

UNIVERSITY OF CALIFORNIA

Los Angeles

Sporting Bodies, Displaying History:

Black Embodiment and Performance in Contemporary Sports Films

A dissertation submitted in partial satisfaction of the
requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy
in Film and Television

by

Samantha Noelle Sheppard

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ABSTRACT OF DISSERTATION

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Doctor of Philosophy in Film and Television

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Professor Kathleen McHugh, Co-Chair

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In this dissertation I analyze Black embodiment and performance in contemporary sports films, particularly through their documentary impulse, the gestures and markers through which these films establish their reference to real sporting and non-sporting bodies and histories. I argue that through this impulse, sports films make claims to an historical real, and they can therefore be explored for how they represent the Black sporting body. Though my project focuses primarily on fiction films, I begin by analyzing this impulse in a sports documentary for how it represents the performance and embodiment of the Black sporting body as an historical contestant. I then trace these strategies as they appear in and shape sports in fiction films,

specifically through narratives of triumph and defeat, dissent, and gendered visibility.

Throughout, I focus on and read the Black sporting body as a an individuated multiplicity which, through performance and embodiment, represents, references, and relates to Black sporting and non-sporting embodied histories and experiences.

Sports films offer a privileged viewpoint on Black embodiment because of their high concentration of Black actors, one that mirrors representation in contemporary athletics. In sport films, sporting history is literally and figuratively choreographed. On the literal level, sports films' formal elements (cinematography, editing conventions), actor training (making them into credible athletes), and overall studio production infrastructure (contracting sport consultants) work together to make the sporting elements plausible and real. On the figurative level, sports films implicitly reference, at the level of embodied performance, historical narratives concerning the social, cultural, and political conditions of Black people. Using textual analysis with attention to historical context, I argue that sports films contain embodied histories, mythologized through filmic and generic conventions, of competing Black bodies in both film and American history. To read these texts and bodies for their historical and bodily memory, I mobilize sports, dance, and performance studies methods as well as gender and critical race theories on embodiment.

The dissertation of Samantha Noelle Sheppard is approved.

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University of California, Los Angeles

2014

For

My mom, George, and Allen

In memory of

Joyce Myrtle Brown, Noel Brown, and George Alfred Sheppard, Sr.

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Introduction:

The Documentary Impulse and/in Black Sporting Bodies

In Sporting Bodies, Displaying History: Black Embodiment and Performance in Contemporary Sports Films, I investigate how the Black body has been represented by, mostly, white mainstream culture, asserting that Black embodiment conveys an historical force that exceeds the constraints and biases of such a production culture. As a genre, sports films use sports history to articulate a kind of visual and discursive realism. The documentary impulse in sports films distinguishes how the genre conflates and blurs the cinematic and social world on screen. To this point, Black bodies on screen are often framed as threats, restricted to containable and presumed apolitical activities such as sports and genres like sports films. Through a focus on embodied performance, I analyze the threat of blackness in motion in sports films, considering what histories and narratives threaten to come to the surface in Black sporting bodies' performances.

In my approach to analyzing representations of Black sporting bodies, I mobilize Jason King's framework that "[blackness] has always been more of (a) movement, both literal and abstract, than a stable racial category."¹ Evaluating the Black body both literally and abstractly, I consider the ways in which Black sporting bodies function as individuated multiplicities whereby sporting performance "poses the possibility of a mutable self, of a fluid subjectivity."²

¹ Jason King, "Which Way is Down? Improvisations on Black Mobility," *Women & Performance: A Journal of Feminist Theory* 14.1(2004), 28.

² Annette Kuhn, "The Body and Cinema: Some Problems for Feminism," in *Writing Body: Female Embodiment and Feminist Theory*, eds. Katie Conboy, Nadia Medina, and Sarah Stanbury (New York: Columbia University Press, 1997), 200.

In doing so, I analyze how the cinematic Black sporting body can function as a looking glass and repository of embodied experiences by identifying how represented, referenced, and related embodied histories paradoxically create experiential overlap for Black people.

In *Sporting Bodies, Displaying History*, I explore the critical implications and historical significations of Black images taken at face value. In looking at sports films, I examine the double meanings at “play” in sports iconography. The cultural politics of race, identity, and performance shape the ways in which sports is represented within popular culture at large. For example, photo conceptual artist Hank Willis Thomas’s sports related photography renders explicit the implicit connections between embodied experience, performance, sports, and social history. Willis Thomas’s photographic images provide a poignant visual and discursive entry into my use of popular culture, specifically film, to consider the contours and connotations of Black bodies and social history with the visual images and symbols of sports. Willis Thomas makes explicit in his sports related images what I argue are implicit in sports films moving images. He depicts Black bodies paradoxical absent present visual legacy of erasure and evolution within sports iconography and links common and exemplary Black embodied performances.

For example, in the photo “The Cotton Bowl” from his series *Strange Fruit* (2011), Willis Thomas juxtaposes the image of a Black football player crouched down, set on the line of scrimmage, across from the image of a Black sharecropper crouched down, picking cotton. The mirrored, symmetrical image of a lineman and a sharecropper aligns the mise-en-scène of both the past and present into a shared visual and discursive space. The title of the piece references the collegiate post-season football bowl game, the Cotton Bowl Classic, as well as the agricultural past of southern Blacks in the United States post-Reconstruction. The photo depicts

the Black body as a laboring body and signifies that labor and exploitation exists in both past and present contexts. The image's reflexivity provokes the question: "What is the relationship between black fieldwork, then and now."³ Willis Thomas's photo articulates the history of Black bodies participating in America's capitalist, dominant economic system, one that is and has been based on the exploitation of "raw material" since the days of slavery. In the photo, the raw material employed—by this I mean "put to work"—by both the sports industry and the post-slavery era agricultural industry is that of "Black muscle," or Black physical labor.⁴ As Black muscle, "[both] figures—separated in time by not even a century—rely on their physical and mental stamina, and both are economic engines that power an industry."⁵

Willis Thomas writes that his "work is about framing and context."⁶ In "The Cotton Bowl Classic," as the two bodies literally and figuratively face each other, the relationship between the past and the present is re-framed and re-contextualized as both a current event and an historical situation, where the opposite figure comments on the specific experiences represented in the other figure. The two bodies, posed against each other, represent opposing characters—though not necessarily oppositional histories—that implicitly challenge our understanding of past and present American history. In this regard, Willis Thomas explains that his goal "is to subvert the common perception of 'black history' as somehow separate from

³ Hank Willis Thomas, "Strange Fruit," <http://www.aldrichart.org/exhibitions/past/thomas.php>.

⁴ William C. Rhoden explains: "For the past fifty years, the prime raw resource in the sports industry has been black muscle. The work of the industry is to extract those bodies from where they primarily reside—in the black neighborhoods of rural and urban America—and put them to work" (174). As well, Black slave labor pre-antebellum and Black sharecroppers post-antebellum labor was a signature aspect of the American economy. See William C. Rhoden, *Forty Million Dollar Slaves: The Rise, Fall, and Redemption of the Black Athlete* (New York: Three Rivers Press, 2006).

⁵ Richard Klein, "Hank Willis Thomas: Strange Fruit," exhibition catalog, (Ridgefield: The Aldrich Contemporary Art Museum, 2012).

⁶ Willis Thomas, "Strange Fruit."

American history, and to reinstate it as indivisible from the totality of past social, political, and economic occurrences that make up contemporary American culture.”⁷ “The Cotton Bowl” image questions whether Black people, particularly athletes, have come a long way from slavery; or perhaps they, meaning the un-paid collegiate athletes who generate millions for their institutions and the few athletes who achieve financial success in professional sports, have become “forty million dollar slaves.”⁸

Influenced and inspired by James Allen’s *Without Sanctuary: Lynching Photography in America*, Guy Debord’s *The Society of the Spectacle*, and Harvey Young’s *Embodying Black Experience: Stillness, Critical Memory, and the Black Body* (Young provides the theoretical foundation for this dissertation), Willis Thomas’s *Strange Fruit* series includes several works beyond “The Cotton Bowl” that address the spectacle of the Black body in sports and social history.⁹ Referencing the song written by Jewish schoolteacher Abel Meeropol and hauntingly performed by Billie Holiday, *Strange Fruit* is about the spectacle of the Black body and “the power of the image to support or subvert misleading ‘grand narratives’ about history and the present moment.”¹⁰ In not only “The Cotton Bowl” photo but also his basketball themed works, Willis Thomas represents the history of Black bodies as spectacles for commoditization and consumption—the Black body as souvenir in sports and America’s history of lynching—in order

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ William C. Rhoden, *Forty Million Dollar Slaves*. There is a growing debate about whether or not college athletes should be paid beyond the athletic scholarship (tuition, fees, housing and books) many, though not all, receive. This debate is largely fueled by the fact that colleges and media outlets make nearly a billion dollars off collegiate athletic contests. In the contemporary moment, athletes at Northwestern University are attempting to unionize.

⁹ Willis Thomas, “Strange Fruit” and Klein, “Hank Willis Thomas: Strange Fruit.” See James Allen’s *Without Sanctuary: Lynching Photography in America* (Santa Fe: Twins Palm Publishers, 2000); Guy Debord, *Society of the Spectacle*, trans. Donald Nicholson Smith (New York: Zone Books, 1995); and Harvey Young, *Embodying Black Experience: Stillness, Critical Memory, and the Black Body* (Ann Arbor: The University of Michigan Press, 2010).

¹⁰ Willis Thomas, “Strange Fruit.”

to produce counternarratives on the master script of race relations in both the past and present moment digitally captured. In *Strange Fruit*, Willis Thomas's basketball montages represent the Black body as a violated body.

For example, "And One"—which plays off the name of the basketball shoe and mix-tape company And1—features Black basketball players going one-on-one against each other. Both players are suspended in air, with one attempting to dunk a basketball over the other into a hangman's noose. According to Willis Thomas, the image questions: "What happens when the visual legacy of American lynching collides with the visual legacy of the slam dunk? Can twenty-first century images of African American men in triumph be seen as responses to twentieth-century images of them in torture? Are they a form of erasure or evolution?"¹¹ Again, Willis Thomas's work engages history through popular cultural images that "[activate] Black memory and [give] voice to embodied black experiences."¹² In doing so, Willis Thomas sutures the visual legacy of sports and lynching into one image and reminds us that Black bodies are repositories of experiences of play and display that range from lived and affective moments of terror to triumph.

As well, Willis Thomas's "Basketball and Chain" depicts a Black basketball player's red and white Nikes in the upper-third of the photo against a black background. The dramatic darkness accentuates the colored shoes in the photo. While only the image of the sneakers and part of the player's legs are visible, there is a metal chain linking the shoes to a National Basketball Association (NBA) engraved basketball, which is located in the lower right corner of the photo. The ball and chain image is a critique of the corporate and cultural sale of basketball

¹¹ Ibid.

¹² Young, *Embodying Black Experience*, 121.

shoes as well as the selling of the American Dream to Black youth. Despite being airborne, the chain will stop and ground the Black athlete whose body is literally and figuratively shackled by white capitalist interests. The image of the chained Black body harkens back to scenes of Black bondage in slavery and prison, the latter of which is a modern day slave industry that exploits and profits off the labor of imprisoned people of color who make up the vast majority of those jailed in the U.S. In this regard, “Basketball and Chain” highlights how “by and large the corporate and college interests that control [Black] success are at an advantage, with the players regarded at best as employees, at worst simple assets in vast money-making enterprises.”¹³

Finally, Willis Thomas’s “Strange Fruit” literalizes the basketball term “hang time,” depicting a shirtless, Black basketball player with his arm extended (as if he is dunking) with the basketball caught in a hangman’s noose. Juxtaposed against a black background, the hung body disrupts the usual photographic image of Black ballers in paradoxically fixed motion, evidenced for example in the iconic image of Michael Jordan’s dunking silhouette. Stilled and literally hanging with his back exposed, the body represents the “after” moment of Black spectacles, particularly the history of violent white lynch mobs leering at dead Black bodies. The image and title evoke the lyrics of the song “Strange Fruit”: “Southern trees bear a strange fruit/ Blood on the leaves and blood on the root/ Black bodies swinging in the southern breeze/ Strange fruit hang from the poplar trees.”¹⁴ Willis Thomas explains that the visual comparisons between athletic performance and histories of Black bodies that reference the slave markets and the racial terror of lynching is about the forms that spectacle and exploitation take in American society.

He shares:

¹³ Klein, “Hank Willis Thomas: Strange Fruit.”

¹⁴ Billie Holiday, “Strange Fruit,” (Commodore, Records April 20, 1939), 78rpm.

I think we too often conflate lynching and sharecropping with slavery. They are definitely connected but very necessarily distinguishable. Black bodies were spectacles in slave markets and on lynching trees and whipping posts. They are spectacles in the NCAA, NBA, NFL drafts and combines. Their ancestors may have worked the cotton and tobacco fields that later became football fields. Their ancestors may have been lynched. I am really trying to draw people out to talk about these very likely possibilities, so that we can think more critically about the present moment. Exploitation is what our country was founded on. It's the American way. We should be more upfront about it. The NCAA is a multi-billion dollar business built primarily off of the free labor of descendants of slaves. What a bargain!¹⁵

Willis Thomas's images of Black athletes in *Strange Fruit*, as well as his other series, specifically *B@ANDED* (2006), are used to recall "the visual and material culture of the archives of slavery" that are made manifest in imagery of lynching, sports, and other spectacles that privilege the Black body.¹⁶ A self-described "visual culture archeologist," Willis Thomas digs into the material evidence of the present to discover Black cultural past and vice versa. In part, what is quite provocative and powerful about his photographic images is that he uses popular sports culture to represent, reference, and relate past and present Black embodied histories through sporting and non-sporting performances.¹⁷

¹⁵ Hank Willis Thomas quoted in Sarah Lookofsky, "Hank Willis Thomas –Branding USA," *Disillusioned*, <http://dismagazine.com/disillusioned/46123/hank-willis-thomas-branding-usa/>.

¹⁶ Alessandra Raegno, *On the Sleeve of the Visual: Race as Face Value* (Hanover: Dartmouth College Press, 2013), 116.

¹⁷ Willis Thomas, "Strange Fruit."

I argue that on an implicit level sports films about Black athletes function in similar fashion to Willis Thomas's photos that represent sports iconography and social history. As with Willis Thomas, I focus on how the framing of Black embodied performance contextualizes history. *Sporting Bodies, Displaying History* analyzes sports films' overt and obscured status as media representations and mediations of histories and experiences concerning and related to Black peoples' lives and imagined experiences. Willis Thomas's work illustrates the concept of the Black body as an "individuated multiplicity," a term I use to describe a singular figure that represents other embodied experiences within specific contexts. I use this term to textually and contextually analyze representations of the Black sporting body. This dissertation explores how the Black sporting body represents and projects literal and figurative narratives on the social, cultural, and political conditions of Black people. I consider not only the ideological stakes of the narratives bodies represented but also the embodied histories and mythologies of competing Black bodies in both film and American history.

Throughout *Sporting Bodies, Displaying History*, I examine embodiment and performance in contemporary sports films, particularly through their documentary impulse, the gestures and markers through which these films establish their reference to real bodies and histories related to Black lived and imagined experiences. I am interested in the ways in which sports films, at both the level of the narrative and embodied performance, contain these documentary impulses. I argue that through this impulse, sports films make claims to an historical real and can, therefore, be evaluated for how they represent the Black sporting body. Throughout this dissertation, I take into account the historical violence inscribed upon the cinematic Black body and read representations of the Black body as containing surplus meaning that always positions the body both inside and outside of a film's singular representation. Sports

films are one such genre, though not the only one, where this dramatic performance occurs, and I mobilize the sports genre's use of historical specificity as well as theories of Black embodied excess to explore the represented, referenced, and related contexts that sports films and the sporting performances in films call into critical focus.

Though *Sporting Bodies, Displaying History* focuses primarily on fiction films, I begin by analyzing the documentary impulse in a sport documentary for how it represents the performance and embodiment of the Black sporting body as an historical contestant. I then trace the strategies as they appear in and shape sports in fiction films, specifically through narratives of triumph and defeat, dissent, and gendered visibility. Throughout, I focus on and read the Black sporting body as an individuated multiplicity which, through performance and embodiment, represents, references, and relates to Black sporting and non-sporting embodied histories and experiences. Here, I provide an outline of the concept of the documentary impulse in sports films, using John Lee Hancock's *The Blind Side* (2009) as a case study to illustrate this notion. Finally, I provide an overview of the chapters in this dissertation.

The Documentary Impulse: Sports Films and the Black Sporting Body

As a genre, sports films offer a privileged viewpoint on Black embodiment and performativity because of their high concentration of Black representation, one that mirrors the hypervisibility of Black athletes in sports, specifically football, basketball, and track. This dialectic between referent and representation structures my examination of sports films' documentary impulse at both the level of the narrative and embodied performance.

I draw on the term documentary impulse from Valerie Smith, who employs the concept to describe contemporary African American cinema's gestures towards real histories and real

bodies. In “The Documentary Impulse in Contemporary African-American Film,” Smith explains that contemporary (late 1980s and early 1990s) films by African American directors are “positioned at the generic crossroads between fact and fiction.”¹⁸ Describing their gestures and markers towards real bodies and real histories, Smith explores the ways in which Black directed narrative films “construct themselves as a part of a widely shared and widely recognizable reality” as well as how “critics and reviewers participate in such constructions.”¹⁹ Largely this construction is done through aural and visual markers familiar to and associated with actual Black life. Smith argues that these films become authenticated—by directors, studios, press kits, reviewers, and audiences—through the acceptance of these markers as representative of Black vernacular culture.

Smith reads the documentary impulse in contemporary African American films as historically grounded in literary practices specific to African American narrative writing, particularly slave narratives that “incorporated various kinds of authenticating documents into their tales to verify their own authority before a skeptical, largely white reading public.”²⁰ She traces the use of the factual throughout narrative writing, citing examples such as Richard Wright, Arna Bontemps, David Bradley, and Toni Morrison, all of whose writing “gestures toward a knowable set of facts to anchor his or her accounts between history and fiction.”²¹ In providing this historical basis, Smith examines how past and present Black filmmakers locate their films in the context of this cross-generic documentary mode.

¹⁸ Valerie Smith, “The Documentary Impulse in Contemporary African-American Film,” in *Black Popular Culture*, ed. Gina Dent. Project by Michele Wallace (Seattle: Bay Press, 1992), 57.

¹⁹ Ibid.

²⁰ Ibid.

²¹ Ibid., 56.

Specifically, Smith describes how an early generation of Black filmmakers, including William Greaves and St. Clair Bourne, employed techniques that are associated with nonfiction cinema, such as cinema vérité, in the development of Black film as a realm of shared experience.²² In her analysis of contemporary fiction films directed by African Americans, including Spike Lee's *Do the Right Thing* (1989), Mario Van Peebles's *New Jack City* (1991), Matty Rich's *Straight Outta Brooklyn* (1991), and John Singleton's *Boyz N the Hood* (1991), Smith contends that these films not only use signifiers of Black culture but also contain "markers that historicize and position them as interventions in the construction of a multifaceted contemporary urban African-American culture of resistance. The markers locate the films in relation to black achievements in sports and music, and to ongoing cultural debates around constructions of race."²³ Using recognizable locales, dedications to victims of racial violence, rappers as actors, and popular hip hop soundtracks, these directors' films' aural and visual signs signify their cinematic worlds as grounded in the realities and experiences of Black Americans. The documentary impulse Smith describes in these films are signs and referents that make visible a verifiable Black experience, one that can lead to a problematic fetishization of the aforementioned directors' works as representative of a monolithic Black experience. In this sense, Smith critiques how these films' relationship to the "real world" often "eclipses other kinds of oppositional cinematic work," particularly the work of documentarians Camille Billops,

²² Ibid., 57.

²³ Ibid., 59. Smith's analysis focuses on the work of Black male directors. However, Black women also directed features during this time period that have the documentary impulse Smith describes. For example, within the "hood genre" films of the early 1990s, Leslie Harris's *Just Another Girl on the I.R.T.* (1993) uses visual markers, vernacular language, and the streets of New York City to "document" the experiences of young Black woman, Chantal (Ariyan A. Johnson). The film focuses on issues including teenage pregnancy and social mobility through education. *Just Another Girl on the I.R.T.* intervenes in the hegemonic construction of Black females within urban African American film culture. The film contains markers and referents to recognizable Black reality. The film was also authenticated by critics and reviewers as an example of real Black female life in urban cities.

James V. Hatch, Marlon Riggs, and Marco Williams.²⁴ I address Smith's notion of the documentary impulse via the use of the fictional in documentaries in Chapter One's case study of the sports documentary *On the Shoulders of Giants: The Story of the Greatest Basketball Team You Never Heard Of* (Deborah Morales, 2011).

Smith's exploration of the documentary impulse in contemporary African American film is instructive to read the documentary impulse in sports films. While some of the sports films I discuss are directed by African American filmmakers, there are many films that I analyze and make reference to that are not. This fact, however, does not undermine the usefulness of Smith's concept for my analysis. For Smith, the directors she discusses, all of whom are African American, are positioned as authorities relative to their film content, which is thought to include familiar examples of "real" Black life. In contrast, my analysis of sports films documentary impulse is not predicated on the racial background of the directors but on the viable sporting worlds/sporting bodies represented on screen. I argue that in sports films, sporting history is literally and figuratively "choreographed." On the literal level, sports films' documentary impulse derives from both the use of sports history as source material and through the representational verisimilitude crafted on screen. On the figurative level, sports films implicitly reference, at the level of embodied performance, the historical embodied experiences of Black people and the social, cultural, and political conditions they endured and engaged.

To the literal point, sports films construct themselves as a part of a recognizable reality by drawing upon real contests and athletes in sports history. Even when fictionalized, they often have a realist style, using actual stadiums, authentic uniforms, athletes/coaches/sportscasters

²⁴ Ibid., 58. For a critique of the fetishization of Black directors, specifically Spike Lee whose work has been exalted as representative of "the real" Black experience, see Wahneema Lubiano, "But Compare to What?: Reading Realism, Representation, and Essentialism in *School Daze*, *Do the Right Thing*, and the Spike Lee Discourse," *Black American Literature Forum* 25, no. 2 (Summer 1991): 253-282.

turned actors, and documentary/actuality footage to authenticate their claims to a verifiable, real-life sporting world. Moreover, the fact that they are often “inspired by,” “based on true events,” or biopics of heroic athletes/coaches/teams signifies that sports films claim a kind of historical status and, thus, have a documentary impulse.²⁵ Therefore, like the narrative films Smith describes, sports films “conceal their status as mediations and suggest they occupy an intimate, if not contiguous, relation to an externally verifiable reality.”²⁶ In blurring the distinction between real history and media constructions of history, sports films literally choreograph sports history through various techniques.

Sports films’ formal elements (cinematography, editing conventions), actor training (making them credible athletes), and overall studio production infrastructure (contracting sport consultants) work together to make the sporting elements plausible and real. In doing so, Aaron Baker explains that sports films “generally frame history as adequately represented by the individual desires, goals, and emotional dramas of the main characters, often in a biopic story.”²⁷ As a result of focusing on “real life” experiences, sports biopics’ “telescoping attempts to exclude the complexity of historical questions and by the end of the film answers in the form of individual actions are fit into a single explanation, represented with a realistic mise-en-scène and an emotional resonance that undermine critical scrutiny.”²⁸ This undermining of critical scrutiny makes the sports genre as whole operate presumably as an apolitical genre, one that is based on the false presumption that sports themselves are apolitical by nature. In this regard, sports films

²⁵ Aaron Baker, *Contesting Identities: Sporting in American Film* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2003), 7.

²⁶ Smith, “The Documentary Impulse in Contemporary African-American Film,” 60.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, 8.

²⁸ *Ibid.*

realistic narratives of sports heroes/events focus on unrealistic utopian tales of success through hard work, self-reliance, and determination.²⁹ To illustrate this concept of sports films' documentary impulse via a biopic, I turn to John Lee Hancock's "inspirational" football tale *The Blind Side* (2009). Using the film as a case study, I briefly examine the ways in which sports films use sporting history, formal elements, actor training, and sports consultants to achieve a kind of sports/historical realism on screen.

The Blind Side is based on Michael Lewis's book *The Blind Side: Evolution of a Game*, which contains two football-related storylines.³⁰ The first storyline relays the evolution of the National Football League's (NFL) offensive tactics in the 1980s. The dominance and game-changing play of professional football Hall-of-Famer and former New York Giants defensive linebacker Lawrence "LT" Taylor engendered this tactical offensive change in the NFL. Because of Taylor's size, speed, and agility, he was an indomitable force on the gridiron. On November 18, 1985, Taylor's athletic skills ended the career of Super Bowl winning Washington Redskin's quarterback Joe Theismann, who was hit by Taylor rushing from the left side, also known as the "blind side" because Theismann never saw him before being hit. Taylor's paramount influence on the field and fear of more devastating injuries for quarterbacks forced NFL coaches to revolutionize their offensive game. Detailing San Francisco 49ers coach Bill Walsh's tactical decision to use an offensive guard—the left-tackle—to stop Taylor, Lewis pinpoints the moment in the 1980s when the position of the offensive left-tackle was elevated in importance within football's strategic play. During this period, the salaries of the left-tackle

²⁹ *Ibid.*, 3.

³⁰ Michael Lewis, *The Blind Side: Evolution of a Game* (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 2006). Lewis's *Moneyball: The Art of Winning an Unfair Game* (2003) was the source material for the Brad Pitt-starring baseball film *Moneyball* (Bennett Miller, 2011).

sharply increased (they are often the second highest players behind the quarterback in professional football) because they are in charge of protecting the quarterback, the leader and most important figure on the offense, from getting hit on his blind side.

Alongside this narrative of evolving football strategy, Lewis's book is equally about the life of then-current Baltimore Ravens (now the Tennessee Titans) left-tackle Michael Oher; and it is this narrative that serves as the primary source material for Hancock's film adaptation. Oher's history is connected to the embodied performance of Taylor. Both book and film spotlight the homeless-to-NFL story of Oher (played in the film by Quinton Aaron), who went from being the son of a drug-addicted mother who lived in foster homes to being adopted as a teenager by a wealthy white couple, Leigh Anne and Sean Tuohy (played by Sandra Bullock and Tim McGraw) in Memphis, Tennessee. However, within a conservative narrative that touts the ideology of Black individual achievement through white paternalism and Black gradualism, the anxieties around race in Hancock's *The Blind Side* are safely contained within the American Dream trajectory the film posits.

The film is largely about the neo-missionary benevolence of the Tuohy family, namely Leigh Anne, who takes Michael into her home after finding out he is homeless, providing him with love and, to her surprise, a bed of his own. The film's problematic race narrative is subsumed within a materialist story and trauma narrative that does not focus on systemic or institutional racism but on the goodness of the "haves" and the neediness of the "have nots." The film's narrative of white goodness/guilt also leads the Tuohy family to force the hand of the private school Wingate Christian School—based on the Briarcrest Christian School that the real-life Oher attended—to enroll Michael despite his low grades/aptitude. The Tuohy family, which includes son S.J. and Collins (played by Jae Head and Lily Collins), become a surrogate and,

later, adopted family for Michael. The Tuohys provide Michael with not only his basic material needs but also secure a private tutor to help him get his grades up so that he can be eligible to play collegiate football.

All of this is done while Michael, a “natural” talent in sports, learns how to play and excel at the left-tackle position in football, which leads him to be recruited by top Division-1 programs across the country. The film ends with Michael choosing the alma mater of his newly-adopted family, the University of Mississippi (Ole Miss), which draws suspicion from the National Collegiate Athletics Association (NCAA). While alarmed by the adoption of a Black teenager who now is going to play football for his adopted family’s alma mater, the NCAA official in charge of the case comes to the conclusion that no coercion by the Tuohys occurred and that Michael, who claims that he chose the school because that is where his family has attended, acted with free will. In the end, Michael is saved from his seemingly predestined fate of jail or death as the son of a poor, drug addicted mother to go on to a successful college football and academic career at Ole Miss and a life in professional sports.

The Blind Side contains explicit gestures towards real sports history via its source material, formal elements, actor training, and use of sports consultants. *The Blind Side* is based on the real-life narrative of Michael Oher. It also uses cameos from actual college football coaches; depicts the institutional presence of the NCAA; contains television footage of the real-life Oher on NFL draft day being selected by the Baltimore Ravens; and shows a slide-show of family pictures of the real-life Oher with the real-life Tuohy family during the final credits sequence.³¹ Quinton Aaron, who plays Michael, trained with former Georgia Tech and current

³¹ The film include Tommy Tuberville (then the coach of Auburn University), Nick Saban (then the coach of Louisiana State University), Lou Holtz (then the coach of the University of South Carolina), Philip Fulmer (then the

Buffalo Bill's strength and conditioning coach, Eric Ciano, to get into shape for the role, dropping 100 pounds in order to portray the realistic body of a high school/college football player.³² Ciano explained that:

“He [Aaron] wasn't physically ready to be able to perform and do anything the players were doing... When he first stepped on the scale and weighed 472 pounds we knew we had to get him in good enough shape to look athletic and play the role and try to play Michael Oher and also be able to perform some of the physical demands that the movie had in the script.”³³

As well, the film used sports consultants to help with the choreography of the football related scenes, including practice and game scenarios.

Overall, *The Blind Side*'s narrative represents the generic tendency of sports film to emotionalize history, telling “history ‘as a story’ using a strong element of closure that leaves the audience with ‘a moral message and (usually) a feeling of uplift.”³⁴ Michael's transformation from a poverty-stricken son of a drug addict to an All-American football player at Ole Miss and later a NFL star touts the redemptive power of his new white family. The film also uses the historical telescoping and emotional resonance that Baker describes to undermine critical scrutiny of the politics of race, particularly stereotypes of Black males, the film's narrative

coach of the University of Tennessee, Knoxville), Huston Nutt (then the coach of the University of Arkansas), and Ed Orgeron (then the coach of University of Mississippi).

³² Chris Brown, “A Bills Ties to ‘The Blind Side,’” March 10, 2003, <http://www.buffalobills.com/news/article-3/A-Bills-tie-to-The-Blind-Side/a13e93d0-7cf2-49a2-b410-cc5e761c2837>.

³³ Eric Ciano quoted in Chris Brown, “A Bills Ties to ‘The Blind Side.’”

³⁴ Baker, *Contesting Identities*, 7.

traffics.³⁵ Michael is an exceptional figure who, as a professional athlete, makes millions. The film doubly positions Michael as a stereotype, a “natural” athlete and a Black man in need of white guidance in order to be successful. The film ends with the triumphant, racially blended Tuohy family dropping Michael off at Ole Miss for his first year of college. The moment is contrasted diegetically with a montage of newspaper clippings detailing the deaths of local Memphis Black youths. Narrating over the image, Leigh Anne explains that she read a news story about a twenty-one year old Black man from the projects. The visuals are punctuated by Leigh Anne’s proclamation that the young man was fatherless, a foster kid, and killed in a gang fight on his birthday. The montage of newspaper images shift from headlines about murdered Black males to images of Michael in the projects prior to his Tuohy salvation. As these images blend into each other, Leigh Anne explains that the article she read mentions that the young boy killed was gifted in sports and that his life would have been different if he did not fall academically behind and drop out of school. The parallels to Michael’s story are obvious, if not egregious, and she explicitly states that the boy could have been anyone—“even her son Michael”—and that she has God and Lawrence Taylor to thank for that fact.

While this ending produces the feelings of elation and relief previously described, it also raises important questions that undermine Leigh Anne’s simple conclusion. As *New York Times* reviewer A.O. Scott explains, Leigh Anne “wonders why [Michael] was so much more fortunate, modestly declining to mention her own role and thereby deflecting attention from the movie’s curious moral, which is that the best hope for a poor black child in America is to have rich white parents.”³⁶ However, the “blind side” of the film’s conservative message of Black inferiority

³⁵ Ibid., 8.

³⁶ A.O. Scott, “Two Films, Two Routes from Poverty,” *New York Times*, November 18, 2009.

and misguided potential is that its melodramatic and meritocratic narrative structure “can function in other ways to produce a contradictory historical complexity.”³⁷ These contradictions lie at the level of the narrative itself as it gestures towards (and obscures) the social, institutional, historical factors and bigotry that create/maintain the larger segregated landscape of Memphis’s cityscape as well as the social ills that come with this segregation. Thus, if sports, as the film suggests, promise equal opportunity and a level playing field, the real question the film’s rags-to-riches tale calls into relief is: why doesn’t society promise it too? Therefore, the film’s verifiable sporting reality produced by its “based on true events” narrative, cameos, and actuality footage, gestures towards not only the experience of the real Michael Oher but other Black men as well. In doing so, the film demonstrates how the representation of Oher functions as an individuated multiplicity that gestures towards the related and alternative experience of other Black youths like him.

Not only do sports films contain a documentary impulse through the use of realism, sporting history is also figuratively choreographed. On this figurative level, sports films implicitly reference, at the level of embodied performance, historical narratives concerning the social, cultural, and political conditions of Black people. This figurative choreographing of history in sports films is one that invokes social theories of movement and the interplay of bodies throughout history. In analyzing the Black body within this context, I borrow a critical framework from dance scholar Susan Leigh Foster who relates the moving body and history as follows: “to choreograph history is to grant that history is made by bodies, and then acknowledge that all bodies, in moving and documenting their movements, in learning about past movement,

³⁷ Baker, *Contesting Identities*, 8.

continually conspire together and are conspired against.”³⁸ Foster’s notion of choreographing history foregrounds “the process of committing [a body’s] actions to history, these past and present bodies transmit to a mutually constructed semiosis.”³⁹ I employ this notion of choreographing history to read the represented, referenced, and related Black embodied histories performed in sports films. My use of Foster’s general formulation of the body in/as history to analyze Black sporting performance is also influenced by Foster’s use of dance theories as social theory to read non-dancing movement as connected to broader social experiences.

For example, In “Choreographies of Protest,” Foster looks closely at the 1960s nonviolent protest of the lunch counter sit-ins, the 1980s ACT-Up die-ins, and the 1999 World Trade Organization meetings protest in Seattle, Washington.⁴⁰ In the essay, Foster approaches the body “as articulate matter” in an attempt to “demonstrate the central role that physicality plays in constructing both individual agency and sociality.”⁴¹ Foster makes an important note that she is not reading the protest movements as dances because it “would radically de-contextualize their motivation and intent;” instead, she is opting to ask questions that a dance scholar would ask of a body’s performance:

³⁸ My use of dance theory here is done, in part, because there is an explicit link between dance and sports. A number of institutions within the academy (particularly those not in the West), house both dance and sports under the disciplinary header of human kinetics and, thus, within the same department. In fact, many scholars have attempted to reconcile the connections between dance and sports. Noel Dyck and Eduardo P. Archetti’s *Sport, Dance and Embodied Identities* views sport and dance as “ethnographically commensurable forms of body culture and social practice” (1). Both forms share “common status as techniques of the body” and have “vital capacity to express and reformulate identities and meaning through their practiced movements and scripted forms” (1). See Eduardo Archetti and Noel Dyck, eds. *Sport, Dance and Embodied Identities* (New York: Berg Publishers, 2003). Susan Leigh Foster, “Choreographing History” in *Choreographing History*, ed. Susan Leigh Foster (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1995), 10.

³⁹ Ibid.

⁴⁰ Susan Foster, “Choreographies of Protest,” *Theater Journal* 55.3 (October 2003): 395-412.

⁴¹ Ibid., 369.

...what are these bodies doing?; what and how do their motions signify?; what choreography, whether spontaneous or pre-determined, do they enact?; what kind of significance and impact does the collection of bodies make in the midst of its social surround?; how does the choreography theorize corporeal, individual, and social identity?; how does it construct ethnicity, gender, class, and sexuality?; how have these bodies been trained, and how has that training mastered, cultivated, or facilitated their impulses?; what do they share that allows them to move with one another?; what kind of relationship do they establish with those who are watching their actions?; what kinds of connections can be traced between their daily routines and the special moments of their protest?; how is it possible to reconstruct and translate into words these bodies' vanished actions?; how is the body of the re-searcher/writer implicated in the investigation?⁴²

In reading protesting bodies as a part of a collective connectivity, Foster “[contributes] to the theoretical discussion on social movements, showing how dance is itself a form of social theory.”⁴³ In this sense, I use dance theory, particularly the choreographing of history, as a form of social theory to read representations of sporting bodies in film as individuated multiplicities that choreograph sport and social history. Therefore, I am not reading sports *as* dance but, as Foster suggests, asking the questions that dance scholars—as well as sports and performance studies scholars—would ask of the fictional performances of Black sporting bodies: what are these sporting bodies doing? How are they doing it? What and how do their motions signify specific and broader narratives of triumph and defeat, dissent, or gendered visibility? What

⁴² Ibid., 379.

⁴³ Ibid.

filmic and non-filmic bodies do these sporting bodies represent and reference? What kinds of histories of blackness and masculinity/femininity do these performers embody? What kinds of documentary impulses and embodied histories are evident in their performances?

Asking and answering these questions throughout my analysis of representations of the Black sporting body, I read the textuality and intertextuality in Black embodied performance. To Foster, “a body, whether sitting writing or standing thinking or walking talking or running screaming, is a bodily writing.”⁴⁴ A sporting body with all of its kinetic potential has so many connective possibilities; and, through performance in film, Black sporting bodies visually “write” out a connection between sports and social history. As writing bodies, these figures also narrate multiple histories of Black social experience. This ability, Foster notes, is because:

...writing bodies demand a proprioceptive affiliation between past and present bodies, they also require interpretation of their role in the cultural production of meaning: their capacities for expression, the relationship between body and subjectivity they may articulate, the bodily discipline of the regimentation of which they are capable, the notions of individuality and sociality that may purvey.⁴⁵

These embodied histories are conveyed in and through sporting performance and evoke a history of shared past Black sporting and non-sporting experiences. Chapter One explains how history becomes embodied, particularly through looking at how the Black sporting body functions as an individuated multiplicity that represents, references, and relates to shared Black embodied experiences. To illustrate this concept, I return to my analysis of *The Blind Side*'s conclusion.

⁴⁴ Foster, “Choreographing History,” 3.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, 21.

As the ending montage cuts between newspaper clippings of dead Black Memphis youth, the film frames Michael's body as an individuated multiplicity, representing both the exception and the rule when it comes to the trajectory of Black males in sports and society.

As well, Michael's body and its performance on and off the football field evoke memories of real sporting history. As mentioned, his sporting performance in the film recounts the story of the evolution of football. The film directly links Michael's embodied experience with that of Lawrence Taylor's. The film begins with documentary footage of Taylor's career-ending tackle of Joe Theismann. Leigh Anne's voice narrates over the footage, describing not only the scene but also the physical attributes that make up the left-tackle: big, wide in the butt, massive in the thighs, long arms, giant hands, and quick feet. She calls these qualities a "rare and expensive combination." In tracing football's evolution based on the embodied performance of Taylor, the film attributes the bodily characteristics of Michael to Taylor through cross-cutting between the two men's images. Leigh Anne explains that Taylor not only altered Theismann's life but her life as well. While Michael's sporting performance on the field evokes the history of Taylor's game-changing play, the ways in which the film frames his sporting performance—through the viewpoint of Leigh Anne—evokes a history of Black male "pornotroping" and racist mythologies regarding Black bodies in both film and American history.

The notion of pornotroping comes from Hortense Spillers who uses the term to describe the captive subject position of the Black body in the New World. Spillers states that "the *theft* of the body" transforms the female and male body into a "territory of cultural and political

maneuver, not at all gender-related, gender specific.”⁴⁶ Describing the captive body’s otherness and the externally imposed meanings, Spillers explains that:

... (1) the captive body as the source of an irresistible, destructive sensuality; (2) at the same time—in stunning contradiction—it is reduced to a thing, to *being* for the captor; (3) in this distance *from* a subject position, the captured sexualities provide a physical and biological expression of ‘otherness; (4) as a category of ‘otherness,’ the captive body translates into a potential for pornotroping and embodied sheer physical powerlessness that slides into a more general ‘powerlessness,’ resonating through various centers of human and social meaning.⁴⁷

Pornotroping describes how captive Black subjects, particularly female subjects, were reduced to their flesh and made to be powerless, a mutable object for their masters whereby “[the] turning of the body, its troping and transformation at the hands of the plantation owner, displays its powerlessness and the owners own transformative power.”⁴⁸

Spiller’s term is useful to consider how masculinity presents an alternative pornotroping. In *The Blind Side*, Michael’s body is reduced to flesh, he is a hyper-Black figure in contrast to his white family. The film’s construction of Michael as lacking interiority and the ambiguity of the film’s trauma narrative positions him as not merely an object but a child. Despite Michael’s obvious physical prowess, his developmental subject position trumps the usual narrative of the powerful and dangerous Black male body. Leigh Anne, thus, transforms Michael’s body for her

⁴⁶ Hortense J. Spillers, “Mama’s Baby, Papa’s Maybe: An American Grammar Book,” in *Black, White, and in Color: Essays on American Literature and Culture* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2003), 206.

⁴⁷Ibid.

⁴⁸ Alia Christine Yap, “Remembering Bodies: Subject Formation in the Neo-Plantation Narratives,” PhD Dissertation, University of California, Berkley, 2008, 56.

own means. In doing so, the film both reinforces and revises plantation iconography regarding Black men and white women. Michael is both paradoxically powerful with and powerless without the help of Leigh Anne.

For example in *The Blind Side*, the opening scenes I described above take stock of Taylor's body and connect it to Michael's through cross-cutting, linking not only their embodied performance but also framing their bodies as genetically and biologically built for the job of football. The embodied history or memories being recalled are those of exploitative racial practices within sports and American society. As I earlier described of Willis Thomas's "Cotton Bowl Classic" photo, the film's notion of Black men's bodies being built for labor harken back to racist pre-and-post antebellum periods within American history where Blacks were considered to be physically capable of laboring but psychologically inferior to whites based on their biology. *The Blind Side*'s "auction block" narrative where Michael's superior physical prowess makes him welcome in the Tuohy family, by which they (and their alma mater) are able to cash in on the symbolic danger of Black male sporting excellence, projects this past and present racist history. Reduced to his embodied presence, Michael's dark, large body (as presented in comparison to those around him) is framed as his worst and best asset. Gifted in body and not in mind, he scores low in all the categories of a career aptitude test except that of "protective instinct," which he scores in the ninety-eight percentile. The film implicitly states that Michael's intellectual deficiencies are the effects of his Black upbringing by a poor, drug-addicted Black mother. However, with the guidance of his new white mother Leigh Anne, Michael can compensate for his damaged life with his body's physicality.

In framing Michael's bodily features as a "rare and expensive combination," the film suggests that Michael's body makes him a "natural" left-tackle who can protect his quarterback's

blind side.⁴⁹ Of course, this “natural” talent lies inside him and he has no idea how to use it. Michael is shown, at first, struggling to conceptually understand and execute his role as a left-tackle. For example, Michael, infantilized and depicted as childlike, gets distracted by balloons in the sky and fails to fulfill his role during the run through of a play at his football practice. All body and no mind, Michael needs a white instructor to transform/discipline his raw talent (in this case, his body as raw material) into a disciplined body for the success of the team.⁵⁰

It’s only after a nearly fatal car accident where Michael saves the Tuohy’s son S.J. from a deploying airbag—as he describes it “I stopped it”—does Leigh Anne now know the best way to discipline his “inherent” abilities. After the coach concludes that the only thing that Michael will be good for is scaring the opposing team when he comes off the bus, another reference to his Black embodied presence, Leigh Anne steps up to teach Michael how to protect his quarterback the way he would protect her and his newly adopted family. Similar to fantastical slave narratives about Blacks who work for and protect their masters from harm, Michael, as a buck turned Uncle Tom, is happy to play football if it means protecting “his” white family.⁵¹ His

⁴⁹ This film’s use of the concept of the “natural” Black is one that reinforces the false and racist notion that Black people are genetically superior in sports. This racist biological argument is one that reoccurs in several contemporary sporting texts, including Jon Entine’s *Taboo: Why Black Athletes Dominate Sports and Why We Are Afraid to Talk About It* (New York: PublicAffairs, 2000) and John Hoberman’s *Darwin’s Athletes: How Sport Has Damaged Black America and Preserved the Myth of Race* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1997). The latter book, which condemns both Black athletes and intellectuals, was taken to task by Kenneth Shropshire and Earl Smith in their book review “The Tarzan Syndrome: John Hoberman and His Quarrels With African American Athletes and Intellectuals,” *Journal of Sports & Social Issues*, 22, No. 1 (February 1998): 103-112.

⁵⁰ This use of the Black body as raw material that can be used/shaped to help whites goes beyond *The Blind Side* in cinema. What Michael Gillespie calls “Black Frankenstein cinema,” this trope is used in films such as Frank Darabont’s *The Green Mile* (1999). Personal Correspondence with Michael Gillespie, July 3, 2013.

⁵¹ This idea of fighting for one’s “white people”—a notion that where a Black person uses the word “my” to denote possession/familial belonging—is a narrative that comes out of slavery and is best represented in Victor Fleming’s *Gone With the Wind* (1939) where the newly freed Black slaves ostensibly reject their freedom and vow to fight on behalf of their masters.

docile qualities lead Leigh Anne to consider Michael as the embodiment of “Ferdinand the Bull.”⁵² In doing so, the film depicts Michael’s “docility-utility” as a sporting performance.⁵³

As Michel Foucault describes in *Discipline and Punish*, “[a] body is docile that it may be subjected, used, transformed, and improved.”⁵⁴ As well, Foucault explains that “the body that is manipulated, shaped, trained, which obeys, responds, becomes skillful and increases its forces.”⁵⁵ In the film, Michael is represented and performs as such a body, submissive and under the control of the Tuohy family’s desires. A.O. Scott describes “Michael [as] a curiously blank character, his inner life lost in the glare of Leigh Anne’s self-congratulation. His pre-Tuohy life is a flurry of flashbacks and vague stories meant—like the drug dealer and Michael’s drug-addicted mother, who appears on screen briefly—to conjure a world of violence, dysfunction and despair.”⁵⁶ Michael’s body is the subject and object of pornotroping; he is “an unthreatening, needy black character seen through a romantically inflected anthropological imagination.”⁵⁷

In fact, it is Leigh Anne’s voice and not Michael’s that echoes in his head during his first football game. After several plays of failing to block his opposing man, who verbally taunts and physically assaults him during the game, Michael’s “docility-utility” is performed. At the line of scrimmage, Michael closes his eyes as the voice of Leigh Anne fills his head, reminding him that

⁵² Leigh Anne describes Michael as “Ferdinand the Bull,” which comes from the children’s book *The Story of Ferdinand the Bull*. This pacifist story is about a bull who doesn’t want to participate in bullfights. Instead, he’d rather pick flowers.

⁵³ Michel Foucault, *Discipline & Punish: The Birth of the Prison* (New York: Vintage Books, 1995), 137.

⁵⁴ Foucault, *Discipline & Punish*, 136.

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*

⁵⁶ A.O. Scott, “Movie Review: The Blind Side,” *New York Times*, November 19, 2009.

⁵⁷ Raengo, *On the Sleeve of the Visual*, 62.

the team is his family; thus, he must do his part to protect his family. When the ball snaps, Michael charges forward down the field, taking with him the foul-mouthed tormentor, only relenting once he's past the end zone, dumping his opponent into the stands. This sporting performance coupled with that of Michael during practice reinforces, at the level of embodied performance, the historical racial/racist arguments of Black's lacking the mental capacity required for social advancement but having superior physical abilities for sport.

Using Leigh Anne's voice in Michael's head during his sporting activity, the film illustrates a destructive pathology regarding Black embodiment—one that dissociates mind from body. It is her voice/her mind that guides his body. A kind of racial masquerade, the scene depicts a ventriloquism that is transgender, transracial, and transgenerational. Despite how the notion of "thinking on one's feet" reconciles the mind/body duality, the film divorces the body from mind. During the game, his performance narrates psychic/physical mythologies of the Black sporting and non-sporting body and experiences. Depicted as hollow mentally and filled with white voices shaping/controlling him, his physical performance signifies what Eldridge Cleaver describes in *Soul on Ice*: "What white America demands in her black champions is a brilliant, powerful body and a dull, bestial mind—a tiger in the ring and a pussycat outside of it."⁵⁸ Framed as a bifurcated individuated multiplicity, one that represents the racist and imagined experiences of Black bodies in need of white guidance (the Black youth that was killed did not have a white mother), Michael's body evokes historical embodied memories of the racial regimentation of Black bodies under the control of whites. However, Michael does not respond to white male authority, specifically his coaches. Under the discipline of Leigh Anne, the fact of

⁵⁸ Eldridge Cleaver, *Soul on Ice* (New York: Dell Publishing Co., Inc., 1986), 92.

white women in control of (as opposed to fear of) Black men's actions paradoxically recalls and revises the history of interracial fears of Black male prowess.

Thus, in analyzing the documentary impulse in *The Blind Side*, at both the level of the narrative and embodied performance, it's evident that histories and mythologies of Black bodies and experiences resonate and project out of performances of Black sporting bodies in motion and contest. Sports films documentary impulse convey an historical force that exceeds the narrative constraints of media and popular culture's representation of Black bodies and their experiences. In doing so, sports films can and should be read as a genre whose visual economy blurs the cinematic and social world, representing, referencing, and relating lived and imagined Black histories and experiences.⁵⁹

Chapter Breakdown:

Throughout all of this dissertation's chapters, I pay particular attention to how representations of Black sporting bodies function as individuated multiplicities and analyze the contemporary sports films I discuss for their documentary impulse at both the level of the narrative and the level of embodied experience. Chapter One, "Historical Contestants," addresses how I read sports films and sporting bodies for their historical and bodily memory. I mobilize sport and performance studies methods as well as critical race theories on Black embodiment to intervene into dominant modes of generic criticism on sports films. I argue that the Black sporting body functions as an individuated multiplicity that represents, references, and relates to Black sporting and non-sporting embodied histories and experiences. I begin by

⁵⁹ David J. Leonard and C. Richard King, "Why Sports Films Matter" in *Visual Economies of/in Motion: Sport and Film*, eds. C. Richard King and David J. Leonard (New York: Peter Lang, 2006), 228.

analyzing the documentary impulse in the basketball documentary *On the Shoulders of Giants: The Story of the Greatest Basketball Team You Never Heard Of* (Deborah Morales, 2011) for how it represents the performance and embodiment of the Black sporting body as an individuated multiplicity and an historical contestant. In *On the Shoulders of Giants*, Black movement is animated via a stylized opening sequence where cut-out silhouettes of contemporary Black basketball superstars pass basketballs to cut-out silhouettes of the legendary Harlem Rens players. The documentary dramatizes how the performative Black body can function as a looking-glass and repository of history of Black sporting and non-sporting experiences, including the spectacle of segregated sports and the spectacle of lynching.

Chapter Two, “Performing Triumph and Defeat,” utilizes the strategies of reading sporting performance and Black embodiment established in the previous chapter to explore the documentary impulse in fiction film narratives of triumph and defeat. I argue that these films gesture toward real histories and bodies and shared Black sporting and non-sporting experiences. First, I look at the concept of performing triumph in *Glory Road* (James Gartner, 2006) and defeat in *Friday Night Lights* (Peter Berg, 2004), considering the sporting and broader socio-cultural ideologies that are elicited in narratives of winning and losing. Second, I problematize narratives of triumph and defeat, arguing that sports films often construct these performances as shadow arguments: defeat as triumph and triumph as defeat. I evaluate performances of defeat as triumph in *Cool Runnings* (Jon Turteltaub, 1993) and triumph as defeat in *He Got Game* (Spike Lee, 1998).

Chapter Three, “Performing Dissent,” analyzes the documentary impulse in fiction sport films where Black sporting bodies perform dissenting acts (refusing to play as form of contestation). I explore how acts of dissent invoke the history of Black bodies in defiance in

American society. Taking issue with the ways in which Hollywood sports films frame Black dissent as narratives of “Black Firsts,” I contend that there are actually very few sports films about the refusal to play the game as an indictment of racial injustice in both sports and society. Using Olympians Tommie Smith’s and John Carlos’s Black power salute and performance of dissent on the global stage as an entry and pivot point for my analysis, I textually analyze the short-film *Hour Glass* (Haile Gerima, 1971) about a basketball player-turned-revolutionary and the biopic *Ali* (Michael Mann, 2001) about the political pugilist Muhammad Ali. I connect their sporting performances to dissenting Black sports figures, particularly Carlos and Smith, in American history as well as to broader moments of Black dissent and revolt in America.

Sports are traditionally considered the domain of men where dominant forms of masculinity are portrayed and men’s sporting performances are considered the standard. This masculinist notion of sports informs gender representation in sports fiction films. While women’s participation in sports films is often a secondary role, there has been a rise in contemporary sports films about women. However, Black women’s representation in sports films, unlike their male counterparts, is nearly non-existent. Chapter Four, “Performing Gendered Visibility,” analyzes the documentary impulse in performances of gendered visibility, specifically looking at the ways in which Black women attempt to register their bodies visible within sporting arenas. I first explore the broader context of women’s sports history and issues of race, embodiment, and performance, specifically femininity and masculinity, in relation to athleticism. I then explore how this history informs and shapes women’s representation, generally, and Black women’s representation, specifically, in sports films. Using two rare examples of representations of Black female sporting bodies, I turn to basketball-themed films *Love and Basketball* (Gina Prince Bythewood, 2000) and *Juwanna Mann* (Jesse Vaughn, 2001)

and explore how both films' protagonist perform gendered visibility on the basketball court, paying particular attention to the ways the protagonists deal with "playing like a man." In doing so, I evaluate how both films contain embodied histories regarding Black women's participation in sports, generally, and the politics of respectability in the Women's National Basketball Association (WNBA), specifically.

Finally, in the Conclusion, I address how analyzing the Black body in/as history provides a critical intervention into dominant modes of generic sports film criticism. Using theories of Black embodiment and performance to read the Black sporting body as an individuated multiplicity, I contend that representations of Black sporting bodies evoke what I call "critical muscle memory," which underscores an internalized, shared experience of Black past movements that are acted out and contested over time by and through representations of the Black sporting body. In describing critical muscle memory, I gesture toward future research on spectatorship, specifically the need to make critical connections between spectatorial experience, the documentary impulse in sports films, and the Black body as an individuated multiplicity.

Chapter One:

Historical Contestants

In the world of competitive sports, athletes are transformed into contestants. A contestant is defined as one who competes as well as one who takes part. As both a challenger and participant in sports' competitive play, contesting Black athletes perform striking displays of physical, creative, and dexterous athletic skill and showcase the Black body as an instrument of and instrumental to "competitive human movement, embodied practice and emotional release."⁶⁰ In this regard, Black athletes are contestants within sports formal structures of play, where games include set rules, roles, goals, and standards for evaluating the quality of the performance of those participating.⁶¹ However, Black athletes do not just compete in athletic contests; they also function as contestants within larger discourses within sports and popular culture. According to Ann M. Hall, "[sport] is such a visible aspect of popular culture" that the "cultural meanings and values enacted through participation, competition and spectacle help make and remake us both as individuals and as collectives."⁶² Through sports—defined here as regulated and rule-governed games—Black athletes contest, meaning they participate in and, as I will argue, challenge the ways in which sport—as a cultural institution—reflects the values in and of dominant society.

This notion of Black athletes as literal contestants within sports games and sport's cultural institution provides the basis for reading the representations of Black athletes in sports

⁶⁰ Ben Carrington, *Race, Sport and Politics: The Sporting Black Diaspora* (Sage: Los Angeles, 2010), 48.

⁶¹ John J. MacAloon, "Olympic Games and the Theory of Spectacle" in *Rite, Drama, Festival, Spectacle: Rehearsals Toward a Theory of Cultural Performance*, ed. John J. MacAloon (Philadelphia: Institute for the Study of Human Issues, Inc., 1984), 254.

⁶² Ann M. Hall, *Feminism and Sporting Bodies: Essays on Theory and Practice* (Champaign: Human Kinetics, 1996), 31.

films as a kind of figurative contestant. Largely, this reading is possible because sports films are a genre “replete with American discourses, ideologies, and racial dynamics” that reinforce and challenge the construction of social identities and “function ‘in a continuing tension (relationship, influence, and antagonism) to the dominant culture.’”⁶³ Aaron Baker explains that sports films narrate competing and conflicting ideological discourses on race, gender, sex, and class. He challenges the presumed “apolitical nature of sports by examining how [sports] films contribute to the contested process of defining social identities.”⁶⁴ Thus, Baker argues that the practice of contestation is both literal and figurative in sports films, whereby despite “efforts at ideological maintenance, contradictions often show up ... allowing us to see the larger structural determinants of social identities.”⁶⁵

Beginning from these arguments, I focus on the trope of the “contestant” as a way to frame and evaluate the ways in which the Black body intervenes and supersedes its own iconography within the sports film genre. In this sense, the Black sporting body functions as an historical force that exceeds the narrative constraints within sports films’ idealized narratives to challenge not only the construction of social identities but the historical narratives attached to those identities. Therefore, in this chapter, I explore the ways in which representations of Black sporting bodies are constructed as historical contestants that bear witness to and challenge hegemonic discourses on sports, history, and the playing out of Black lived as well as imagined

⁶³ King and Leonard, “Why Sports Films Matter; Or, Refusing a Happy Ending,” 229, and Baker, *Contesting Identities*, 1.

⁶⁴ Baker, *Contesting Identities*, 2.

⁶⁵ Ibid.

experiences. To this point, larger narratives of (social) contestation and (social) movement in sports and society at large connect to and are connected by representations of Black athletes.

In framing Black athletes as historical contestants, I analyze Black embodiment and performance in sports films, particularly through their documentary impulse, or the gestures and markers through which these films establish their reference to real bodies and real histories.⁶⁶ Taking into account the “rhetorical and discursive ways in which racial imagery,” specifically blackness, codes, attaches, and produces surplus values and meanings onto the Black body, I explore how theories of embodiment and performance offers a way to transform dominant criticism on race and representation in sports films.⁶⁷ Using theories of Black embodiment and performance, this conceptual framework makes perceptible the ways in which the Black body conveys an historical force that exceeds hegemonic representational practices in American cinema. Because of the historical violence inscribed upon the real and represented Black body, I argue that individual as well as communal bodies and experiences resonate in and project out of representations of Black sporting bodies. This assertion depends on what I call the paradox of individuated multiplicity, and this paradox is evinced in the sports films I discuss throughout this dissertation. By individuated multiplicities, I mean the way in which a singular Black body represents, references, and relates to other embodied experiences within specific contexts.

Starting with this notion of the cinematic Black sporting body as an individuated multiplicity, this chapter frames representations of Black sporting bodies using an interdisciplinary methodology drawn from sport, dance, and performance studies as well as

⁶⁶ I explore Valerie Smith’s notion of a documentary impulse from in greater depth in the Introduction. See Smith, “The Documentary Impulse in Contemporary African-American Film.”

⁶⁷ James Snead, *White Screens, Black Images: Hollywood from the Dark Side*, eds. Colin MacCabe and Cornel West (New York: Routledge, 1994), 2.

critical race and gender theories on embodiment and performativity. Using these methods and theoretical concepts, I focus on and read the Black sporting body as a communicative body which, through performance and embodiment, represents, references, and relates to Black sporting and non-sporting embodied histories and experiences.

I conclude this chapter with a case study that looks at nonfiction cinematic modes within sports films. I analyze Black embodiment and performance in Deborah Morales and Kareem Abdul-Jabbar's 2011 basketball documentary *On the Shoulder of Giants: The Story of the Greatest Basketball Team You Never Heard Of* and examine the documentary impulse in the film at both the levels of narrative and embodied performance. I look at how *On the Shoulders of Giants* uses digital animation as a way to literally and figuratively connect representations of past and present Black basketball players together as well as associate their actions to larger narratives of social contestation (lynching) and social movement (civil rights and equality) that shaped and continue to shape Black experiences. Textually analyzing the ways Black sporting bodies function as individuated multiplicities, I read the represented, referenced, and related embodied histories in the documentary. In doing so, I demonstrate how representations of the Black sporting body functions as historical contestants within sports films.

From “Skin in the Game” to “Skin in the Genre”: Black Embodiment and Performance in Sports Films

Black representation in sports films is often discussed within historical terms whereby race and identity is evaluated through the lens of macro historical shifts and changes for Blacks in both cinema, society, and sports. Specifically, scholars discuss how Black athletes, having been mostly marginalized and excluded from sports films until the 1940s, gained more

substantial, albeit often supporting roles, in sports films post World War II. During the classic period of the 1950s on screen, Black characters functioned in Hollywood sports films to define their white protagonist.⁶⁸ At that time, Black athletes-turned-actors were transformed on screen into objects of desire and danger and hypersignifiers of masculinity. “Because of their race,” athletes including Paul Robeson, Woody Strode, Al Duval, Joe Lillard, and Kenny Washington, “were reduced to the body [and] became viable commodities to be exploited by the cinema industry.”⁶⁹ Additionally when Black characters began to get more starring roles in sports films, their centrality in the narrative came “with the restriction that they continue to accept white control and represent an ideology of self-reliance and gradualism. These values have continued to inform filmic representation of African American athletes, even as blacks have become a dominant presence in sports such as basketball and football.”⁷⁰ For example, the shifting demographics in the NBA in the 1970s and 1980s became source material for Hollywood feature films about “a black style of basketball modeled on the NBA.”⁷¹ To this point, contemporary sports films (based on release years 1970s-present and not the time period represented in the diegesis) do feature many more Black athletes than Hollywood has previously represented in the genre. As well, Black athletes are often portrayed in team sports, making the genre one where Black participation en masse is not merely incidental to the narrative but a central focus of the film itself.

⁶⁸ Baker, *Contesting Identities*, 2.

⁶⁹ Charlene Regester, “From the Gridiron and the Boxing Ring to the Cinema Screen: The African-American Athlete in pre-1950 Cinema,” *Culture, Sport, Society: Cultures, Commerce, Media, Politics*, 6: 2-3 (2003), 270.

⁷⁰ Baker, *Contesting Identities*, 2.

⁷¹ *Ibid.*, 30.

My work builds on and moves beyond these historical examinations of Black representation, stereotypes, and tropes in sports films. Focusing on contemporary films, many of which have not been rigorously analyzed or discussed at all in sports film scholarship, my engagement with theories of embodiment and performance is an intervention into the manner in which race functions as a framework to evaluate Black representation in sports films. In this sense, I shift the critical lens from examining “skin in the game” to “skin in the genre” in order to evaluate what the Black body brings to not just sporting performance but also the sports film genre. In foregrounding the Black body, I argue that, while white bodies also participate in sports on screen, they do not function as individuated multiplicities that evoke embodied histories on screen and, thus, do not have the same historical projections as Black bodies on screen. At the level of genre, I provide a racially inflective and generative analysis that bridges aesthetic, critical, and historical contextualization through a focus on Black embodied performance in contemporary sports films.

As I explained in the Introduction and above, contemporary sports films have a large concentration of Black actors/representation and make claims to and sometimes actually incorporate an historical real. Sports films have a realist style to authenticate their claims to a verifiable, real-life sporting and social world. Because of these factors, sports films offer a decidedly privileged genre to analyze Black embodiment and explore representations of the Black body in/as history. In order to evaluate historically inflected representations of Black sporting bodies at the level of embodied performance, I turn to performance studies scholar Harvey Young’s provocative and innovative approach to analyzing Black embodiment and performance within America’s racist and racializing society.

Young's *Embodying Black Experience: Stillness, Critical Memory, and the Black Body* offers an extraordinary perspective on the historicity of the Black body, racial performativity, and racial projection. Young analyzes what he calls "phenomenal blackness," or shared and similar lived Black experiences that "[invite] a consideration of history, habit, memory, and the process of racial mythmaking."⁷² Chronicling performances of stillness and resistance in photography, theater, athletics, and museums, Young relates "how similar experiences of the body repeat within the lives of black folk and how select individuals have employed expressive forms to relay their stories and life lessons to largely unimagined future audiences."⁷³ Moreover, Young focuses on the Black body as a target of violent racial projections—including racial epithets and profiling, incarceration, and physical and sexual assault—in order to "[spotlight] the ways in which *an* idea of the black body has been and continues to be projected across actual physical bodies."⁷⁴ In doing so, he "chronicles how the misrecognition of individuated bodies as 'the black body' creates similar experiences."⁷⁵ Young mobilizes this notion of the misrecognition of Black bodies by others and oneself as a type of embodied double consciousness that unites and structures the shared experiences of Black people in society.

In addition to Young, E. Patrick Johnson offers an important example of critically reading the Black body theoretically but also underscoring the historical authenticity and distinct experience of the Black body in real life. In *Appropriating Blackness: Performance and the Politics of Authenticity*, Johnson interrogates the intersections of race, performance, culture, and

⁷²Young, *Embodying Black Experience*, 6.

⁷³ Ibid.

⁷⁴ Ibid., 4.

⁷⁵ Ibid.

politics in the “process of *doing* blackness.”⁷⁶ Johnson details how race is performance and performance is racialized. Analyzing various performances of blackness as dynamic and generative, Johnson contends that “racial performativity informs the process by which we invest bodies with social meaning” and social history.⁷⁷ “In addition to being two contested terms,” Johnson explains, “blackness and performance are two discourses whose histories converge at the site of otherness.”⁷⁸ At this site of otherness, blackness is always in the state of being and becoming. However, in neither Johnson’s text nor my dissertation, an analysis of blackness and performance as social constructions does not occlude the importance of the embodied presence of Black people’s real life experiences. In this sense, Johnson cautions how we read race as a construct and lived experience:

Yet I must reemphasize, following Rinaldo Walcott, that to “read blackness as merely ‘playful’ is to fall into the willfull denial of what it means to live ‘black.’” Indeed, blackness offers a way to rethink performance theory by forcing it to ground itself in praxis, especially within the context of a white supremacist, patriarchal, capitalist, homophobic society.⁷⁹

Therefore, in considering the performativity of blackness as playful, yet, a lived experience, my analysis of Black sporting bodies considers the spectacular representational display happening in sports films that situate the body in/as social history. Here, the visual term “display” literally encompasses several meanings of the term “play:” the play of the game, the play of/between

⁷⁶ E. Patrick Johnson, *Appropriating Blackness: Performance and the Politics of Authenticity* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2003), 7.

⁷⁷ *Ibid.*, 9.

⁷⁸ *Ibid.*, 7.

⁷⁹ *Ibid.*

bodies, and the way in which the narrative/contest plays itself out. Like Johnson who argues that blackness is an embodied performance, I suggest that the historicity of the Black body, particularly in relation to sports as a body-based performance, produces a dynamic cultural relationship between performance as display and display as performance wherein history is represented and referenced within this dialectic.

I use Young's and Johnson's theories to build on and enhance critical scholarship on the ways in which sports films are about "visual economies of motion and the manner in which race, class, gender, sexuality, and nostalgia activate them."⁸⁰ In focusing on the visual economy of embodied performance, I particularly mobilize Young's reading of the Black body and its shared experiences to undergird my conceptual approach to the cinematic Black sporting body's historical specificity and variability. Young explains that "the black body exists as a theoretical construct that both represents and creates the experiences of multiple, individuated bodies within specific contexts."⁸¹ This concept is what I call the paradox of individuated multiplicity, and it informs the way in which I read the resonant (referenced and related) histories at the level of embodied performance represented by and through Black sporting bodies in sports film.

I use Young's theories on Black embodiment and performance to support the idea that representations of the Black athlete in cinema "always speaks, because of the history of violence done to the black body, both in history itself and in the history of the cinema, for more than that particular black Self."⁸² This concept underscores the notion of the historical violence inscribed

⁸⁰ David J. Leonard and C. Richard King, "Screening the Social: An Introduction to Sport Cinema" in *Visual Economies off/in Motion: Sport and Film*, eds. C. Richard King and David J. Leonard (New York: Peter Lang, 2006), 7.

⁸¹Ibid., 9-10.

⁸² Grant Farred, "When Kings Were (Anti-?)Colonials: Black Athletes in Film," *Sport in Society* 11.2/3 (March 2008), 251.

upon the cinematic Black body. Discussing Leon Gast's Muhammad Ali documentary *When We Were Kings* (1996), Grant Farred argues that the exceptional athlete's burden of over-representation—speaking for “raced, gendered, ethnicized, immigrant, (pseudo) national or ‘originary’ community”—renders his/her presence as resonant of multiple and entangled histories.⁸³ Throughout this dissertation, my use of textual analysis with attention to historical context renders visible the multiple and entangled histories that are embodied in, by, and through Black sporting bodies. Crucially, these histories link representations of Black sporting bodies as individuated multiplicities and, thus, as historical contestants to particular instances of Black struggle and resistance in American history.

Furthermore, as Farred suggests, if “the Black athlete, in contradistinction to her or his white counterpart, is never permitted the historical luxury of only ‘personal’ representation,” it stands to bear that representations of Black sporting bodies function as individuated multiplicities with repositories of representation, meaning, association, and significance. Therefore, I agree with Farred that “the black athlete is, in this way, always simultaneously in excess of itself and less than itself; it speaks for its broader community, which means that the single, exceptional individual is always less than the totality of that community.”⁸⁴

In my approach to examining representations of the Black sporting body, I combine Young's theories of Black embodiment and performance and Farred's notion that the Black athlete's burden of representation makes it function in excess of itself. In this chapter, as well as the rest of this dissertation, I use these frameworks to analyze and contextualize the performance

⁸³ Ibid., 242. For Farred, Ali's iconographic embodied history is one that includes his status as a “1960s renegade and hero of the counter-cultural left” based on his politics inside and outside of the ring. Farred argues that *When We Were Kings* “renders Ali's political oppositionality incidental to his boxing” instead of depicting how Ali “so effortlessly integrated his politics into his boxing” (242).

⁸⁴ Ibid.

of this embodied excess by reading the Black sporting body as an individuated multiplicity. The notion takes into account W.E.B. Du Bois's notion of "double consciousness," or the "sense of always looking at one's self through the eyes of others" as an embodied experience.⁸⁵

In film, the notion of "double consciousness" is often used to describe the "two-ness" experience of the tragic mulatto/a figure, such as Peola (Freda Washington) in *Imitation of Life* (John Stahl, 1934), who embodies the narrative and history of miscegenation in American society and functions as "a visual reminder of the sexual slavery of black women, who for so long had been at the sexual disposal of their masters."⁸⁶ Moving beyond a Black/white duality of the mulatto/a, I explore the embodied histories and experiences that resonate out of the individual Black image. I do this, largely, through reading the real as well as the represented Black sporting body as a communicative body. I argue that Black athletes' bodies have always been considered a sign and signifier, a "powerful fantasmic figure" that shifts and oscillates in meaning.⁸⁷ In film, I explore how the Black sporting body as "an expressive totality, balletic and beautiful" finds its discursivity within the film's narrative, by the vocabulary of athletic spectacle, and through its excessive embodiment.⁸⁸

In this sense, representations of Black sporting bodies function, as Henry Louis Gates, Jr. describes, as "double-voiced" texts, speaking for themselves but also to other texts (bodies) and

⁸⁵ W.E.B. Du Bois, *The Souls of Black Folk* (New York: Dover Publications, Inc., 1903), 4.

⁸⁶ Lisa M. Anderson, *Mammies No More: The Changing Image of Black Women on Stage and Screen* (New York: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, Inc., 1997), 49.

⁸⁷ Carrington, *Race Sport and Politics*, 1.

⁸⁸ Toby Miller, *Sportsex* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2001), 21.

contexts (narratives).⁸⁹ This type of expression is referred to as signifying, a practice used to read African American literature and vernacular traditions. Gates explains that “Black texts Signify upon other black texts in the tradition by engaging in what [Ralph] Ellison has defined as implicit formal critiques of language use, of rhetorical strategy.”⁹⁰ I mobilize this rhetorical strategy in sports films through reading Black sporting bodies as individuated multiplicities that signify upon other Black sporting and non-sporting images in film and society.

Framing the Black sporting body as an individuated multiplicity that signifies, I focus on sporting performance in sports films as a “craft” where the Black body both performs as an individual and speaks for its broader community. Through disciplining of the body’s movements, craft describes both “the honing of skill by the application of discipline, time, talent, and energy” as well as “the production of cultural artifacts that express particular ethnic histories and traditions to the development of styles of life and work that reflect and symbolize a community’s values, virtues, and goals.”⁹¹ Black sporting performance in film as craft suggests that “Black creativity [turns] the body from a singular form of ‘cultural capital’ into what Stuart Hall calls a ‘canvas of representation.’”⁹² Black sporting bodies’ fluid, expressive, and creative representation paints numerous narratives onto its bodily canvas and attaches related socio-historical and political contexts of Black experiences.

⁸⁹ Henry Louis Gates, Jr. *The Signifying Monkey: A Theory of African-American Literary Criticism* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1988), xxv.

⁹⁰ *Ibid.*, xxvii.

⁹¹ Michael Eric Dyson, “Be Like Mike?: Michael Jordan and the Pedagogy of Desire,” in *Michael Jordan, Inc.: Corporate Sport, Media Culture, and Late Modern America*, Ed. David L. Andrews (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2001), 261 and 262.

⁹² Ella Shoat, “Post-Third Worldist Culture: Gender, Nation, and the Cinema,” in *Rethinking Third Cinema*, eds. Anthony R. Guneratne and Wimal Dissanayake (New York: Routledge, 2003), 69.

The notion of the Black sporting body as an individuated multiplicity does not essentialize the Black experience; it does not in effect propagate the notion of a monolithic Black people and a unitary description of blackness. There is no authentic blackness; instead, blackness is “overdetermined—contingent on the historical, social, and political terms of its production.”⁹³ Because of this, as Hortense Spillers warns, “the body should be specified as a discursive and particular instance that belongs, always to a *context*, and we must look for its import there.”⁹⁴ Thus, grounding my film analysis of Black sporting bodies within sports films’ documentary impulse (the genre’s use of historical specificity and preoccupation with facticity), my work shows that, through embodiment and performance, the referenced and related contexts that the film evokes are just as important as the particular instance being represented. As well, I recognize that Young does not suggest that “all Black people have the same experience; it is, rather, that a remarkable similarity, a repetition with a difference, exists among embodied black experiences.”⁹⁵ Therefore, this chapter is about looking at the cinematic Black sporting body as an individuated multiplicity that, through embodiment and performance, exceeds the narrative landscape in which it is represented and evokes multiple historical narratives/contexts, making it an important visual/discursive site and citation of and about referenced and related Black sporting and non-sporting embodied histories and experiences.

While Young’s focus is on performances of stillness and my work investigates Black bodies in motion and contest, Young does examine the embodied performance of Black athletes,

⁹³ E. Patrick Johnson, *Appropriating Blackness: Performance and the Politics of Authenticity* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2003), 3.

⁹⁴ Hortense Spillers, “Peter’s Pans: Eating in the Diaspora,” in *Black, White, and in Color: Essays on American Literature and Culture* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2003), 21.

⁹⁵ Young, *Embodying Black Experience*, 5.

specifically Black boxers. I discuss his analysis of shared embodied Black experiences in boxing in Chapter Three's exploration of the film *Ali* and performances of dissent. However, Young's reading of how racialized events create shared embodied Black experiences can be abstracted to describe athletic spaces specific to the sports and sports films I discuss throughout this dissertation. Young's theorization of the Black body attests that there are "spectacular events, charged racialized and racializing scenarios, in which completed experiences assume a more active and, indeed, determining role in a person's lived experience."⁹⁶ For Young, racial profiling and being harassed by law enforcement is an example of what I call a "completed spectacular event." These kinds of charged racialized and racializing scenarios occur in sports as well. Sporting arenas, fields, courts, and pitches also function as sites of/for completed spectacular events, where primarily Black bodies perform in mass, specifically, for primarily white public consumption and are the subject of and subjected to charged racialized and racializing scenarios. In fact, historically, sporting events are often charged racial spaces and have their own level of racial discrimination called "staking" in sports where athletes are put into positions based on racial stereotypes. For example, Black athletes are pushed into positions that are thought to require less mental ability and greater athleticism, such as being running backs instead of quarterbacks in football.

Overall, the history of sports is one of segregation and integration. In the contemporary landscape I examine, Black athletes make up a majority of those who participate in high-revenue sports like football and basketball while white audiences make up the majority of spectators. Black athletes are often targeted with racist statements that attribute their achievements to

⁹⁶ Ibid., 11.

biological physical prowess. In this ethnocentric view of sports, the failures of Black athletes (and Black people in general) derive from racist ideas that they lack sophisticated mental ability, leading to few Black people in positions of power (e.g. coaches, owners, and quarterbacks). In both scenarios, Black success and failure in sports is based on a racist presumption about their genetics. Moreover, sports such as basketball and, to a lesser extent, football are often racialized within the popular imaginary. Since the late 1970s, contemporary basketball, specifically the National Basketball Association (NBA)—which became integrated (for African Americans) in the 1950-1951 season when Chuck Cooper was drafted by Boston, Nat “Sweetwater” Clifton signed a contract with New York, and Earl Lloyd signed with Washington—has become increasingly racialized. The NBA is recognized as having an urban, Black aesthetic. For professional basketball, “a big part of the NBA’s greater appeal here and abroad came from the spectacle of black style [...] because over 80 percent of the NBA players are African American, the league exemplifies ‘the status of “difference” as *the* commodity in postmodernity.’”⁹⁷ Also having a gritty, urban feel, football, specifically the National Football League (NFL) where Black players were forcibly de-integrated from the league from 1933 to 1945, is also a racialized sport. African Americans are the majority of players in the league. However, there are only a few Black quarterbacks and coaches in the league. There are no Black football team owners. In this regard, once the color line was broken on various playing fields it was rigidly maintained in the front office and positions of authority on the sidelines.

Informed by this history, sports films visually narrativize how sports have functioned as completed spectacular events within history. Many of the films I discuss in this dissertation, including *Remember the Titans* (Boaz Yakin, 2000) and *Glory Road* (James Gartner, 2006),

⁹⁷ Baker, *Contesting Identities*, 30.

borrow from sports history's charged racialized and racializing scenarios, depicting integration/segregation morality tales of Black teams/players competing against white players/teams. Even in sports that are assumed to be absent of Black participation, including bobsledding, which I explore in my analysis of *Cool Runnings* (Jon Turteltaub, 1993) in Chapter Two, sporting arenas still function as a site for completed spectacular events, where Black bodies are made to prove their worth to white athletes, audiences, and society. Thus, as a genre, sports films and their representation of Black embodiment dramatize athletics as kind of completed spectacular event whereby conceptions of blackness—as a shared historical, fleshed experience—are projected across individual bodies. This projection engenders the process whereby I read the cinematic Black sporting body as an individuated multiplicity that evokes a history of Black embodied experiences.⁹⁸

In analyzing cinematic Black sporting bodies as individuated multiplicities, it is important to look, more broadly, at Black embodiment and representation in dominant cinema practices. Historically, Black representation in Hollywood cinema has been structured within the limited scope of racial stereotypes and caricatures. Black racial imagery codes Hollywood film, as James Snead notes, through the devices of mythification, marking, and omission.⁹⁹ In many ways, Black representation in Hollywood functions, like Young's account of the Black body in American society, as a subject of racial projection via stereotypes found and circulated in popular culture. Donald Bogle's seminal interpretive history of African American representation in film denotes the five stereotypes—mammy, buck, Uncle Tom, coon, and mulatto/a—that, while guised in different forms, remain ever-present in the history of Hollywood cinema.

⁹⁸ Young, *Embodying Black Experience*, 11.

⁹⁹ Snead, *White Screens, Black Images*, 4.

“Because the guises were always changing,” Bogle explains, “audiences were sometimes tricked into believing the depictions of the American Negro were altered, too. But at heart beneath the various guises, there lurked the familiar types.”¹⁰⁰ Thus, the use of stereotypes—in relation to cinema’s exhibitive functions as a kind of racial “projection”—distributed across Black bodies throughout film history reveals, in the words of Young, “a remarkable similarity, a repetition with a difference.”¹⁰¹ As well, similar to Young’s use of the “continuing existence or legacy of racial assumptions” as a catalyst to shared experiential overlap, Black representation in Hollywood cinema (as well as society in general) shapes the possible reading of the cinematic Black body as one that brings together and sometimes blurs the real and imagined Black body—the representation and the referent—and, thus, can be constrictive and constructive (the stereotype as good/bad and rooted in/out of reality) of Black embodied experience.¹⁰²

Notwithstanding the dominant practice of Hollywood, it is important to recognize that not all Black film imagery is negative and many African American filmmakers contested Hollywood’s stereotypical images. As Ed Guerrero notes in *Framing Blackness: The African American Image in Film*, throughout the history of cinema, competing and changing Black images and unstable notions of blackness have “talked back” to each other.¹⁰³ The Black image, Guerrero contends, is “defined and conditioned by social struggle, the demands of the historical moment, and the material imperative of an industry that privileges economics and short-term

¹⁰⁰ Donald Bogle, *Toms, Coons, Mulattoes, Mammies, & Bucks: An Interpretive History of Blacks in American Films*, 4th edition (New York: Continuum, 1973), 18.

¹⁰¹ Young, *Embodying Black Experience*, 5.

¹⁰² Ibid.

¹⁰³ Ed Guerrero, *Framing Blackness: The African American Image in Film* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1993), 2.

profit before all other human, aesthetic, or philosophic possibilities or concerns.”¹⁰⁴ In this regard, for Black spectators specifically, Black images have always been vexed within a complex representational and presentational web of cultural meaning and negotiation. Therefore, whether “resistant” or “oppositional” viewers, “spaces of agency exists for Black people, wherein we can both interrogate the gaze of the Other but also look back, and at one another, naming what we see. The ‘gaze’ has been and is a site of resistance for colonized Black people globally.”¹⁰⁵ Therefore, if stereotypes of the Black body make it “an already-read text,” there is subversive, intertextual possibilities in considering how representations of the cinematic Black body as an individuated multiplicity revises history—which is “the [literal and figurative] fact of being *seen* again”—and moves to re-envision shared Black experiences—“to form an image of again or afresh, especially in one’s memory.”¹⁰⁶

Therefore, in examining representations of the Black body in sports films as an individuated multiplicity, I focus on how histories and mythologies of individual and shared Black experiences are embodied. In order to more broadly understand how this process works, I turn to Harvey Young’s explanation of the term Black embodiment. In particular, the term highlights what becomes represented *in* and *on* the body. This mapping of the Black body is both a literal and suggestive one, where social, cultural, and political meanings and values are

¹⁰⁴ Ibid.

¹⁰⁵ bell hooks, “The Oppositional Gaze: Black Female Spectators” in *Reel to Real: Race, Class, and Sex at the Movies* (New York: Routledge, 1996), 289. For an analysis of “resistant” Black spectatorship, see: Manthia Diawara, “Black Spectatorship: Problems of Identification and Resistance,” in *Black American Cinema*, ed. Manthia Diawara (Routledge: 1993): 211-220.

¹⁰⁶ Barbara Johnson considers stereotypes to be an “already-read text.” See Barbara Johnson, *The Critical Difference: Essays in the Contemporary Rhetoric of Reading* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1980), 3. *Oxford English Dictionary*, v. “revise,” accessed May 9, 2011, <http://www.oed.com>.

internalized. Young explains, “[when] popular connotations of blackness are mapped across or internalized within black people, the result is the creation of *the black body*.”¹⁰⁷ Unlike, for example, white bodies that can be *a* body, a Black body in its overdeterminedness functions not as an individuated or unmarked body but as *the* imagined Black figure. Innumerable meanings, values, and differences are inscribed over the surface/skin of the Black body to the point that the individual is disembodied and only a referred body. “This second body, an abstracted and imagined figure,” Young explains, “shadows or doubles the real one. It is the black body and not a particular, flesh-and-blood body that is the target of a racializing projection.”¹⁰⁸ Furthermore, the term Black embodiment emphasizes the meanings made *through* the body. This position through the body locates how ideas of the Black body are projected throughout history. This projection through the Black body reifies the “mystery of blackness,” which “[becomes] a *fact* through repeated deployment across a range of bodies.”¹⁰⁹ In film, the effect of the processes of Black embodiment and racial projection is the excess values and significations associated with the Black image on screen.

The Black body in Hollywood cinema has historically performed in excess of itself, always containing symbolic value in surplus of the body’s individual self. For example, Black women’s dominant roles on screen as maids and mammies attest to a surplus of type in place of an individual self. Discussed by a range of scholars including Robyn Wiegman, (1991), Ed Guerrero (1993), bell hooks (1996), Craig T. Watkins (1998), Jane Gaines (2001), and Linda Williams (2001), the cinematic Black body is a commodified signifier with surplus value.

¹⁰⁷ Ibid., 7.

¹⁰⁸ Ibid.

¹⁰⁹ Ibid.

Michael Rogin describes Black bodies as possessing “the power to make African Americans represent something besides themselves.”¹¹⁰ “From the very first films,” James Snead argues, “Black skin on screen became a complex code for various things.”¹¹¹ As a result of the possible meanings that can be attached to its body and particularly its skin, Snead explains that Black racial imagery on screen produces a specific coding process that demarcates the Black body as both a political and sexual threat that must be contained via censorship because of fear of Black people’s identification with their image.

Anne Friedberg explains that “[all] demands for film censorship stem from the position that cinema encourages imitation/mimetic incorporation of the harmful, illegal, or immoral actions of a character, actor or star. In short, a fear of identification.”¹¹² To this point, in her analysis of censorship in early American motion pictures, particularly films with representations of criminal and/or sexual Black bodies, Jane Gaines writes of the exhibitory possibilities as well as the political and sexual threat of the Black body’s presence in cinema. She describes that “the black body, in its remarkable capacity to reproduce images, then is not only the screen but the projector as well.”¹¹³ In this sense, the Black body is understood as having the ability to embody imagery as well as project imagery to spectators. Gaines describes the body as “a ‘robust mechanism’ like the cinema able to record and recreate the images it stores.”¹¹⁴ However,

¹¹⁰ Michael Rogin, *Black Face, White Noise: Jewish Immigrants in the Hollywood Melting Pot* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1996), 14.

¹¹¹ James Snead, *White Screens, Black Images: Hollywood from the Dark Side*, eds. Colin MacCabe and Cornel West (New York: Routledge, 1994), 2.

¹¹² Anne Friedberg, “The Denial of Difference: Theories of Cinematic Identification,” in *Psychoanalysis and Cinema*, ed. E. Ann Kaplan (New York: Routledge, 1990), 44.

¹¹³ Jane Gaines, *Fire & Desire: Mixed-Race Movies in the Silent Era* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2001), 252.

¹¹⁴ Ibid.

because of Black bodies “tendency to too much embodiment,” they function as volatile bodies on screen and were considered by white people (and by some Black people, however, for different reasons) as dangerous.¹¹⁵ Gaines explains that censoring films became the “method of quelling black urban uprisings that are actually nascent expressions of group identity and solidarity” as it was thought that “through the incorporation of the [volatile] image into the black body, the criminal violence (coupled with taboo sexuality) on the screen would be replicated in the wider society.”¹¹⁶ This fear of Black overidentification with their cinematic image, an image of visual as well as signifying excess, did not just have direct impact on film censorship. This fear also set the stage for the lack of Black representation in American cinema, producing as an effect the persistent burden of representation—the extra-filmic symbolic value—placed upon Black screen images as well as Black actors themselves. Coupling this burden with the politics of respectability, which stresses a need for positive, exceptional images to combat negative stereotypes, Black representation in cinema is always signifying more than itself and talking to, back, and against its own history of representational display in dominant, Hollywood cinema.

To read sports films and representations of Black sporting bodies for their historical and bodily memory and, thus, as individuated multiplicities, I analyze sporting performativity in sports and sports films broadly. However, to read sports, and in particular the play of sports, in and of themselves, I bear in mind how the fictitious construction of sporting practices, events, and bodies within sports films, rendered through filmic and generic conventions and with the

¹¹⁵ Ibid., 251. Black Americans have also cautioned against Black bodies “tendency to too much embodiment.” For example, in the case of D.W. Griffith’s *The Birth of a Nation* (1915), Black leaders, including Booker T. Washington and the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) worried about how the racism expressed in Griffith’s text would have a direct and negative impact on how they would be treated in society.

¹¹⁶ Ibid., 252.

manipulative aid of editing software and computer technology, make analysis of sporting activity in cinema wholly distinct from analysis of real-life sports. As a popular cultural form, Ben Carrington argues that sports should be analyzed on their own terms:

... film, music (including popular music), fashion, television and so on, can all be rendered as signifying texts that can then be 'read' by simply reworking the familiar tropes of literary criticism in order to make sense of the play of ideology, power, politics, and identity found within the contested spaces of popular culture and everyday life. Sport's very physicality, the emphatically embodied nature of its performance, the sheer diversity of sporting forms and sites, and its assumed 'non-art' instrumental rationality, make it a distinct cultural type that cannot easily be 'read' in the same way as these other cultural practices. To analyze sport only as a 'text' means losing much of sport's power (both as spectacle and in terms of its ludic appeal) as a form of competitive human movement, embodied practice and emotional release. We still lack a conceptual language, in other words, with which to make sense of sport except by trying to apply ways of reading sport that have been developed elsewhere to sport.¹¹⁷

Carrington demonstrates not only the issues around applying specific types of literary criticism to read sports but also underscores the importance of analyzing the specificity of sports' spectacle and ludic power/appeal in terms of embodiment, performance, and affective engagement. Thus, while I agree that reading sports is different than reading other popular culture forms (and that the conceptual language to do so is lacking), on the other hand, there is a unique and distinctly fabricated sporting performance happening in sports films.

¹¹⁷ Carrington, *Race, Sport, and Politics*, 48.

As I explained in the Introduction, sports' films hire sports consultants to choreograph sporting performances and train actors into credible athletes. For example, Glen Jones explains that in the basketball drama *Coach Carter* (Thomas Carter, 2005):

...the action sequences contained within [in the film] are realistic and are performed by the actors. There are no filmed 'actuality' inserts. The players filmed appear comfortable when handling the ball; they show a number of highly developed techniques and skills, have good athleticism, and appear to be able to 'play the game.' The DVD 'extras' inform the viewer that the action sequences were practised and choreographed through the work of Mark Ellis, the basketball coordinator employed on the film. He tells us that one of the pre-requisites for the actors was that they could play basketball. They all attended a three-week basketball camp prior to filming in which they worked upon their fitness and skills. Some 70 'plays' were learned. The actors had become a 'well oiled machine' by the time the film shoot took place. Filming for 12 hours per day was commonplace... Much of the basketball action was also storyboarded.¹¹⁸

Fictional sports films are about the play of actual sports and, thus, involve a tacit agreement to the realistic depiction of athletics but are not literal renderings of real-life sports contests themselves, which occur mostly on television. Significantly, the only exception is that of documentary sports films such as Spike Lee's *Kobe Doin' Work* (2009), which focuses on Los Angeles Lakers' shooting guard Kobe Bryant and his April 13, 2008 game against the San

¹¹⁸ Glen Jones, "In Praise of an 'Invisible Genre'? An Ambivalent Look at the Fictional Sports Feature Film," *Sport in Society* 11.2 (2008), 126.

Antonio Spurs.¹¹⁹ Thus, fictional sports films blur the distinction between real sports history and media constructions of sports history. However, Carrington's attention to issues of spectacle, embodiment, and affect serve as a reminder that in reading sports in sports films one must not look only at the narrative but also at the embodied performance of the play of sports themselves, particularly in scenes of sporting practice and contest.

Looking closely at sports performance, I take into account the ways in which performativity, more generally, in sports films is written through the terms of race and gender. Therefore, I turn to performance studies methods and theories of racial and gender performativity. Performance studies "focuses on the interplay between bodies, spatial arrangements, movements, and context" and "contemplates theoretical explications of bodies, voices, and objects engaged in various aspects of representational presentation and movement."¹²⁰ To this point, actual sporting contests are a type of performance. Performance studies scholar Richard Schechner argues that "[sports] activities... are very much like staged art performances," highlighting the role of the uniforms worn, the set scripts and choreographies enacted by way of "plays," and the conflicts that are real and fake for both athletes and fans alike.¹²¹ Therefore, in thinking about the staged nature of sports films, theories of gender and race performativity provide an important theoretical model to understand how representations of Black sporting bodies function as gendered and racialized individuated multiplicities that represent shared embodied Black experiences.

¹¹⁹ In Lee's film, thirty cameras follow Kobe Bryant during the NBA's 2007-2008 season. Kobe wore a microphone during the game as well as provided verbal commentary during the documentary. *Kobe Doin' Work* is a rare example of a Black athlete providing both a diegetic and non-diegetic commentary on his sporting performance.

¹²⁰ Deborah Elizabeth Whaley, "Review: BODIES IN DISSENT: Spectacular Performances of Race and Freedom, 1850-1910 by Daphne A. Brooks," *American Studies*, 48.4 (Winter 2007), 152.

¹²¹ Richard Schechner, *Performance Studies: An Introduction* (New York: Routledge, 2002), 6.

As such, gender performance renders social laws explicit. In studying representations of Black sporting bodies, the role of performing gender is explicitly stylized via embodiment and physical action. Black sporting bodies are dynamic, historically settled and unsettled, composed and contesting performers of gender and race in society. Judith Butler argues that gender is not a stable identity but:

...an identity tenuously constituted in time—an identity instituted through a *stylized repetition of acts*. Further, gender is instituted through the stylization of the body, and hence, must be understood as the mundane way in which bodily gestures, movements, and enactments of various kinds constitute the illusion of an abiding gendered self.¹²²

Largely because of sports obvious connection to the body, sports “have traditionally played an important role in definitions of gender, especially masculinity.”¹²³ Black males’ performances in sports films recall histories and mythologies on Black athleticism, specifically ones that are tied to racist psychological qualities (such as intellect) and physiological and genetic features of “natural” talent (such as speed or strength). As well, Black male sporting performances recall, more abstractly, Black men’s history in American society since slavery’s plantation economy, where the Black male body’s physical prowess was calculated, exhibited, and exploited for white public consumption. For Black male athletes as laborers, their embodied performances in sports films link the auction block to the sporting arena whereby contemporary sporting performance becomes a spectacle of the past. Significantly, Black female identity in sports, which I examine

¹²² Judith Butler, “Performative Acts and Gender Constitution: An Essay in Phenomenology and Feminist Theory,” in *Writing on the Body: Female Embodiment and Feminist Theory*, eds. Katie Conboy, Nadia Median, and Sarah Stanbury (New York: Columbia University Press, 1997), 402. [Butler’s emphasis].

¹²³ Baker, *Contesting Identities*, 3.

in depth in Chapter Four, is one that takes into account women of color's ambiguous position within sports and, as a result, sports films. Black women's representation in sports is the subject of sexist and racist media coverage; and they are relatively invisible within the genre of sports films. Chapter Four explores how an analysis of Black women's embodied performance in sports films represents and references histories and mythologies specific to Black women in sports and society, particularly women's roles in professional sports and the role of the politics of respectability in constructing Black female sexuality.

Similar to gender, race shapes Black sporting bodies performativity in real life and on screen. Take for example the performances of race and identity at work in the "style" of improvisation and dunking in basketball. Explaining Michael Jordan's athletic style of basketball as defined by spontaneity, stylization of the performed self, and the use of edifying deception, Michael Eric Dyson explains that improvisation is the will to spontaneity, or "the way in which historical accident is transformed into cultural advantage, and the way acts of apparently random occurrence are spontaneously and imaginatively employed by African-Americans in a variety of cultural expression."¹²⁴ Improvisation does not imply "a lack of preparation, thereby eliding the historical knowledge, the sense of tradition, and the enormous skill that the most eloquent improvisers are able to mobilize."¹²⁵ Thus, Dyson links Jordan's performance (his style of play) to various Black creative forces including jazz musician John

¹²⁴ Dyson, "Be Like Mike?," 262.

¹²⁵ Danielle Goldman, *I Want to Be Ready: Improvised Dance as a Practice of Freedom* (Ann Arbor: The University of Michigan, 2010), 5.

Coltrane, comedian Richard Pryor, and rapper Kool Moe Dee.¹²⁶ Dyson argues that Jordan's body (his display) is a site of desire and social history:

...a six-foot-six American man of obvious African descent [was] the dominant presence and central cause of athletic fantasy in a sport that twenty years ago was denigrated as a black man's game and hence deemed unworthy of wide attention or support. Jordan is therefore the bearer of meanings about black culture larger than his individual life, the symbol of a pedagogy of style, presence, and desire that is immediately communicated by the sight of his black body before it can be contravened by reflection.¹²⁷

Starring in the animated basketball film *Space Jam* (Joe Pytko, 1996), Jordan's use of improvisation on screen and in real life is an example of how play and display mark Black embodied performance in sports as racialized constructions of blackness and black social history.¹²⁸

In reading the Black sporting body as an individuated multiplicity, I examine the relationship between performance, display, and social history. For example, the practice and cultural politics of dunking in basketball illustrates this critical convergence. "Dunking," Davis W. Houck explains, "is a far more symbolic and rhetorical act, one that implicates a complex

¹²⁶ Dyson, "Be Like Mike?," 262. The change from "is" to "was" marks the shift from the cultural/athletic fantasy of Michael Jordan to LeBron James. I argue that James is now the biggest figure of this fantasy.

¹²⁷ Ibid., 267.

¹²⁸ Michael Jordan has often been discussed in terms that suggest he transcends race. But this logic, as E. Patrick Johnson claims, occludes the reality of Black lived experiences. While Jordan may have been marketed as "raceless" he "transforms race for white viewers, providing a desired alignment for white folks with a black personality who does not appear to pose as a threat" (Hoechsmann, 273). In this sense, Jordan is still Black to Black people. Michael Hoechsmann, "Just Do It: What Michael Jordan Has to Teach Us," in *Michael Jordan, Inc.: Corporate Sport, Media Culture, and Late Modern America* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2001).

cultural politics and a corresponding commodity culture. In addition to an overtly racial dimension, dunking implicates matters of violence, gender, and the marketing of professional basketball.”¹²⁹ The latter point is visibly “staged as theater” in various professional dunking contests, such as the NBA Slam Dunk contests, where current NBA stars are “judged by a panelist of ‘experts’ for originality, difficulty, force, and execution” but is also likened to the “up in the air” Black basketball style of play.¹³⁰ The cultural politics of dunking and its relation to a specific kind of Black performance in basketball, where one’s body and skills are on display, do not just shape professional basketball but also amateur play, evidenced most saliently in the collegiate career of UCLA center Kareem Abdul-Jabbar (then known as Lew Alcindor).

As a tall and assertive figure on the court, Abdul-Jabbar could dunk the basketball with ease, making him an indomitable force in college basketball. In 1967, the NCAA issued a rule that banned dunking in intercollegiate men’s basketball from 1967 to 1976. A form of affirmative action for white athletes, Black athletes were handicapped in their actions on the court. “That the NCAA deliberately targeted Abdul-Jabbar, the UCLA junior,” Houck states, “was reflected in the no-dunk rule’s popular designation—the Alcindor rule.”¹³¹ During the dunking ban, Abdul-Jabbar excelled at the “sky hook” shot, a much harder shot to defend against than the dunk. Abdul-Jabbar’s body and skillful actions—his play as well as his display—are transformed into a site of resistance and improvisation developed out of the institutional response to his Black body’s audacious performance on the court. Therefore, his employment of the sky hook (as well as the dunk) tells the tale of adaptation to new rules but also evokes a then-present

¹²⁹ Davis W. Houck, “Attaching the Rim: The Cultural Politics of Dunking,” in *Basketball Jones: America Above the Rim*, eds. Todd Boyd and Kenneth L. Shropshire (New York: New York University Press, 2000), 152.

¹³⁰ Ibid.

¹³¹ Ibid.

and past history on race, embodiment, dominance, and control in the realm of sports and beyond. As the example of dunking and its relationship to Black bodies demonstrates, racial performance in sports and, I argue, in sports films is one that is written on, by, and through the body's spectacular sporting performance.

While the "Alcindor Rule" is an example of containment within basketball, sports also generate tensions around Black performativity or, more broadly speaking, blackness in motion. Broadly speaking, blackness in motion as a literal concept reflects Black modernization and urban migration. Figuratively, blackness in motion frames the socio-historical narratives of social, economic, and political uplift that have been ever present within the Black community in American society. Historically, these upward-directional movements of blackness have been looked upon by whites with contempt and fear. Perceived as dangerous, the upward motion was thought to be a threatening climb towards social equality and political/economic redress for racial injustice. For example, in African American's direct action campaigns for civil rights, physical mobility (marches) and immobility (sit-ins) as a form of civil disobedience were directly linked with social mobility (desegregation and equal rights) as well as white resistance (hoses, dogs, prison, and/or death) and containment (housing and legislative segregation). In collapsing the critical boundary between the history of seeing blackness in motion as a threat in society and on screen, whether in the Selma marches (which actually were televised) or in the basketball drama *Glory Road* about the 1966 all-Black lineup to win a NCAA national championship discussed in Chapter Two, it becomes remarkably productive to read those performed threats as connected to other broader, threatening histories of blackness in motion for which they represent, reference, relate and resonate within.

Whether making a spectacular play or breaking world records, I argue that the Black sporting body's constant dramatic materializing—where, as Judith Butler explains, “the body is not merely matter but a continual and incessant *materializing* of possibilities”—is what allows for the body to embody related experiences.¹³² Taking into account the racial and gender performance theories discussed above, I contend that representations of the Black sporting body's gender and racial performance within narratives of triumph and defeat, dissent, and gendered visibility is, as Butler argues, “a manner of doing, dramatizing, and reproducing a historical situation” and read sporting performances as corporeal acts that are an effect of and reflect on past individual and communal actions.¹³³ In doing so, I analyze how in sports films, particularly those created within the dominant Hollywood industrial mode, authorized representations of the Black body author their own challenges within the bounds of the sport being played, the rules governing the sport, the narrative framing the story, and the historical performances being represented, referenced, and related in sports films.

In sports films, representations of Black sporting bodies are individuated multiplicities that reference and relate to Black sporting and non-sporting embodied histories and experiences. Through the interdisciplinary methods and theories of Black embodiment and performance discussed throughout this chapter, I explore how representations of Black sporting bodies function as individuated multiplicities with embodied histories and, thus, as historical contestants that challenge fixed temporal and representational meaning.

Case Study: Historical Contestants in *On the Shoulder of Giants*

¹³² Butler, “Performative Acts and Gender Constitution,” 404.

¹³³ Ibid.

As the Introduction explains, in my analysis of Black embodiment and performance in sports films I focus particularly on sports films documentary impulse, or the gestures and markers through which these films establish their reference to real bodies and real histories related to Black lived and imagined experiences. Unlike the fictional sports film I analyze throughout the my dissertation, I first turn my attention to non-fiction in order to explore how Black sporting bodies bear witness to and challenge hegemonic discourses on sports, history, and the playing out of African American lived as well as imagined experiences.

In order to analyze Deborah Morales 2011 basketball documentary *On the Shoulders of Giants: The Story of the Greatest Basketball Team You Never Heard Of*, I return to Valerie Smith's work on the documentary impulse in fiction films. As I described in the Introduction, Smith focuses on how contemporary Black directed films are constructed as part of a shared and recognizable reality. However, she critiques the ways in which these films have overshadowed the work of other Black filmmakers. To this point, Smith provides a shadow argument to her notion of the documentary impulse in fictional films by focusing on how "recent black-directed documentaries gesture toward the fictional or the artificial in an attempt to enter suppressed narratives into public discourses."¹³⁴ Smith explains that in Black documentaries, including Camille Billops' and James V. Hatch's *Suzanne, Suzanne* (1982) and *Finding Christa* (1991); Marlon T. Rigg's *Tongues Untied* (1989) and *Color Adjustment* (1992); and Marco Williams's *In Search of Our Fathers* (1992), "directors experiment with the artificiality of their medium to defamiliarize assumptions about family, sexuality, gender, race, and identity."¹³⁵

¹³⁴ Ibid., 57.

¹³⁵ Ibid., 61.

Morales and Abdul-Jabbar's documentary highlights the way in which "many African American film/videomakers have adopted the documentary mode to assert their view of reality. Documentary's identification with realism as a social signifier and its non-commercial status have made it a welcome site for challenging the authority of mainstream American history and culture."¹³⁶ Through the use of digital animation, a gesture towards the fictional and artificial in the documentary, *On the Shoulders of Giants* enters into the mainstream obscured Black sporting and non-sporting histories. The documentary's merging of fictional and non-fictional narrative modes blurs the "illusory boundaries between fiction and non-fiction," producing a hybrid narrative "of extraordinary poetic power."¹³⁷ By looking at how Black bodies are literally and figuratively animated as individuated multiplicities in *On the Shoulders of Giants*, I evaluate the embodied social histories and narratives of other, more violent, spectacular Black performances of lynching that the film references. In doing so, I explain how the representations of sporting bodies in the film resonate a history on the shared social, cultural, and political conditions of Black people in both the past and present.

In *On the Shoulder of Giants*, basketball legend Kareem Abdul-Jabbar chronicles the experiences and cultural impact of the "Harlem Rens," the first all-Black professional basketball team. An evocative tale of "the greatest team that you have never heard of," *On the Shoulders of Giants* challenges the cultural acceptance of the NBA as a historically Black dominated professional league by examining the performances of the "original ballers" who were barred

¹³⁶ Janet K. Cutler and Phyllis R. Klotman, "Introduction" in *Struggles for Representation: African American Documentary Film*, eds. Janet K. Cutler and Phyllis R. Klotman (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1999), xvii. While Morales is the film's director, Abdul-Jabbar wrote the screenplay (based on his memoir) and played such a pivotal role in the film's production. Thus, I consider this film to be both their films.

¹³⁷ *Ibid.*, xx.

from entering the all-white professional leagues at the time.¹³⁸ The documentary relays the history of these pioneering Black basketball players and their coach Bob Douglas, connecting them and their sporting performance to the cultural movement and cultural politics of the Harlem Renaissance.

Douglas, who immigrated to New York City in 1910 at the age of nineteen, became the “father of Black-basketball” when he founded the first Black professional team. Working out a deal with Sarco Realty Company, who owned the Renaissance Casino and Ballroom at 138th Street and Seventh Avenue in Harlem, to charge patrons for a night of watching hoops and dancing to a live orchestra, the Renaissance Big Five, better known as the “Rens,” were born. The film chronicles the history and importance of the Rens, highlighting their grueling schedules barnstorming across racially tumultuous regions; the racism they encountered from opposing fans and the whites-only professional basketball league; the competition between them and the white-owned Harlem Globetrotters based out of Chicago; and their attempts to play for and win the world championship. The film culminates in the Rens’ 1939 championship-run season where they defeated the all-white Oshkosh All-Stars in the World Professional Basketball Tournament. Having previously been denied entrance into the segregated American Basketball League and the National Basketball League in 1926 and 1937, respectively, the Rens went down in history as world champions, playing and defeating the best white teams from both leagues.¹³⁹ Still, their significance was lost within dominant sports and Black sports history.

¹³⁸ The documentary demystifies, in part, the assumption that the NBA was always an avenue for Black males to gain notoriety, fame, etc. The NBA, like many other American institutions, was a segregated one. Up until 1950, there were no Black Americans playing in the NBA. Following 1950, there was a slow and steady rise of Black participation in the professional league. According to “University of Central Florida’s College of Business Administration’s 2010 Racial and Gender Report Card: National Basketball Association,” currently, 82% of NBA players are people of color. Specifically, African Americans make up 77% of the professional population.

¹³⁹ Kareem Abdul-Jabbar with Raymond Obstfeld, *On the Shoulders of Giants: My Journey Through the Harlem Renaissance* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2007).

In fact, Abdul-Jabbar, who adapted his memoir *On the Shoulders of Giants: My Journey through the Harlem Renaissance* for the screenplay, was born and raised in Harlem but had never heard about the Rens until he was seventeen. Detailing his degrees of separation from several Rens players, Abdul-Jabbar writes: “And yet, I’d had connections to them I wasn’t even aware of... The Ren’s history was brushing against me all the time, like strangers bumping while passing on a crowded street. Historical connections and influences were all around me, but I hadn’t noticed.”¹⁴⁰ Abdul-Jabbar recounts learning the Rens’ style of play from watching basketball tapes at summer camp: “Watching those films, I was undoubtedly learning Rens plays and moves without ever having heard of them.”¹⁴¹ Abdul-Jabbar’s description of his own experience is an example of the Black sporting body functioning as an individuated multiplicity wherein his sporting play unconsciously represents and recreates the style of the Rens’ players. In this sense, Abdul-Jabbar is connected to both the Rens’ players and the plays, to both bodies and embodied performances.

Released in February of 2011 on Video-on-Demand and then subsequently on DVD, *On the Shoulder of Giants* was also packaged and released as an educational resource for many public schools for Black History Month, which continues Abdul-Jabbar’s mission to help Black people uncover the hidden past by “revealing some truths that have been hidden.”¹⁴² In fact, the film opens with Abdul-Jabbar “schooling” prominent basketball figures—Bill Russell, former Celtics captain and 11-time NBA champion; Jerry Reinsdorf, the chairman of the Chicago Bulls; Marques Haynes, former Harlem Globetrotter; Jerry West, former Los Angeles Lakers player

¹⁴⁰ Ibid., 180-181.

¹⁴¹ Ibid.

¹⁴² Ibid., 183.

and General Manager—on the historical erasure of what is arguably the best team in basketball history.

Staged at a bar, this “boys club only” talk of greatness is authenticated through the presence of these heavyweight basketball figures and the intimate setting of the discussion. This group functions as a hall of fame of sorts—many have been inducted in various actual halls of fame—with exclusivity marked not only by their professional impact but also more glaringly by their gender. There are no female sporting bodies present in the scene’s subjective evaluation of who is the greatest team in basketball history. Why isn’t former WNBA player Sheryl Swoopes there to put forth the Houston Comets, who won the first four national championships of the women’s professional league, as one option? The question that prompts both the film and their discussion is “genderless:” who do you think is the greatest basketball team in history?¹⁴³ Perhaps this omission of women’s basketball history in the narrative is merely and incidentally predicated on the fact that they are discussing precursors to the NBA, a male league. However, the film’s question elides gender specificity, and the film’s implicit gender bias underscores how sports are considered the domain of men. This erasure of a Black female presence and their performances of visibility and, thus, historical legibility in the structuring of sports history—particularly Black sporting history—will be addressed in Chapter Four.

Notwithstanding this point, *On the Shoulders of Giants* does an outstanding job foregrounding Harlem as a cultural epicenter for Black urban modernity and linking this cultural movement to basketball history. The documentary uses the presence of Black bodies in the

¹⁴³ I would argue that the University of Connecticut’s women’s basketball program, led by current WNBA star Maya Moore, to an unprecedented 90-game winning streak. They hold the record for the longest winning streak in college (men’s or women’s) basketball history.

NBA—both the reality and the assumption/stereotype—to critique the absent history of the original Black bodies in professional basketball. Serving as interviewer and tour-guide, Abdul-Jabbar functions as the “color man,” a sports commentator “who reminds the viewer of the statistics, past achievements, and world records, while placing current events into historical perspective.”¹⁴⁴ A towering figure, Abdul-Jabbar is the “color(ed) man” of Black sporting history, embodying sporting history and commenting on the intertwining of sports and social history. Abdul-Jabbar ties basketball history to Black cultural and social experiences in the United States. He links the Harlem Renaissance’s cultural innovation and advancement to the aesthetics and athletics of the Black body. In the documentary, Cornel West explains this sport and sociality connection:

The Harlem Renaissance was one of intellectual breakthrough, of artistic breakthrough, but also one in which sport was central. The history of Black people was such that for two hundred and forty four years all we had was our voices and our bodies. We had no land, no territory. We had no rights. We had no liberties. So all of our freedom, all of our self-determination was in our voices—one reason why the anthem of Black people is “Lift Every Voice.” And we had our bodies; we could use our bodies to stylize space and time, the way we walk, the way we talk.¹⁴⁵

¹⁴⁴ James Friedman and Ava Rose, “Television Sports as Mas(s)culine Cult of Distraction,” in *Out of Bounds: Sports, Media, and the Politics of Identity*, eds. Aaron Baker and Todd Boyd (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1997), 5. See Dave Zirin, *A People’s History of Sports in the United States: 250 Years of Politics, Protest, People, and Play* (New York: The New Press, 2008).

¹⁴⁵ Cornel West quoted in *On the Shoulders of Giants: The Story of the Greatest Basketball Team You Never Heard Of* (Deborah Morales, 2011), DVD.

On the Shoulders of Giants creatively illustrates the ways in which Blacks have used their voices and bodies and their bodies as voices to stylize space and time as well as create embodied connections to the past and present.

This stylization process is reminiscent of descriptions of Black social music, particularly jazz, which has often been linked stylistically to basketball.¹⁴⁶ In fact, the film literalizes the convergence between basketball and jazz, expressing that the Rens, who played on a dancehall floor before the bands went on and exhibited a style of play that kept the ball “in the air,” began to embody Harlem’s sound. In the film, jazz musician Wynton Marsalis explains each past Rens and contemporary basketball players’ roles on the team in relation to the roles of jazz band members. Marsalis notes that the bass player is the center in basketball, providing the rhythm for the band. In this case, he equates this figure to contemporary player Kevin Garnett and Rens player Tarzan Cooper. The piano player is the conductor of the band, such as the point guard is in basketball, likening modern day player Chris Paul with that of Rens player Fat Jenkins. The figurative drum, which provides proper syncopation, is the power forward in basketball, similar to current sensation LeBron James and past Rens’ player Puggy Bell. Marsalis notes that there is always a star person, whose instrumentation takes things to a new level; such was the flow of jazz greats Miles Davis, Dizzy Gillespie, and Charlie Parker. This figurative player is associated with franchise players such as Dwayne Wade and Michael Jordan and Rens’ player Pop Gates. Marsalis points out that in a band, just like on the court, “everybody has a chance to solo.” In this sense, like jazz, basketball players can improvise their flows and movements. Not only do

¹⁴⁶ For a discussion of the relationship between basketball and jazz, see Todd Boyd, *Young, Black, Rich, and Famous: The Rise of the NBA, the Hip Hop Invasion, and the Transformation of American Culture* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2003).

the Rens and present players embody the sound of jazz, the documentary uses digital animation to frame Black sporting bodies as individuated multiplicities that embody social history.

Beautifully illustrated in the film's opening, animated credit sequence, cut-out silhouettes of contemporary Black basketball superstars are layered on top of vibrant, color-saturated images of Harlem. The first animated figure shown is Abdul-Jabbar doing his signature sky-hook over another Black basketball figure. Framed by the architecture of the city, the urban landscape is a luminous mix of animated brick buildings. Viewable through the windows, shifting black and white footage of couples dancing and footage of basketball games are digitally superimposed. Peering into the past, as well into spaces that offers the confluence of performances of sports and dance, the sequence continues, showing an animated trumpeter in action as the musical tempo rises. With the lively jazz and hip hop infused soundtrack produced by Herbie Hancock & will.i.am, Wynton Marsalis, and Chuck D & Johnny Juice, cut-out silhouette contemporary basketball players pass basketballs to cut-out silhouette figures of the legendary Rens players. In that instance, Rens players 'Tarzan' Cooper, John Isaacs, 'We Willy' Smith, Puggy Bell, and Fat Jenkins are formally animated, or "brought to life," as they move the ball through space and time to modern day players Kobe Bryant, Kevin Garnett, Carmelo Anthony, and LeBron James.

In the scene, the stylized, digitally animated "play" of the players and the jazz score do more than shape the design and performance of these bodies within the scene but also frame Black bodies as individuated multiplicities. Structuring and suturing the flow between past and present Black sporting bodies, the "give and go" movement structures the documentary's narrative. This strategy links the passing and receiving concept to not only the literal interpretation—the ball moving from one teammate to another—but also to its implied metaphor of historical exchange, transforming the animated players into historical contestants. This

exchange not only visually connects the athletic performances of Black basketball players; it also projects/imagines in present bodies the missing/re-imagined Black bodies of the past. To animate something is to endow it with life, making it to appear “alive and having the power of movement.”¹⁴⁷ The technical use of animation here is significant because it represents the basketball players as individuated multiplicities and illustrates the resurrected, intertextual, and powerful embodied connection between Black athletic bodies in the past and present who share related basketball and social experiences. The use of digital animation in the documentary dramatizes how the performative Black body can function as a looking-glass and an archive of related experiences. The contemporary Black basketball figures are indebted to the pioneering Rens, and both are united through their exemplary athleticism and through their shared histories, most significantly the racism both experience/d in and outside of the professional league.¹⁴⁸

On the Shoulder of Giants' additional animated sequences demonstrate how the Black sporting body functions as an individuated multiplicity and, thus, an historical contestant. The film uses the reanimated silhouetted images of the Rens to connect both past and present Black basketball players “into larger arenas of meaning where it moves alongside bodies bearing related signage.”¹⁴⁹ In the scenes following the give-and-go opening, the narrator, Jaime Foxx, provides voiceover commentary on sports and Black social history, particularly the history of the spectacular racial terror of lynching for Black people links sports and social history. During the voiceover, an animated sequence depicts the Black body in silhouette. This singular image

¹⁴⁷ *Oxford English Dictionary*, adj. and n. “animate,” <http://www.oed.com>.

¹⁴⁸ For more information about white racism in the NBA and other sports, see editors Richard C. King and David J. Leonard's *Commodified and Criminalized: New Racism and African Americans in Contemporary Sport* (New York: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, Inc., 2011) and David J. Leonard's *After Artest: The NBA and the Assault on Blackness* (New York: State University of New York Press, 2012).

¹⁴⁹ Foster, “Choreographing History,” 8.

displays a lynched body. Through digital animation, the image is made to literally function as an individuated multiplicity, revealing a cohort of Black bodies that have been the target of violent, white racism. The sequence begins with images of the agrarian lifestyle of Black people after the turn of the century. As Foxx's voiceover narrates their historical struggle and social and political isolation, the screen goes black. In the following shot, a black-silhouette image of a man standing by a body hanging from tree is displayed against a white backdrop. In close-up, the image dissolves into that of an actual photograph of a lynching victim, hung from a tree with white bodies staring on. From silhouette to image, the Black body is framed as an individuated multiplicity, representing and creating experiences of multiple, individuated Black bodies within specific contexts. The image shifts four times to reveal similar images of lynched Black bodies. The final lynched body is that of William Brown, who after being accused of molesting a white girl, was kidnapped by a lynch mob, hung from a lamppost, mutilated, riddled with bullets and then burned in Omaha, Nebraska on September 28, 1919.¹⁵⁰ As the film blends images of lynched Black bodies and white onlookers with the voiceover tale of white racism that dominated the time period of the Rens, the documentary explicitly links the embodied presence of the Rens to this larger social world of racialized terror.

Significantly, the opening image of lynching is in silhouette, a blank canvas onto which any body/anybody can be physically and psychologically projected. The film's use of the silhouette is reminiscent of the work of artist Kara Walker. Walker uses the silhouette medium in her provocative and graphic art because it "produces an extraordinary space of psychological

¹⁵⁰ The history of all of these images are recounted in James Allen's *Without Sanctuary*.

projection.”¹⁵¹ The still-life images of the lynching are punctuated within the film’s spectacular contexts of Black sporting history; and their display literally resonates and projects images of other Black bodies and historical experiences of racial terror. In this sense, the body and the film evoke historical embodied memories and representations of the spectacle of white bodies looking onto Black bodies—whether on the auction block, hanging from trees, or in basketball arenas the Rens and current basketball players perform in across the country. By acknowledging the history of lynching, the film explores Black embodiment and performance in sports as connected to broader narratives of social movement (the fight for integration and equality) and social contestation (political enfranchisement).

The film explains how the Rens played basketball during a time of racial terror for Black people in general. Specifically, their games against white teams made them targets and they played with the knowledge of the possibility of violent white retaliation. In this sense, *On the Shoulder of Giants* illustrates the shared social experience between Black basketball players and lynched Black bodies reveal the pain and trauma of Black embodiment and shared experience of racial terror. In ““Can you be BLACK and Look at This?”: Reading the Rodney King Video(s),” Elizabeth Alexander suggests that bodily terror is an experience that is remembered on the individual body and by the Black body politic.¹⁵² Alexander’s essay attempts to understand how it is that Black people feel connected to other Black people and describe themselves as having a “relationship” to their racial group.¹⁵³ She also explores how incidents of racial violence

¹⁵¹ Gwendolyn DuBois Shaw, *Seeing the Unspeakable: The Art of Kara Walker* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2004), 6.

¹⁵² Elizabeth Alexander, ““Can you be BLACK and Look at This?”: Reading the Rodney King Video(s),” *Public Culture* 7 (1994): 77-94.

¹⁵³ *Ibid.*, 78.

“consolidate group affiliations by making blackness an unavoidable, irreducible sign which despite its abjection leaves creative space for group self-definition and self-knowledge.”¹⁵⁴ *On the Shoulder of Giants* explores how the Black body as an individuated multiplicity projects the shared history of racially violent experiences, connecting the worlds of sports discrimination and racial violence (many Rens players were harassed and their lives were threatened on and off the court) to societal discrimination and racial violence. In the connected images of Black sporting bodies and Black lynched bodies, the sporting and “corporeal images of terror suggest that ‘experience’ can be taken into the body via witnessing and recorded in muscle memory as knowledge.”¹⁵⁵ *On the Shoulders of Giants*’ representation of the Black sporting and lynched body as an individuated multiplicity demonstrates how “how bodily experience, both individually experienced trauma as well as a collective trauma, comes to reside in the flesh as forms of memory reactivated and articulated at moments of collective spectatorship.”¹⁵⁶ In the film, the fleshed memory is the critical muscle memory of the spectacle of racial terror and pain projected in/out of the animated image of the sporting and lynched Black body.

In conclusion, *On the Shoulders of Giants* frames both Black sporting bodies and the lynched Black body as individuated multiplicities that choreograph history through their explicit and implicit reference, at the level of the narrative and embodied performance, to historical narratives concerning Black peoples’ lived experiences. Using animated bodies within the documentary’s nonfictional tale, the historical exchange between past and present Black basketball players are enlivened, connecting their bodies, histories, and the social and cultural

¹⁵⁴ Ibid.

¹⁵⁵ Ibid., 83.

¹⁵⁶ Ibid., 80.

investment made in them to each other. The silhouette image of the Black body hanging from a tree gains dimensionality, as it is filled out and filled in with images of other lynched bodies. Thus, the role of violence against the Black body is central in understanding the connections of the Black experience via embodiment and spectacular contexts of bodily display. The representation of the lynched body expresses the physical vulnerability of Black sporting bodies at that time. The film structures this history of lynching as bearing on the history of the Rens just as much as the Rens' history bears on modern day players. As the film describes the racist treatment the Rens endured, it is evident that they knew and lived in light of the deadly ramifications of their sporting and non-sporting actions.

As historical contestants, the Black sporting bodies in *On the Shoulders of Giants* bear witness to the history of racial segregation and racist treatment within professional basketball as well the history of lynching, connecting the discourses on the relationship between spectacular displays of the body on the court and in society at large. These Black sporting bodies, embody, signify, project, and connect entangled, suppressed, and intertextual historical truths about Black lived and imagined experiences in sports and American society.

Chapter Two:

Performing Triumph and Defeat

Sports films contain utopian, idealized narratives where athletes, mostly men, are portrayed as heroic individuals that overcome adversity and obstacles through hard work and self-determination to achieve success in sports.¹⁵⁷ In these dominant sporting narratives, male protagonists define and prove themselves “through free and fair competition modeled on American society, which claims that rewards go to the most deserving individuals.”¹⁵⁸ Sports films generally frame success for athletic individuals/teams as a journey that, at times, involves losing. These narratives are usually framed as “underdog” stories and often conclude with the protagonist winning in the end. These triumphant finale scenarios include: dramatic buzzer-beating shots (*Hoosiers*, 1986), championship games (*Miracle*, 2004), redemption matches (*Talladega Nights: A Ballad of Ricky Bobby*, 2006), local-boy-makes-good (*Invincible*, 2006), and winner-takes-all (*Sports Jam*, 1996) narratives. However, to qualify the overwhelming success narrative within sports films, just as in sports, there is a key element that defines competition: there is a winner and there is a loser. While sports films often decontextualize losing from winning, focusing the story (as well as the camera) on the triumphant victors, there are sports films where the protagonist, despite his acquired heroic dimension, falls short. In other words, there are sports films that end in defeat.

At a most basic level, sports films construct mutually constitutive narratives of triumph *and* defeat. Just as in sports themselves, the question of who will win the final game and,

¹⁵⁷ Baker, *Contesting Identities*, 3.

¹⁵⁸ *Ibid.*

conversely, who will lose the final game provides the implicit narrative structure and generic conventions within most sports films. So the story goes: hero faces obstacles, overcomes obstacles, and wins the game (and gets the girl, too). Sports films often build tension through the use of obstacles/conflicts and resolve these tensions via an epic sports showdown. Players and teams walk away in triumph and victory or defeat and disappointment.

In this chapter, I examine sports films' dominant narrative configurations of triumph (winning) and defeat (losing). Textually analyzing how triumph and defeat is performed in sports films, I read how individual and teams of Black sporting bodies are framed as individuated multiplicities that represent and resonate with the experiences of other Black triumphant or defeated bodies within specific contexts. In doing so, I explore how the represented Black body/bodies reference and relate to other Black sporting and non-sporting acts of triumph and defeat. In analyzing embodied performances of triumph and defeat, I take into account the lived as well as affective Black experiences that resonate in and project out of representations of Black bodies "winning" and "losing" in sports.

Specifically, this chapter provides a survey of four different narrative configurations of performing triumph and defeat in sports films. Analyzing two "based on true events" dramas, I first look at the concept of performing triumph in *Glory Road* (James Gartner, 2006) and defeat in *Friday Night Lights* (Peter Berg, 2004), considering the sporting ideologies as well as the broader sociocultural ideologies elicited in narratives of winning and losing. In doing so, I explore the affects associated with performances of triumph and defeat—excitement and devastation, respectively—and take into account how these affects become embodied as well as performed in the aforementioned sports films. Second, I problematize configurations of triumph and defeat, arguing that sports films often construct these narratives as shadow arguments: defeat

as triumph and triumph as defeat. I evaluate performances of defeat as triumph in *Cool Runnings* (Jon Turteltaub, 1993) and triumph as defeat in *He Got Game* (Spike Lee, 1998). Throughout my film analyses, I explore the documentary impulse at both the level of the narrative and embodied performance; identify connections across bodies; and acknowledge related histories concerning Black peoples' lived and imagined experiences of triumph and defeat

Performing Triumph:

Sports create a world of opposing forces: individual player versus individual player; team versus team; coach versus coach; fan versus fan; city versus city; and nation versus nation. Within these matrices of sporting rivalry, acts of winning and losing are central to the literal and ideological conflicts/contests that frame and govern sports as well as sports films' spectacular sagas of triumph and defeat. In fact, narratives of winning and losing in sports and media representations of sports (e.g. television, film, and video games) shape the discourse of sports and sporting performances themselves and vice versa. Specifically, winning is thought to be not only the logical outcome of one's hard work but also the most important part of playing the game itself. Essentially, a person trains, practices, and plays to not lose or, even worse, tie. They play to win.

This sentiment is taken to the extreme by famed football coach Vince Lombardi, who once decreed that: "Winning isn't everything. It's the only thing."¹⁵⁹ "The importance of

¹⁵⁹ This quote is often attributed to Vince Lombardi, who certainly made the phrase famous, but its actual origins have been the subject of debate. The quote is sourced back Vanderbilt/UCLA football coach Henry Russell Sanders. See Steven J. Overman, "'Winning Isn't Everything. It's the Only Thing': The Origin, Attributions and Influence of a Famous Football Quote," *Football Studies* 2.2 (October 1999): 77-99.

winning,” Steven J. Overman explains, “has been touted as a basic tenet of the American sports creed and, at the same time, singled out as encapsulating what is wrong with competitive sport.”¹⁶⁰ Lombardi’s take on the totality of winning in sports is indicative of a broader sociocultural system that overemphasizes winning and hierarchizes the notion of victory as the penultimate experience. Consequently, in the realm of sports, it is the thrill of victory and not the agony of defeat that suggests to not only be a sporting champion but also “to be ‘American’ is to be seduced by the lure of domination, by conquest, by winning.” To be anything “other” is to fall short of that goal, to lose, to fail.¹⁶¹ In this context, winning is both a practice and an ideology.

It therefore makes sense that “winning is the focus of massive cultural attention, both in sport and society.”¹⁶² Garry Whannel explains that the “celebration of winning, of success of achievement and of fame occupies a significant place in western cultures.”¹⁶³ Within this context, American society’s preoccupation with narratives of triumph informs the formulaic nature of the sports film. Shaped by the rhetoric and discourse of success, Hollywood’s sports films’ narratives, for the most part, follow a tendency to affirm and exalt the power of winning to utopian ends. They dramatize the promise of sports—“that once the contest begins, success depends primarily on one’s determination and effort”—and endorse and naturalize a “traditional American mythology that champions the promise of a unified self through individual

¹⁶⁰ Ibid., 77.

¹⁶¹ bell hooks, “Neo-Colonial Fantasies of Conquest,” 82.

¹⁶² Garry Whannel, “Winning and Losing Respect: Narrative of Identity in Sport Films,” *Sport in Society: Cultures, Commerce, Media, Politics* 11.2-3, 201.

¹⁶³ Ibid.

achievement,” self-reliance, and hard work.¹⁶⁴ In this sense, Aaron Baker surmises that sports films function within the hegemony of Hollywood’s thematic paradigm, what Robert Ray describes as “deliberately traditional, a reassertion of the most fundamental American beliefs in individualism, ad hoc solutions, and the impermanence of all political problems.”¹⁶⁵ In doing so, sports films and the athletic ideologies they contain often downplay the larger structural and institutional barriers that curtail success in sports as well as society at large. As Ray explains: “American history’s major crises appear in American movies only as ‘structuring absences’—the unspoken subjects that have determined an aesthetic form designed precisely to conceal these crises’ real implications.”¹⁶⁶ In sports films, histories of systemic and institutional discrimination against Black and female athletes are often dismissed—a “denial of racial [and sexual] difference in stories of self-reliant gradualism”—or, when acknowledged, are individualized and framed as obstacles to be, literally and figuratively, worked out and overcome on the playing field and, thus, overcome in real life.¹⁶⁷

Generally speaking, sports films are about winning and the celebration of sporting excellence. They overwhelmingly depict performances of triumph within emotionally resonant narratives of happiness or excitement. Triumph is defined as “the action or fact of triumphing; victory, conquest, or the glory of this; also, a signal [of] success or achievement.”¹⁶⁸ Sports

¹⁶⁴ Baker, *Contesting Identities*, 11.

¹⁶⁵ Ray quoted in Baker, *Contesting Identities*, 10. Robert Ray, *A Certain Tendency of the Hollywood Cinema, 1930-1980* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1985), 31.

¹⁶⁶ Ray, *A Certain Tendency of the Hollywood Cinema, 1930-1980*, 31.

¹⁶⁷ Baker, *Contesting Identities*, 33.

¹⁶⁸ *Oxford English Dictionary*, n. “triumph,” <http://www.oed.com>.

films construct and narrate performances of triumph within “feel-good” stories that have a “happy ending.” Just as with viewing sporting matches live or on television, most sports films’ scripted goal is for audiences to not only watch the final showdown but also become emotionally invested in (to root/cheer for) the protagonist’s triumphant win on/off the playing field. The affective dimensions, or intensity of feelings, in watching sports films “can evoke through [sports’] design a special kind of tension, a pleasurable excitement, thus allowing feelings to flow more freely.”¹⁶⁹

To this point, in their groundbreaking sports study *The Quest for Excitement: Sport and Leisure in the Civilizing Process*, Norbert Elias and Eric Dunning explain that:

The setting of sport, like that of many other leisure-pursuits, is designed to move, to stir the emotions, to evoke tensions in the form of a controlled, a well-tempered excitement without the risks and tensions usually connected with excitement in other life-situations, a ‘mimetic’ excitement which can be enjoyed and which may have a liberating, cathartic effect, even though the emotional resonance to the imaginary design contains, as it usually does, elements of anxiety, fear—or despair.¹⁷⁰

Because of their largely melodramatic style and representational verisimilitude, sports films function in a similar though not a congruent manner to that of sports themselves. In sports films’ realistic portrayals of athletics, dramatic sports contests play out the contradictory tensions Elias and Dunning describe of sports: “the pleasurable de-controlling of human feelings, the full

¹⁶⁹ Norbert Elias and Eric Dunning, *The Quest for Excitement: Sport and Leisure in the Civilizing Process* (New York: Basil Blackwell, 1986), 48.

¹⁷⁰ *Ibid.*, 48-49.

evocation of an enjoyable excitement on the one hand and on the other the maintenance of a set of checks to keep the pleasantly de-controlled emotions under control.”¹⁷¹ Like melodrama where the excessive display of emotions—including desire, fear, and anxiety—are expressed, sublimated, and contained, sports films’ emotionalizing of history in melodramatic terms illustrates how feelings of happiness/excitement—being ecstatically *moved* by victory—in narratives of triumph can be used to explore excessive discourses attached to embodied emotional displays of success.

For real-life Black athletes, emotional outbursts are often read as acts of unbridled Black rage and not affirmations of Black humanity, clearly highlighting the racial politics that frame Black people’s affective expression in popular culture.¹⁷² In Hollywood sports films, sports allow for Black athletes to harness their emotions for success on and off the playing field. James Gartner’s college basketball drama *Glory Road* (2006) depicts this dual performance of triumph on and off the court. In analyzing performances of triumph, at both the level of the narrative and embodiment, I read how Black bodies in *Glory Road* function as individuated multiplicities, representing the experiences of other triumphant Black bodies within related sporting and non-sporting contexts. This concept of individuated multiplicities in performances of triumph is distinct in that the victory depicted in *Glory Road* is a team victory. On one level, the team

¹⁷¹ Ibid., 49.

¹⁷² Richard Sherman, cornerback for the Seattle Seahawks, is the most recent and telling example of a Black athlete being publically and racially chastised for his emotional outburst. On January 19, 2014, in the final seconds of the NFC Championship game, Sherman’s final play helped to secure the Seahawk’s victory over the San Francisco 49ers and their trip to the Super Bowl, which they later won. Following the game, Sherman gave an emotionally charged interview with Fox Sports’ Erin Andrews. He shouted: “I’m the best corner in the game! When you try me with a sorry receiver like Crabtree, that’s the result you gonna get. Don’t you [Crabtree] ever talk about me!” His excitement and challenge in that moment was conveyed in his post-game interview and read, by many, as aggressive and “scary.” By many white and Black people in the media, Sherman was said to be a thug and not a passionate football player.

represents a united body of individuated players. On the other level, a team is made up of individual players. Thus, performances of triumph within team sports already gestures towards analyzing Black bodies as individuated multiplicities, underscoring both individual bodies and the collective body coming together to achieve a common goal.

Glory Road is based on the true story of Texas Western's male basketball team, the Miners. The film chronicles the Miners' journey to become the first all-Black lineup to win a NCAA Division-1 Basketball Championship in 1966. *Glory Road* follows a formulaic Hollywood sports narrative of triumph.¹⁷³ The players face obstacles, overcome those obstacles, and are victorious in the end. *Glory Road* is an example of a film about "Black firsts," meaning films about Black athletes who break the literal and symbolic "rules of the game." An integrationist tale, *Glory Road*, like many films about Black athletes and especially Black athletes crossing color barriers, is told from the perspective a white man: Texas Western's basketball coach Don Haskins (Josh Lucas).¹⁷⁴

Glory Road begins by depicting Haskins' journey to Texas. Haskins, who was coaching women's high school basketball before being appointed head coach of the Miners, moves his family to El Paso, Texas. Once he gets there, he realizes that the school has little financial resources to aid in recruiting. Dismissed by white athletes he tries to recruit, Haskins turns his

¹⁷³The film is produced by Walt Disney Pictures (and their distribution company Buena Vista Pictures) have a long history of producing and marketing (profitable) sports films. Besides many straight to video/DVD films, theatrically released sports films include (among others): *Million Dollar Arm* (Craig Gillespie, 2014), *Secretariat* (Randall Wallace, 2010), *The Game Plan* (Andy Fickman, 2007), *Invincible* (Ericson Core, 2006), *Glory Road* (James Gartner, 2006), *Miracle* (Gavin O'Connor, 2004), *The Rookie* (John Lee Hancock, 2002), *Angels in the Outfield* (William Dear, 1994), *D3: The Mighty Ducks* (Robert Lieberman, 1996), *D2: The Mighty Ducks* (Sam Weisman, 1994), *The Mighty Ducks* (Stephen Herek, 1992), *Air Bud* (Charles Martin Smith, 1997), and *Cool Runnings* (Jon Turteltaub, 1993).

¹⁷⁴ The film's title is based on Don Haskin's autobiography *Glory Road: My Story of the 1966 NCAA Basketball Championship and How One Team Triumphed Against the Odds and Changed America Forever* (New York: Hyperion, 2005).

attention to Black basketball players from across the country to fill out his roster. He goes to Bronx, New York; Gary, Indiana; and Detroit, Michigan. While Black players had previously been recruited to play for white schools/teams prior to 1966, coaches usually played one or maybe two Black players at a time. The stereotype was that, while Blacks' physical prowess make them great athletes, they lacked the brains and discipline (read as capability) to handle the pressure of high stakes basketball and beat real (i.e. white) teams. "The power of a stereotype," Jared Sexton explains, "lies not in its status (i.e. is it true?) but in its function (i.e., what work does it do in a given discourse?)." ¹⁷⁵ In both the film and the history it references, the fear of too many Black athletes on the court reflects white peoples' larger fear of integration off the court.

The film sets up Haskins' reason for recruiting Black players as predicated on the school's financial constraints and non-name recognition status. However, Haskins is also depicted as a defender of equal opportunity in sports. At a College Summer League game in Kansas City, Haskins' notices the play of a standout Black player, Bobby Joe Hill (Derek Luke), and offers him a full athletic scholarship. Haskins pursues Hill despite the white tournament director's warning to Haskins that he "can't win playing nigger ball." When trying to recruit Hill, who at first is reluctant to trust another white coach who will keep them on the bench as a "token Negro," Haskins tells Hill that he does not see color. Using the utopian tenets of sports as a meritocratic system, Haskins declares that he only sees "quick" and "skill" and rewards hard work and determination. With Hill signing on as point guard and team leader, Haskins assembles a Miners' team of seven Black and five white players.

¹⁷⁵ Sexton, "Life with no hoop': Black *Pride*, State Power," 226.

As with most sports films, *Glory Road* depicts the obstacles that the Miners face. The first obstacle is the Black players “playground” style of play. Haskins teaches the team “fundamental” basketball, also known as “textbook” style. Premised on tough defense, discipline, and extreme conditioning, Haskins’ fundamental basketball “implies a structured formality in which the adherence to a specific set of rules determines one’s ability to play successfully and ‘correctly.’ Thus heavy reliance on a series of repeated play dictates the best players and best teams.”¹⁷⁶ Haskins critiques his Black players for their flashy style, what he calls “activity without accomplishment.” As most of the Black players were recruited “from the playground,” their style of play is less restrictive and more creative. Based on one’s ability to improvise, playground ball’s “liberal style of performance” represents “the informal nature of pick-up basketball played on the playground—no referees, time clock, etc.—the game becomes determined almost purely by those things created in the course of the game.”¹⁷⁷

As the Miners play Haskins’ fundamental basketball style, they reach their first obstacle. In their second game of the season against fourth-ranked Iowa, the team struggles throughout the first half. During half-time in the locker room, a frustrated Hill tells Haskins: “We can’t play like this. They’re better than us at your game. You need to let us loose.” Haskins reluctantly agrees and tells Hill to play both styles of play. With Hill and Orsten Artis (Alphonso McAuley) on the court, the two’s playground style changes the tempo of the game, figuratively symbolized through the soundtrack’s shift to the Meditation Singer’s lively “Ain’t That Good News.” The music underscores an earlier statement made by Hill that when he is playing basketball he’s making “sweet music” with his game. Hill and the other Black Miners players demonstrate how

¹⁷⁶ Boyd, *Am I Black Enough For You? Popular Culture from the ‘Hood and Beyond* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1997), 115.

¹⁷⁷ *Ibid.*, 115-116.

their game—embodied performance—is not about looking good but is about a vernacular style that requires both spontaneity and control. The Miners go on to win the game.

As the season continues, the film depicts the Miners' unanticipated success on the court through a montage of newspaper clippings detailing their victories. During this time, low-post player Willie "Scoops" Cager (Damaine Radcliff) is forced to ride the bench once Haskins finds out Cager has a heart condition. As they continue to win, the Miner's Black and white players bond. However, the team's success on the court makes the Black players a target of racial violence off the court. On a road game, the hotel room of two Black players is trashed and vandalized with racial epithets painted in blood on the walls. During a team stop for lunch, Black player Nevil Shed (Al Shearer) is violently attacked in a men's restroom. Their embodied performance of triumph on the court causes backlash against their bodies off the court. These violent attacks against the Miners' Black players is set up as part of the reason the team gets their only loss of the season against Seattle. The Black players believed that if they lost then they would not be the target for so much hate. Haskins dismisses their fear and suggests that they must win to prove others wrong. Haskins' conclusion fails to take into account how the Black miners' embodied performances of triumph does not deflect from their embodied presence as Black people in a racist society.

The Miners make it to the Division-1 NCAA Tournament and fight their way to the championship game. As underdogs, the Miners are pitted against the top-ranked University of Kentucky Wildcats coached by the legendary Adolph Rupp (Jon Voight). Before the game, Haskins takes his players to the basketball court and tells them he has decided to only play the seven Black players (five starters and two substitutes) in order to end the negative stereotypes/philosophies surrounding Black players' capabilities in team sports. In this sense,

Haskins' describes how the Black players' bodies function as individuated multiplicities. They are both singular individuals and stereotypes. Through their sporting performance of triumph on the court, they will be able to prove for not only themselves but for others that Black people are more than just great individual athletes. Detailing the racist tropes around Black athletes, Haskins tells them that "tonight they are going to put a stop to it forever." The white players agree to sacrifice their participation for the greater gain of civil rights. The Miners' game against Kentucky is a close one, and the Miners only have a slight lead at half-time. Staving off the talented of the Wildcats, including the impressive play of future NBA player-turned-coach Pat Riley (Wes Brown), the Miners win the game 72-65. The film ends with the players returning to El Paso, Texas to a large, interracial crowd of cheering fans. With Alicia Key's rendition of "People Get Ready" filling the soundscape as each player leaves the plane, the film provides a brief update on their post-collegiate careers.

With a victorious final game for the Miners, *Glory Road* is a story of Black triumph on the court that, supposedly, transferred to Black triumph off the court. Because the film is "based on true events," the documentary impulse at the level of the narrative and embodied performance in the film is articulated in the sports history it covers. As well, the film's narrative explicitly situates the Black basketball players' triumphant actions within the larger evolving social and political landscape of American society in the 1960s. The film begins with a black and white montage sequence detailing the events of 1965. Scored to Stevie Wonder's song "Uptight (Everything's All Right)," the sequence includes a voiceover stating that "times are changing." There are quick shots of images/people of the historical period, including: soldiers going off to Vietnam, the Beatles, Martin Luther King Jr., Black people marching in the South, Lyndon B. Johnson, NASA's Gemini spacecraft, and race riots. Cut between these representative images of

the 1960s are scenes of white basketball players on indoor courts and Black basketball players playing in their neighborhoods. The shots continue to show Muhammad Ali proclaim that he is the greatest. In close-up of an old-fashion camera, on screen text fades-in reading: “Based on a true story.” Martin Luther King Jr.’s image and “by the content of their character” line from his “I Have a Dream” speech is layered over the images of Black and white children playing basketball in their respective neighborhoods. The shots shift to a black screen with text reading: “of a team that changed everything.” The opening sequence ends with a jump ball as two hands go up and one tips the ball as a camera flashes.

Using actuality footage, this opening sequence positions the story of the Miners within the verifiable reality of the 1960s. In doing so, the film links the arena of sports and the Miners’ victory to a larger history of social change, particularly the Civil Rights Movement. Through intercutting iconic images of the time period with shots of the segregated play of white and Black basketball players, *Glory Road* suggests that the events in the film are part of a teleology of social justice and progress in American society through sports. Prior to their representation in the diegesis, the Black players on the Miners team are framed as individuated multiplicities through the films’ documentary impulse. Functioning on behalf of the larger Black community through their individual achievements, the Black players represent themselves but also a “team that changed everything.” They did so through the “content of their character” on the basketball court. Thus their sporting performances of victory on the court are made to represent the experiences of victory for Black people off the court. Through winning, arguably, the Miners changed the ways in which people thought about Black athletes’ and Black people’s capability to achieve equality through success in the public sphere.

Glory Road constructs triumph on the basketball court as having the capacity to change white social perceptions of Blacks in American society. In the NCAA championship game, the Miners are framed on the court in a sea of white racism with confederate flags flying in the stands. In most sports films, the court functions as a “depoliticized space where actions of the performers are idealized.”¹⁷⁸ However, the basketball court in *Glory Road* is visually and narratively politicized. The film uses the sports arena to not only combat but also solve racial problems. Before the game begins, the five white Wildcats and the five Black Miners stand center court. Through the broadcasters playing up the racial division/tensions of both teams lineups, it is obvious that this is more than just a game. Visually representing “difference” on the court (in race and style of play), the Black Miners’ bodies and embodied performance demonstrate there is no difference in standing out and being outstanding.

The championship match is a fight over sports and society’s claim to white supremacy. Thus, the Black Miners’ sporting performance that ends in triumph is a blow to this hegemonic ideology of white dominance on and off the court. Of course, this literal and metaphoric enactment of winning on the court, proving Black equality by actually being better than their white opponents, is simplistic. In fact, *Glory Road*’s nostalgic look back at Black past victories registers but then obscures the ways in which moments of Black triumph often come with racial animosity and backlash for other Black bodies.

For example, the first Black heavyweight champion Jack Johnson’s win in 1910 against white boxer Jim Jeffries that exposed the myth of white superiority caused race riots, including one in Clarksburg, West Virginia. Recounted from the *New York Times*: ““Angered at the

¹⁷⁸ Deborah Tudor, *Hollywood’s Vision of Team Sports: Heroes, Race, and Gender* (New York: Garland Publishing, 1997), 123.

demonstration of Negroes celebrating the Reno victory [of Johnson over Jeffries], a posse of 1,000 white men organized here tonight soon after the announcement of the news and drove all the Negroes off the streets. One was being led with a rope around his neck, when the police interfered.”¹⁷⁹ Harvey Young explains that this moment “represents a reversal of the events that occurred earlier that day... The return of the rope marked the beginning of a second performance, a replay of the first but with a different ending.”¹⁸⁰ In this sense, the Miner’s Black players’ embodied performance of triumph can engender Black lived experiences of defeat (e.g. harassment, profiling, discrimination, assault, and even death). Despite the racial backlash they had received throughout the season, *Glory Road* doesn’t privilege stories of the “second performance, a replay of the first but with a different ending” for either them or other Black people.

Triumph is not only performed through the victorious play of the Miners, who dominate “above the rim” in the championship games. Triumph is also embodied affectively by the players whose emotional reactions resonate through the film. They are jubilant when they win because they pulled off the greatest upset in NCAA history. At the end of the game, the players yell and scream in excitement, holding up their hands to signal that they are number one. Cager runs into the stands to hug his mother, who previously begged the coach to play her son despite his heart condition. In shock, Shed recites to himself out loud: “Mom, I’m a national champion. I’m a national champion.” Hill is lifted up on the court by teammates and overcome with enthusiasm over the victory. The moving gospel melody on the soundtrack signifies the films’

¹⁷⁹ *New York Times* quoted in Young, *Embodying Black Experience*, 99.

¹⁸⁰ Young, *Embodying Black Experience*, 99.

and the characters' embodied feeling of excitement. The music is moving, and the players are obviously moved.

Triumphant on the court, the Black Miners' embodied affective response in the film frames their body as an individuated multiplicity, representing and creating the affective experiences of excitement within the Black community. In depicting the team's jubilant celebration, the film cuts to show Black people watching them play live in person and on television. The Miners' families are the lone Black faces in the stadium. Groups of Black men watch the game on TV from a local barber shop. Little Black boys huddle outside of an electronics store watching the game broadcast on a TV through the shop's window. A group of Black students from the University of Kentucky secretly huddle in a dorm room to watch the game. In showing these representative bodies of the Black community, the film aligns the victory and the feeling of triumph on the court with the feeling of victory and triumph in the real world. Just as television played a significant role in the Civil Rights Movement, the film constructs the medium's ability to carry "the message" of Black equality to the Black masses. The Black Miners' players function as individuated multiplicities whose embodied performance of triumph and affective experience of excitement signal moments of Black triumph off the court for those watching.

The Miners' sporting performances are visually and narratively connected to Black civil rights campaigns. Thus, their victory on the court represents, references, and relates to other Black sporting and non-sporting embodied experiences of triumph. While images of the Civil Rights are often harrowing—people being attacked by dogs and police, *Glory Road* visually renders the often overlooked vision of what winning in civil rights campaigns looks like for Black people. Despite its simplistic narrative, the film shows how even in just one game, what it

looks and feels like for Black people to go from “we shall overcome” to “the promise land,” even if that’s just the NCAA finals. However, the Black Miners players’ embodied performance also recalls the negative effects of triumph. Making history with their starting lineup, the Miners represent a decisive moment when white colleges began to cherry-pick the best Black players, who previously played for Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCUs). Their embodied victory marks how integration in basketball really did, as the opening tagline, “change everything” for HBCUs.¹⁸¹ Through the film’s narrative and embodied performance of success, this related history highlights “[the challenge] for the black community over the past decades... to figure out how to control this mad scramble for black athletic resources and harness its potential to achieve the community’s social, economic, and political goals.”¹⁸²

While *Glory Road* is a rather typical Hollywood sports film, following conventions of telling “Black history” through the lens of white benevolence, the film relates Black triumph on the court with Black triumph off the court. The embodied performances of triumph as affective excitement are evoked within histories of civil rights gains and losses in both sports and society. In this sense, *Glory Road* acknowledges the ways in which sports, an assumed apolitical activity, can be and often is a highly politicized arena where winning means more than just being the best.

Performing Defeat:

While winning is the most desired result in sports, it’s not the only outcome that takes place. Winning is conditional. In *The Queer Art of Failure*, Judith Halberstam explains,

¹⁸¹ For a wonderfully informative and profoundly moving documentary about the way in which integration in basketball changed the athletic programs for HBCUs when Black players began to play at white, mainstream institutions, see Dan Klores 2008 ESPN documentary *Black Magic*.

¹⁸² Rhoden, *Forty Million Dollar Slaves*, 175.

“winning is a multivalent event: in order for someone to win, someone else must fail to win, and so this act of losing has its own logic, its own complexity, its own aesthetic, but ultimately, also, its own beauty.”¹⁸³ To this point, Halberstam describes this logic, complexity, aesthetic, and beauty in Tracey Moffat’s photograph series *Fourth*, which depicts the fourth place athletes at the Sydney 2000 Summer Olympic Games. Halberstam argues that during the Olympics Americans are treated to “wall-to-wall coverage of triumphant Yanks” and that “we are given the history of winners all day, every day, and so every four years American viewers miss the larger drama of the games, emerging as it does from unpredictability, tragedy, close defeat, and yes, messy and undignified failure.”¹⁸⁴ *Fourth* captures not only the “antiglamour” of the first loser at the Olympics but also, Halberstam explains, alludes to the “‘fourth’ world of Aboriginal culture, and so it references the erased and lost art of a people destroyed by the successful white colonizers.”¹⁸⁵ Images of losing and displays of defeat can be ideologically disruptive because “failure recognizes that alternatives are embedded already in the dominant and that power is never total or consistent; indeed failure can exploit the unpredictability of ideology and its indeterminate qualities.”¹⁸⁶

Despite the attention given to winning in sports, the experiences of losing can, at times, provide a counterhegemonic discourse on the “common sense” that winning is everything in sports and society.¹⁸⁷ All athletes know that losing shadows winning and that the impending

¹⁸³ Judith Halberstam, *The Queer Art of Failure* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2011), 93.

¹⁸⁴ *Ibid.*, 92.

¹⁸⁵ *Ibid.*, 93.

¹⁸⁶ *Ibid.*, 88.

¹⁸⁷ The notion of “common sense” here is mobilized from Antonio Gramsci’s work on hegemony and common sense as set of beliefs that do not appear as ideology. See Antonio Gramsci, “Hegemony, Relations of Force, Historical

possibility and inevitability of failure haunts the promise of success. This spectral presence of failure exposes the temporality of success in sports. Even the best athletes know that someone is always trying to and eventually will take their place at the top. As well, for most athletes, losing is perhaps the most consistent and fundamental aspect of playing sports. You play until you lose.

Losing in sports can be defined within two dimensions of failure: performance and its consequent.¹⁸⁸ Donald W. Ball explains that “[failure] is the inability, for whatever reason, to satisfy the standards of goal-related performance, leading to the separation or estrangement of the failed from the goal-specified position from which it (the goal) has been unsuccessfully pursued.”¹⁸⁹ In sports, where individual/team actions are tied to “the ideological foundations of the [U.S.A.], including individualism, the American dream, meritocracy, and the goodness of the system,” the failure to win—both on and off the playing field—is often decreed as a personal failure to achieve success in a world that does not need fundamental social transformation but harder working people.¹⁹⁰ Winners are to be championed and losers are to be forgotten. However, defeat is pedagogical. As both a practice and ideology in sports and society, defeat reinforces how “lived experience constantly tells us that most people do not succeed, that the gap between winning and losing is significant, and that [sports and society are] not a level playing field.”¹⁹¹

Bloc,” in *The Gramsci Reader: Selected Writings, 1916-1935*, ed. David Forgasc (New York: New York University Press, 2000).

¹⁸⁸ Donald W. Ball, “Failure in Sport,” *American Sociological Review* 41.4 (August 1976), 726.

¹⁸⁹ Ibid.

¹⁹⁰ Leonard and King, “Screening the Social,” 2.

¹⁹¹ Whannel, “Winning and Losing Respect,” 201.

For many athletes, the emotional blow of losing is often softened by the rhetoric of sportsmanship. In contradiction to the earlier Lombardi quote about the necessity of winning, sportswriter Grantland Rice's oft quoted "Alumnus Football" poem states: "For when the One Great Scorer comes/ To mark against your name/ He writes—not that you won or lost/ But how you played the Game."¹⁹² In this sense, losing is acceptable if you have given your best effort and left everything on the field. In other words, no one likes a sore loser. For example, after losing to Ken Norton on March 31, 1973, former world heavyweight champion Muhammad Ali explained: "I never thought of losing, but now that it's happened, the only thing is to do it right. That's my obligation to all the people who believe in me. We all have to take defeats in life."¹⁹³ Ali reads his literal loss in the ring as a double performance in and out of the ring where the pedagogy of failure can inspire a community. Ali's acceptance of defeat in his loss to Norton and his religious and political actions in other moments—particularly his refusal to be drafted into the Vietnam War—are examples of "what happens when failure is productively linked to racial awareness, anticolonial struggle [...] and different formulations of the temporality of success."¹⁹⁴ In this sense, as a countercultural figure, Ali's defeats and failures function as a part of his oppositional politics that challenge what it means, specifically for Black people, to win and lose in sports and society on an individual and communal level.

Notwithstanding the elements of sportsmanship in losing, the reality is that defeat is not the desired result in competition. Thus, sports films are predominately about performances of

¹⁹² Grantland Rice, "Alumnus Football," (1908), in *Only the Brave and Other Poems* (New York: A.S. Barnes and Co., 1941), 144.

¹⁹³ Muhammad Ali quoted in "Muhammad Ali – in His Own Words," *BBC Sport Boxing*, January 17, 2012, <http://www.bbc.com/sport/0/boxing/16146367>.

¹⁹⁴ Halberstam, *Queer Art of Failure*, 92.

triumph and are less about performances of defeat. Losing is used for dramatic effect to heighten the suspense and cathartic relief that comes from winning. Because sports films “[facilitate] the establishment and development of narrative tensions around the striving for success and the potential costs of that striving,” they rarely privilege the subjectivity of those that lose the final climatic game and rarely show the unflinching cruelty of competition.¹⁹⁵

Notwithstanding this generic tendency to focus on triumph, there are sports films that end with their main protagonist losing their final game or match. The 1976 box-office hit, *Rocky* (John Avildsen), is perhaps the most popular example of this narrative journey ending in defeat.

In *Rocky*, underdog Italian American fighter Rocky Balboa (Sylvester Stallone) overcomes emotional and physical obstacles to “go the distance” against Black heavyweight champion Apollo Creed (Carl Weathers). An American dream fable, Rocky narrowly loses the boxing match against Creed, and his defeat is framed as one of “heroic whiteness” where the American Dream—which like America itself is predicated on an institutional investment in whiteness—is both validated and reaffirmed.¹⁹⁶ *Rocky* spawned six sequels, making the first film’s ending of defeat a preface to the narrative of success represented in the franchises’ subsequent four films. *Rocky II* through *Rocky V* ends in performances of triumph for Rocky. The final film in the franchise, *Rocky Balboa* (Sylvester Stallone, 2006), is the exception, and the film ends with Rocky valiantly losing in a split-decision to a younger, faster world heavyweight

¹⁹⁵ Examples of sports films that do show their protagonist losing or the cruelty of competition include Clint Eastwood’s *Million Dollar Baby* (2004), where the film’s protagonist, Maggie (Hilary Swank), becomes a quadriplegic after suffering a cheap-shot from her opponent.

¹⁹⁶ Baker, *Contesting Identities*, 76.

champion. Coming full circle, *Rocky Balboa* provides Rocky a final chance to “go the distance” against another Black opponent.

While the *Rocky* franchise uses the dramas of defeat to engender subsequent dramas of success, many contemporary sports films cut straight to success. For Black athletes as protagonists, such as with *Glory Road*, stories of triumph support American ideals of hard work and self-reliance. Sports films are one of the few genres that have high concentrations of Black representation, which allows for Black figures to play out the genre’s tendency to overemphasize stories of individual exceptionalism. The hypervisibility of Black people in popular sports films plays into “the biggest misconception in sports, that blacks dominate the playing courts and playing field while white people are stuck with supporting roles.”¹⁹⁷ As Shaun Powell explains:

White people still own and have always owned, baseball, golf, tennis, skiing, cycling, swimming, diving, surfing, hockey, soccer, volleyball, softball, skating, cricket, fencing, every event at the X-Games and the Winter Olympics, and, in the suburbs everywhere, T-ball. And this does not include white dominance in such borderline sports as auto racing, horse racing, bowling, and trophy hunting. Also, based on sheer numbers, starting with youth and including recreational leagues, white participation in basketball and football is higher than that of blacks. To paraphrase Jimmy the Greek, the white is bred to be the dominant athlete. Nobody bothers to examine that, however.¹⁹⁸

¹⁹⁷ Shaun Powell, *Souled Out? How Blacks Are Winning and Losing in Sports* (Champaign: Human Kinetics, 2008), 249.

¹⁹⁸ *Ibid.*, 250.

Therefore, the hypervisibility of Blacks in sports such as basketball and football also underscores the ways in which sports films' narratives of exceptionalism are read as examples of sports' meritocratic system. As such, sports films, as a genre, contain narratives where Black athletes—particularly men—have the opportunity “to be visible, to be heroic, [and] to excel.”¹⁹⁹ Sports films mobilize narratives of triumph whereby individual success is a way to beat/overcome systemic problems. Thus, narratives of triumph featuring Black athletes, who function as perpetual underdogs in sports and life, are important to address social issues of racial inequality as well as represent heroes to/of the Black community.

However, there are sports films about Black athletes who lose. For example, the basketball dramas *Coach Carter* (Thomas Carter, 2005) and *Sunset Park* (Steve Gomer, 1996) both end with the underdog team losing their final game. *Sunset Park* is the fictional tale of an inner-city, all-Black basketball team that is forced to have a white female coach, Phyllis Saroka (Rhea Pearlman), a P.E. teacher who is looking for a higher paying job in order to open a restaurant. Learning the rules of the game, Saroka's team of delinquent and dysfunctional Black players, many of whom are battling outside pressures and the perils of street-life, begin winning games and make it to the city championship game where they lose. Based on a true story, *Coach Carter* is about Richmond High School basketball coach Ken Carter (Samuel L. Jackson) who comes under fire when he locks out the entire male basketball team from the gym, banning them from playing because of their poor grades and low class attendance. Despite backlash from the community and school administrators, the players come around to Carter's way of thinking and focus on academic as well as athletic achievement. The team's athletic success leads them to the playoffs where they lose. While the basketball teams in both *Sunset Park* and *Coach Carter* end

¹⁹⁹ Tudor, *Hollywood's Vision of Team Sports*, 123.

their high-stakes seasons with losses, these films are not about performances of defeat in the sense of what I am explaining here. They are, however, illustrations of performances of defeat as triumph, where players gain more from losing than winning, which I discuss in the next section of this chapter. This distinction between sports films about performances of defeat and performances of defeat as triumph is imperative to understanding the former in sports films.

The performances of defeat that I describe are those that not only end with the film's protagonist/team, who overcome obstacles on and off the field, losing. They also dramatize defeat, defined as "an undoing; ruin; act of destruction," at the level of the personalized experience.²⁰⁰ As a result, I consider performances of defeat as both a sporting outcome and an affective state, where the emotional devastation of a loss transcends the game to describe the spiraling emotional transformation of the athletes themselves. In other words, athletes' feelings of devastation as severe shock, disappointment, and destruction accompany performances of defeat on and off the field.

Sports films that end in defeat do more than just represent an alternative affective experience specific to sports' structural duality of winning and losing. Narratives of defeat critique the utopian logic within sports films. Obliterating the boundary that separates the playing field from culture, sports films that depict performances of defeat—as an outcome and an affective state—reveal how all-encompassing failure can be for people. Peter Berg's high school football drama *Friday Night Lights* depicts this dual performance of defeat on and off the playing field. In analyzing performances of defeat at both the level of the narrative and embodied performance, I read how the Black athlete protagonist Boobie Miles (Derek Luke) is framed as an individuated multiplicity, representing the experiences of other

²⁰⁰ *The Oxford English Dictionary*, n. "defeat," <http://www.oed.com>.

exceptional/pathological Black bodies within related sporting and non-sporting contexts. In the context of performances of defeat in *Friday Night Lights*, I use the notion of individuated multiplicity to explore the identity of being an exceptional athlete that has a very common narrative of injury derailing ones career prospects. As well, in considering Boobie's performance of defeat, the notion of individuated multiplicity underscores how he functions as both an exceptional Black athlete—exemplary in skill and ability—and a pathological Black athlete—uninterested in education as a means to social mobility.

Friday Night Lights is a film adaptation of H.G. Bissinger's bestselling non-fiction book *Friday Night Lights: A Town, A Team, A Dream*.²⁰¹ In addition to being made into a feature film, the book was also adapted into a critically acclaimed television series for NBC which aired from 2006-2011. The film version of *Friday Night Lights* depicts the story of the 1988 football season of the Permian High School Panthers in Odessa, Texas. Odessa is an economically downtrodden and racially divided town that is overly invested in the local politics of high school sports, particularly football.

Based on true-events from Bissinger's year-long investigative research into sporting culture in America, the film centers on Odessa's obsession with football and how that obsession puts pressure on the coaches and players to be perfect. Not only is head coach Gary Gaines (Billy Bob Thornton) under the microscope from parents, community members, and boosters who expect him to produce a championship team (and will lead the charge to have him fired if he does not win games), but also the teenage players feel the burden of others' expectations for them. People in the community are constantly stopping both Gaines and his players to give advice. For Gaines, the advice he receives from concerned fans is often on how he should coach

²⁰¹ H.G. Bissinger, *Friday Night Lights: A Town, A Team, A Dream* (Boston: Addison-Wesley, 1990).

the Panthers and use different players. For example at a dinner before the start of the season with boosters for the football program, one of the female attendees tells Gaines to play Black star running back Bobbie Miles on both offense and defense. Dismissing this suggestion, Gaines explains that he does not want him to get hurt. The woman replies: “Bullshit, that big nigger ain’t gonna break.” For the Panthers’ players, they are constantly reminded of the end goal of the season. Police officers, ex-players, family members, and Odessa community members ask them if they are going to win state to which they always reply in the affirmative. With the pressure of winning state on them, the players are “saddled with the burden (and, crucially, the opportunity) of a notable athletic tradition, carrying the torch that has been passed to them with no small dosage of great expectations.”²⁰²

The film follows the on and off the field worlds of the shaky but effective quarterback Mike Winchell (Lucas Black) who wants to find a way out of his small-town; athletic but troubled fullback Don Billingsley (Garrett Hedlund) whose abusive father previously played football for Permian; smart and upwardly mobile safety Brian Chavez (Jay Hernandez) who is the class valedictorian and on his way to Harvard; mute and intimidating Ivory “Preacher Man” Christian (Lee Jackson) who is the heart of the team; third-string running back Chris Comer (Lee Thompson Young) who is afraid of getting hit; and gifted and cocky star running back James “Boobie” Miles who sees football as way out of the ghetto for him and his family.

The film begins during preseason and follows the turbulent ride the Permian Panthers face as they make their way to the state championship game. The Panthers’ success is largely dependent on their star player Boobie, who is being recruited by the top college football programs in the nation. During the season opener, Boobie tears his ACL during a blow-out

²⁰² Jared Sexton, “The Field of Fantasy and the Court of Appeal,” 105.

game. Despite the ways in which everyone put pressure on him to exploit Boobie's talent, Gaines is accused by Odessa's white community members for overusing the now-fallen star, leading many in the town to demand his resignation. Gaines does not quit, but he now must strategize an offensive game plan that is not based around/on Boobie. Boobie tries to make a comeback on the field later in the season despite being warned that his injury is too severe and he may never play football again. Despite his desire to play, he only exacerbates his injury and seals his fate. The team is forced to win without him. Third-string running back Chris Comer takes Boobie's place, literally and figuratively. Comer blossoms into a force to be reckoned with on the field. His success on the field changes how he acts off the field. Reminiscent of an earlier scene with Boobie, Comer swags through the hall as classmates flock towards him. Here the film represent the Black athlete as an individuated multiplicity. Boobie is replaced with another Black athlete who becomes just like him (except the following year actually leads the Panthers to a victory in the state finals). The regular season ends with the Panthers in a three-way tie for a trip to the playoffs. With their fate decided by a flip of a coin, Permian secures a spot in the playoffs.

The Panthers make it to the state championship game, playing against the undefeated Cowboys from the all-Black Dallas Carter High School. Playing at the Houston Astrodome, the stakes are high to win for both teams. The Panthers struggle in the first half of the game as they are pounded by the faster, bigger, stronger, and dirtier play of the Cowboys. Down at the start of the second half, the Panthers challenge the first-half dominance of the Cowboys as the narrative tension builds in the film. The showdown between the two teams comes to a head in the final eleven seconds of play. With the Cowboys up 34 to 28, the Panthers are on offense. On fourth down, the Panthers are seven yards from a first down and eight yards from the end zone.

In their first effort, Billingsley, who just had his shoulder popped back into place, runs the ball down to the one yard line for a first down only to have a flag called on the play. The ball goes back to the previous line of scrimmage with two seconds left. The Panthers have one final attempt to win the game. After the snap, quarterback Mike Winchell, finding no one to throw to, runs and spins off tackles, carrying the ball down the field despite the cadre of opposing players pushing him in both directions. Both teams are attempting to, respectively, usher Winchell to victory or defeat. Winchell is finally brought down and for a moment it's unclear whether or not he got the touchdown. With the announcer asking if "it's in," the referee signals that the play is short of the goal line and the Panthers lose. The scene becomes a mix of deafening loss and raucous celebration. The ball sits just inches short of the end zone as Winchell and his fellow teammates register devastation on their face. The film ends with Gaines replacing the nametags of the senior players, and Winchell, Billingsley, and Chavez explain they are going to miss the "lights." During their brief talk, the film details each of the players lives post high school. Boobie Miles, who is absent, is said to have played football in junior college and now lives in Monahans, Texas with his four-year-old twins.

Despite the Panthers' successful journey to the state finals, *Friday Night Lights* ends with a climatic performance of defeat. The documentary impulse of the film is evident in the story staying, somewhat, true to Bissinger's account of the real-life Panthers.²⁰³ The film's verisimilitude is represented in its use of the team's real uniforms, the actual Permian stadium,

²⁰³ For a detail of the inaccuracies between real-life and *Friday Night Lights* account of Panther's season, see: Jeff Merron, "Reel Life: Shedding light on 'Lights,'" *ESPN Page 3*, October 8, 2004, <http://proxy.espn.go.com/espn/page3/story?page=reel/fnl/041006>.

and through the creation of credible football scenes.²⁰⁴ Depicting real-life players Mike Winchell, Don Billingsley, Brian Chavez, Chris Comer, Ivory Christian, and Boobie Miles, the film claims historical status. In analyzing performances of defeat in *Friday Night Lights*, I focus my analysis on Black running back Boobie Miles. While he is not the only Black athlete on the team (there is also Chris Comer and Ivory Christian), Boobie exemplifies the notion of performing defeat as an embodied and affective experience within a sports film that ends in failure. Part of what makes the performance of defeat in *Friday Night Lights* so devastating is the depiction of the sporting and psychological defeat of Boobie. His injury functions as an act of bodily destruction which engenders his personal undoing and ruin.

As a player, Boobie embodies both notions of the exceptional and pathological Black athlete. As a gifted player on the field, Boobie is touted as the one who will lead the Panthers to victory. At the beginning of the film, Boobie is running down the street of his economically devastated community. His shirtless, sweaty, muscular body frames him as an exceptional athletic specimen. Little Black children riding bikes and one sprinting to keep up follow him down the road. They all wear his jersey #45. Boobie's body is framed as a role model, exceptional at the level of individual talent. He represents the athletic desires of the little Black boys who want to literally and figuratively follow in his footsteps. In the film, Boobie is shown as a charismatic yet arrogant athlete. He revels in his athletic prowess and uses it as an excuse to not worry about school. In one scene where he is reading letters from college programs interested in recruiting him, he has to get a teammate to help him pronounce some basic words,

²⁰⁴ Ibid. Jeff Merron explains that: "More than 800 former high school and college football players auditioned to be on a 41-man squad directed by [sports consultant] Allan Graf. Prior to filming, they worked out for three weeks and ran about 100 plays based on Permian's 1988 playbook. Graf was the stunt coordinator for "Any Given Sunday," "The Waterboy," "Jerry Maguire," and many other films."

illustrating that his athletic abilities have been used by his teachers to excuse his academic deficiencies.

Friday Night Lights depicts the actual sporting performance of Boobie's defeat as an unnecessary physical injury. In his sporting performance, his injury is an act of destruction to his body. During a regular season game, the Panthers were decisively winning when third-string quarterback Chris Comer couldn't find his helmet and Boobie is put back in the game. Carrying the ball, he is tackled and suffers a horrific injury. As he screams out, writhing in pain, Boobie's injury freezes all action on the field. Time slows down as everyone including his teammates, the coaches, the fans, his uncle and guardian L.V. (Grover Coulson), and even real-life Boobie Miles playing one of the Panthers' coaches watches the moment. In having the real-life Miles watch/re-live this staged moment of the beginning of the end for him in sports, the film not only implicitly links Boobie to himself but also to other Black athletes who have witnessed and experienced each other's/their own defeat on and off the field. Boobie's attempt to play a few weeks later on his unhealed knee ends in further injury, subsequently ending his season and collegiate/professional hopes.

In *Friday Night Lights*, two scenes in particular depict how defeat becomes both affectively registered and embodied as devastation and disappointment by Boobie. This first scene takes place at the doctor's office before Boobie injures himself beyond repair. With his uncle L.V. Miles accompanying him, Boobie learns about the significance of his ACL injury. Unlike the previous doctor who told him he would be back to playing form in three weeks, the specialist explains to Boobie that his injury is too severe for him to play at the level he once was, thus, effectively suggesting he will never play the kind of football that comes with the potential for collegiate and professional success. Balking at the idea that he can't play, Boobie retorts that

he's going to play. The emotional intensity of the scenes rises as Boobie becomes more distraught that his fears of thwarted success are true. He accuses the doctor, whose son played for rival school Midland in the past, of lying and being in cahoots with the school's football coaches. Boobie screams at the doctor, asking him: "who's paying you!" Boobie grabs the X-ray of his injured knee and cries out that the doctor is trying to take his football career from him. L.V. restrains a distraught Boobie, and the two leave the office.

The second scene that further depicts Boobie's undoing occurs after he quits the football team and cleans out his locker. Making his way back to the car where L.V. waits for him, the reality his football career is over hits him. Injured to the point that he will never play the same way again, Boobie explains that football was the only shot to get him and his family out of their impoverished lives. His dream of social and economic mobility through sports is gone. Having never done well in school, Boobie questions: "now what are we going to do? I can't do nothing else but play football." Framed in close-up but from outside the car window, the camera functions as an interloper, eavesdropping on a moment of Black embodied emotional excess. Boobie sobs uncontrollably, utterly devastated by the realization that at eighteen, in many ways, his life is over. L.V. tries to console him, but Boobie goes over the hours he spent perfecting this one option of economic mobility as a way to make it not just to the pros but out of the ghetto. This moment captures Boobie's undoing and signals his embodied and affective state of defeat. Injured and devastated, Boobie's idea of his life trajectory is ruined.

In conjunction with the film's final game ending in defeat, these two scenes underscore how defeat becomes embodied as injury and emotional devastation. As an individuated multiplicity, Boobie is constructed as an individual figure, but his story of curtailed success narrates the experiences of many Black athletes in various sports (but particularly football and

basketball) whose failure on the field transcends their feelings of failure in real life. Aaron Baker describes, how “the overemphasis on individual exceptionalism in the representation of African American star athletes contributes to what bell hooks calls a ‘spirit of defeat and hopelessness; among poor and working class blacks so that they have ‘no belief that they can attain wealth and power on any playing field other than sports.’”²⁰⁵ In *Friday Night Lights*, Boobie represents this embodied spirit of defeat and hopelessness.

Thus Boobie’s performance of defeat represents, references, and relates to the countless Black male sporting and non-sporting bodies whose attempts (via sports and other means) to make a better life are thwarted. Boobie’s defeat represents Black male athletes who get lost in sports/school systems where when they are no longer useful they are discarded as useless. Boobie’s embodied and affective performance of defeat suggests that for many Black athletes getting substandard educations the game of life is “fixed” if success is based on making it to the NFL which has smaller odds than becoming an astronaut. As Gary Whannel explains:

Of all those who aspire to leave the ghetto by sporting success, very few become professional sports performers, of those very few make the grade, and of those who make the grade very few win. Of course this would not matter if losers also had reasonably dignified lives; but in the neo-liberal capitalist world, for many, losing means permanent entrapment in poorly paid jobs, often casualized and de-unionized, with few rights and no security of employment. Often two or more jobs are necessary to cover the basic necessities. As much as any other country, USA is a world of sharp extremes of wealth and poverty.²⁰⁶

²⁰⁵ Baker, *Contesting Identities*, 31.

²⁰⁶ Whannel, “Winning and Losing Respect,” 201.

Boobie's performance of defeat recalls the cruel exploitation of sports mythology that individual hard work guarantees success. The devastating losses in *Friday Night Lights*, both individualized and as a team, challenge and racialize the utopian narrative within sports. The reality of losing and being a loser dismantles the logics of success. In doing so, failure becomes a way to address the racial and economic inequities that sports and American culture create and affirm. In *Friday Night Lights*, the Panthers' loss and Boobie's defeat depict the harrowing Black nightmare behind the American professional sports dream.

Performing Defeat as Triumph & Triumph as Defeat:

Winning and losing are the main outcomes represented in sports because narrativizing situates contests into the context of winning or losing wherein there is a decisive outcome at the end of the game. There is very little ambiguity in this fact. As Gary Whannel explains:

Events have to be won and lost (that is why we have tie breaks, penalty shoot outs, play-offs, and the almost incomprehensible regulations governing bad weather in one-day cricket). Everything is times, measured, quantified or judged. Elaborate statistical tables are kept, detailing victories, defeats, goals, runs, points, assists, scoring chances, mistakes, wickets, goal averages, batting averages, best performances and world records. Sport does not tolerate ambiguity readily.²⁰⁷

However, in sports films, the sporting results are not ideologically always as clearly defined as narratives of triumph or defeat. In analyzing sports films about winning and losing "respect" in sports, Whannel suggests that the sports film is "often, at its best, largely about ambiguities,

²⁰⁷ Ibid., 207.

elusivities, slippages, allusions, shades of grey and indeterminacies.”²⁰⁸ Despite the ways in which sports films usually are about triumph and (sometimes) defeat and attach sociocultural and sporting ideologies about winning and losing, the genre’s efforts at ideological maintenance often produce contradiction in their utopian logic of success and failure. In this sense, sports films often construct narratives of triumph and defeat as shadow arguments: defeat as triumph and triumph as defeat.

For example, sports films about performances of defeat as triumph demonstrate that failure can be rewarding. The aforementioned films *Sunset Park* and *Coach Carter* are examples of sports films about performances of defeat as triumph. Both narrate tales of Black athletes whose seasons end in losses. Both films are set in high school where, as Jared Sexton argues of *Coach Carter* and *Friday Night Lights* and can also be used to describe *Sunset Park*, “high school sport serves as the practical ground for adjudicating the moral and technical education of young men and the figural source of allegory for prospects of economic recovery, political deliberation, and social change in contemporary United States.”²⁰⁹ The performances of defeat as triumph within the above films morality tales about Black male athletes coming of age through mentorship signify that when the team/player loses, they don’t really loose. They get a moral victory described as “the sentimentality of momentary personal triumph (‘that ever-elusive *inner* victory’).”²¹⁰ In doing so, performances of defeat as triumph in sports films make it so that one actually *can* win for losing.

²⁰⁸ Ibid.

²⁰⁹ Sexton, “The Field of fantasy and the Court of Appeal,” 103.

²¹⁰ Ibid., 105.

On the other hand, sports films about performances of triumph as defeat are based on narratives of Black exceptionalism and pathology, often situated in stories about Black males' aspirations to play college or professional sports, most typically basketball. This narrative trope is similar to my description of Boobie Miles' performance of defeat in *Friday Night Lights*; however, these films end with the main character succeeding, often at the expense of others' failures/defeats. The basketball drama *Above the Rim* (Jeff Pollack, 1994) is one film example about performances of triumph as defeat. In the film, Kyle Watson (Duane Martin) is a gifted basketball player who wants to play for Georgetown University. Kyle is divided between following the mentorship of his white coach Rollins (David Bailey), who tries to teach him to be a team player because that kind of play will get Kyle an athletic scholarship to Georgetown, and the gangster lifestyle of the charismatic but sadistic Birdie (Tupac Shakur). After first aligning himself with Birdie and then rebuffing Birdie's violent lifestyle, Kyle finds himself in a precarious situation when Birdie demands Kyle throw a neighborhood basketball tournament. Playing for Coach Rollins' team, Kyle tries to throw the game against Birdie's team. However, Birdie's estranged brother and former basketball standout Shep (Leon), who Rollins asks to help Kyle make better decisions on and off the court, joins the tournament to play on Kyle's team. Shep helps Kyle's team win, and Kyle does get an athletic scholarship to Georgetown. Birdie is gunned down at the end of the film. Essentially, *Above the Rim* is about Black men's two divergent life choices, a dilemma between taking the road more (gangster life/death) or less traveled (college) in the ghetto.

Above the Rim and other sports films like it that frame Black triumph as/through Black defeat, the exceptional Black athlete's victory is indelibly intertwined with the failure of other Black sporting and non-sporting bodies. In this case, the exceptional Black athlete's victory (on

the court and thus in life) are linked to and confirm the common and “common sense” stories about “little Black boys [who] put on jerseys and shorts, dream big about stardom on fine hardwood courts, but awake to the harsh reality of the stripped, unfinished, inner-city floors where life splinters.”²¹¹

Therefore in analyzing sports films about performances of defeat as triumph and triumph as defeat, I turn to two very different sports films: *Cool Runnings* (Jon Turteltaub, 1993) and *He Got Game* (Spike Lee, 1998). Providing a brief plot synopsis of both films, I examine the documentary impulse at the level of the narrative and embodied performance. Focusing on the final moments in both films, I explain how *Cool Runnings*' and *He Got Game*'s Black athletes, respectively, perform defeat as triumph and triumph as defeat. In doing so, I address how their bodies function as individuated multiplicities that represent, reference, and relate to similar narratives of Black sporting and non-sporting embodied histories and experiences within vexed articulations of triumph and defeat. The concept of individuated multiplicities functions differently in both films. In *Cool Runnings*, the notion of individuated multiplicities takes into account the fact that sporting event is set at the Olympics wherein individual athletes/teams already stand-in for a nation. In this sense, Olympians function as paradoxical multiple, individuated bodies on the global stage. In *He Got Game*, the notion of individuated multiplicities takes into account the ways in which Spike Lee spotlights an individual player in order to address the broader experience of exceptional Black athletes at a turning point in their sporting careers.

Cool Runnings fictionalizes the story of the first Jamaican bobsled team that competed in the 1988 Winter Olympic Games in Calgary, Alberta, Canada. The film begins in 1987. Top

²¹¹ Black Ice, perf. “Imagine,” *Russell Simmons Presents Def Poetry Jam*, season 2m episode 1, produced by Russell Simmons and Mos Def, aired 2006 (New York: HBO Video, 2007), DVD.

Jamaican sprinters Derice Bannock (Leon), Junior Bevil (Rawle D. Lewis), and Yul Brenner (Malik Yoba) participate in the Jamaican trials for the 1988 Jamaican Summer Olympics in Seoul, Korea. During the final event for the 100-meter trials, Junior accidentally trips and brings down fellow sprinters Derice and Yul, making all three fail to qualify for the Summer Games. While all three athletes are distraught by this fact, Derice takes it personally since he wanted to follow in the footsteps of his father who ran on behalf of Jamaica in the Olympics in the past.

With his champion pushcart driving friend Sanka Coffie (Doug E. Doug), Derice recruits Junior and Yul to join his bobsledding team. Enlisting the help of disgraced ex-U.S. Olympic bobsledder Irving "Irv" Blitzer (John Candy) who lives in Jamaica working as a bookie, Derice gets Irv, while reluctant, to train them. The film contains several comedic scenes of them learning how to push, steer, and drive their makeshift bobsled in the Jamaican countryside. In order to make it to the Olympics, the team is forced to raise money since the Jamaican government will not support them financially, thinking they will just be seen as a huge joke on the national stage. Junior, whose family is rich, sells his car to help the team pay their way to Calgary. Once there, Irv buys the team an old sled to race with. During their training time before the Games begin, the Jamaican team learns how to use an actual sled and deal with the cold weather.

At the Games, the Jamaican bobsledders are disliked by other Olympic Teams, most notably the East German team. Barely making it past the qualifying round, the Jamaican team struggles to find their rhythm. When they do qualify, they are disqualified, largely because of the grudge between Irv and his former U.S. Coach Kurt Hemphill (Raymond J. Barry). It becomes revealed that Irv had cheated in the 1972 Olympic Games, adding weights to his bobsled team's sled, and disgraced Kurt and the U.S. through his extreme need to win. With Irv

giving an impassioned plea to Kurt to not punish the Jamaicans for his transgressions, the board reverses its decision and the Jamaicans are allowed to compete.

After a shaky first day, Sanka confronts Derice about their bobsledding style. Telling him to stop imitating the Swiss, Sanka explains that the team must bobsled like Jamaicans. They now groove down the Olympic course to their new mantra: “Feel the rhythm, feel the rhyme. Come on Jamaica, it’s bobsled time. Cool Runnings!” During the final race day, the Jamaicans get off to a fast start. While at first it first seems like they might medal, their bobsled malfunctions. The teams comes to a violent crash meters from the finish line. With their hopes of Olympic glory gone, the team lifts the sled onto their shoulders and carries it across the finish line to the sound of a dramatic slow-clap turned rousing applause. At the end of the film, the text on screen reads: “The Jamaican bobsled team returned to their country as heroes. Four years later, they returned to the Olympics... as equals.”

Similar to my earlier discussion of *Glory Road*, *Cool Runnings* is an example of what I call a film about “Black firsts,” or tales of when Black athletes make (white) sporting history. While *Cool Runnings* plays very loose with its historical veracity, the film’s documentary impulse at both the level of the narrative and embodied performance is evident in the use of real sports history as source material.²¹² Based (very loosely) on the Jamaican sprinters who competed in the 1988 Winter Olympic Games, *Cool Runnings* is a rare sports film with a civil rights/equality-related narrative depicted through comedy instead of drama. This lighthearted approach to racial discrimination and prejudice underscores how the film’s narrative that ends in loss/failure is reinterpreted as success.

²¹² For an historical account of the actual Jamaican bobsledding team, see Christian Nelson Stoke, *Cool Runnings and Beyond: The Story of the Jamaica Bobsleigh Team* (Salt Lake City: American Book Publishing, 2002).

In the final race for the Jamaicans, *Cool Runnings* depicts the tragedy of their bobsledding crash as having occurred because of equipment malfunction. When the team flies down the icy course, the film shows the Jamaican team's newly-converted Calgary fans and fans at home cheering for the team. The team's driver, Derice, steers the sled. The film cuts to images of the old sled appearing more than rickety. A faulty bolt comes undone and one of the runners dislodges from the sled. As the team goes into a turn, Derice loses control of the bobsled, and it turns over. Real black and white footage of the actual event in sports history is cut in between color images of the film's representation of the event. As the team's heads bang on the track, sparks fly from their helmets. The once cheering crowd goes deathly silent in horror. As the sled comes to a stop, the speechless Calgary fans and Jamaican fans at home wait to know the fate of the bobsledders. As medics race down the track, Derice and the other bobsledders finally move, getting out of the sled. Derice, who is determined to cross the finish line, leads his teammates in carrying the sled on their shoulders across the finish line. Proud and dignified, they walk away as losers in the technical sense but winners in the game of life.

Cool Runnings' tragic, yet, triumphant ending is an example of a sports film performance of defeat as triumph. In part, the film constructs this performance by revising history. The Jamaicans' sled did not turn over because of an equipment malfunction but because of human error. They also did not carry the sled off the track. As well, the racial hostility depicted in the film was not accurate for the Jamaican team, who were actually quite popular at the Winter Games.²¹³ In changing these historical facts, *Cool Runnings* converts a tale of defeat into a story of triumph. By having the sled turn over by equipment error instead of human error, the film

²¹³ Pamela Engel, "Here's the Real Story of the 'Cool Runnings' Bobsled Team That The Movie Got Wrong," *Business Insider*, February 6, 2014, <http://www.businessinsider.com/the-real-story-of-the-cool-runnings-bobsled-team-2014-2>.

denies the link between the individual practices of failure and institutional policies that support and create failure narratives for others. In other words, because of their hard work, determination, and self-reliance as they faced obstacles throughout their journey, the Jamaicans' actions in the film cannot be the reason they fail. A story about civil rights cannot end with Black people being the reason for their own defeat. In placing blame away from the Jamaicans, *Cool Runnings*' reaffirms notions of hard work, discipline, and determination through its narrative of defeat as triumph. This reaffirmation is predicated on the fact that no one expects them to win. As Garry Whannel explains: "the very idea of a Jamaican bobsleigh team is presented as absurd. The team have no chance of winning, but in the course of the film they win respect from their peers and their compatriots."²¹⁴ Thus in the film's equality narrative, the performance of defeat as triumph is translated as the act of gaining "respect."

To this point, *Cool Runnings*' frames "respect" as more important than winning. When Derice asks Irv why he cheated, Irv explains: "A gold medal is a wonderful thing, but if you're not enough without it, you'll never be enough with it." In this sense, the film constructs winning or wanting to win above all else as dangerous for those looking to be seen as equals. The Jamaicans are represented as "enough" without winning. The film transforms the disgrace of losing into an act of empowerment (lifting the sleds) for the Jamaican team. Their bodies, carrying the sled, are framed as individuated multiplicities, representing not just themselves but their country. Figuratively speaking, they lift the weight of racial equality and carry it on their backs to the finish line.

Their embodied performance of defeat as triumph represents, references, and relates to history of Black sporting and non-sporting bodies whose defeats are/were reframed as triumphs

²¹⁴ Whannel, "Winning and Losing Respect," 195.

in stories of Black equality. Their performance depicts, albeit problematically, an abstracted history of Black narratives of rewarding failures, particularly in quests for civil rights. For example, the Civil Rights Movement contains many narratives of individual and communal failures against challenging white oppression. In particular, Martin Luther King Jr. and Ralph D. Abernathy, among others, were arrested on April 12, 1963, after protesting in a moment of defeat in Birmingham, Alabama. While in jail, King wrote his now-famous “Letter from Birmingham City Jail,” which was circulated across the nation after his release. The letter empowered many Blacks, including a Black journalist named Carl T. Jones who expressed: ““Dr. King’s most lasting contribution is that he emancipated black people’s psyche. We threw off the slave mentality. Going to jail had been the whip which kept black folks in line. Now going to jail was transformed into a badge of honor.””²¹⁵ In this sense, personal and communal stories of defeat are momentary, cursory experiences in service of a larger saga of Black triumph. However, in counterdistinction to *Cool Runnings*’ version of defeat as triumph, Black people in American society were not looking to just gain “respect.” Their fights, losses, and wins for legislative and institutional changes frame their performances as much more powerful than a sporting trip down an icy track.

Cool Runnings does relate to other gains for Black people in winter Olympic sports. The Jamaican bobsled team’s embodied performance evokes future experience of the U.S. Olympic bobsled team competing in the 2014 Winter Olympic Games in Sochi, Russia where five of the six women bobsledders are Black and four are former track sprinters. *Cool Runnings* may take lightly the story of the first Jamaicans to participate in Olympic bobsledding, but its comedic

²¹⁵ Carl T. Rowan quoted in Stanley Harrold, Darlene Cark Hine, and William C. Hine, *The African-American Odyssey*, Volume II, 5th Edition (New York: Prentice Hall, 2011), 590.

take on this history also renders the seriousness of winning in sports as both necessary and irrelevant for equality in society. In doing so, *Cool Runnings*' performance of defeat as triumph critiques and affirms the logics of success in sports and society, signifying that winning is not everything but you can win for losing.

Spike Lee's 1998 film *He Got Game* is a sports drama about, as the tagline professes, "the father, the son, and the holy game" of basketball. The film depicts the story of Jake Shuttleworth (Denzel Washington), who is serving out a manslaughter sentence for killing his wife, Martha (Lonette McKee), at Attica State Penitentiary. Jake is given an opportunity from the Governor of New York to receive an early parole if he can convince his estranged son and number one high school basketball prospect in the nation, Jesus (Ray Allen), to play college basketball at the Governor's alma mater, Big State. With seven days to get Jesus to sign the letter-of-intent to Big State, competing with offers from other schools and the temptation to make the leap to the NBA, father and son embark on the one-on-one of their lives. Jake vies for not only his freedom from prison but also forgiveness from his son for killing his mother. Jesus attempts to make a life-altering decision regarding his basketball career while balancing the social pressures of the people around him including: his opportunistic uncle looking to cash in on his nephews projected fame; his unfaithful girlfriend La La (Rosario Dawson) who attempts to get him to accept gifts from a pro scout; his own high school coach pressuring him to tell him his choice first; the adoring college coaches who want him to sign with their school; and his Coney Island community at large who are looking to be remembered when he makes it big in the league.

He Got Game offers a biting critique on the industry of college and professional sports and the sports industrial complex. While there are various scenes of basketball being played, *He*

Got Game is not structured around the sports trope of the big final game. Instead, it revolves around the narrative of an exceptional athlete at the crossroads between college and professional sports. In this sense, the film is about the big decision to go or not to go pro. The film ends with Jake and Jesus playing in a tense game of one-on-one, first to eleven points wins. However, it's not just a game. Jake wagers his freedom, stating that if he wins then Jesus must sign the letter of intent to play at Big State. Jake declares that if he loses then he'll be out of his life forever. With such high stakes, Jake starts out with an early lead as the two revise the earlier one-on-one game from the fateful night that Jesus's mother was killed. Talking trash back and forth, Jesus, younger, quicker, and all-around better than his father, takes the lead, ending with him winning the game eleven-to-five. Jesus refuses to sign the letter. Jake is re-arrested and taken back to Attica, and the fate of Jesus's basketball career is unknown. Later, at the national press-conference, Jesus's coach reads a statement penned by Jesus stating that he is choosing to attend Big State. Jesus also writes that he sends prayers out to his father, symbolizing reconciliation through his public acknowledgement. However, despite Jesus signing with the Governor's alma mater, Jake is not released on early parole and is instead depicted in newspapers as an escaped convict. The warden explains that Jake did not "technically" get Jesus to sign the letter-of-intent during the week of his illegal release.

Similar to Lee's other films, *He Got Game* is filled with athletic iconography.²¹⁶ The film's documentary impulse at the level of the narrative and embodied performance is rendered throughout the film's use of real athletes and representations of real sports figures. Lee's attention to basketball realism (as culture) underscores the film's verifiable reality. Jesus, for

²¹⁶ For a discussion of the athletic iconography in Spike Lee's early feature films including *Joe's Bed-Stuy Barbershop: We Cut Heads* (1983), *She's Gotta Have It* (1986), *School Daze* (1988), *Do the Right Thing* (1989), and *Mo' Better Blues* (1990), see Kerr Houston, "Athletic Iconography in Spike Lee's Early Feature Films," *African American Review* 38.4 (Winter 2004): 637-649.

example, is played by NBA star Ray Allen and is named after real-life Black player Earl “The Pearl” Malone, who was given the nickname “Jesus” and later (by white people) “Black Jesus.” The film also includes a litany of professional NBA players and coaches, NCAA college coaches, and basketball sports personalities including: Rick Fox, Travis Best, Walter McCarty, Shaquille O’Neal, Reggie Miller, Bill Walton, Scottie Pippen, Michael Jordan, Charles Barkley, Rick Pitino, George Karl, Dick Vitale, Jim Brown, Jim Boheim, Roy Williams, Lute Olsen, Dean Smith, and Nolan Richardson.

Lee’s film attempts to convey the realistic “love of the game” and the sports industrial complex of the contemporary moment. For example, the film’s opening contains a beautiful montage sequence of basketball with men, women, children, and adults playing the beloved game. Included in this sequence is a shot of Arthur Agee. Agee, whose life was documented in Steve James’ *Hoop Dreams* (1994), functions as an individuated multiplicity in the documentary. *Hoop Dreams* was initially conceived by the filmmakers as a short film that would detail Black street ballers in order to understand how the love of the game translate into one’s daily life. Filmed over the course of four and a half years, the film follows William Gates and Arthur Agee, two teenaged African American males who appear to have promise to go from their urban, blighted environments of Chicago’s Cabrini-Green housing project to the urban, stadium lighted environment of the NBA they watch as youths on their televisions.

Agee and co-star William Gates’ story of athletic desire to play in the NBA becomes rearticulated in *He Got Game* through the character of Jesus. Jesus functions, as well, as an individuated multiplicity in the fiction film, representing and creating the desired experience of Agee to have the opportunity to play professional sports. Moreover, Jesus’s final one-on-one with Jake relates to a similar scene in *Hoop Dreams* between eighteen year old Arthur and his

father Arthur, Sr. Unlike *Hoop Dreams*, *He Got Game* is not about a dream deferred. However, the film does critique the social and cultural politics around Black athletes longing for success in sports as a positive example of the American Dream.

He Got Game constructs the performance of triumph as defeat through the relationship between father and son in the film. Jesus, a star basketball player, represents the exceptional Black athlete who embodies triumph. Jake, imprisoned for murder, represents the pathological Black figure who embodies defeat. Thus, even when Jesus wins (gets a full athletic scholarship to play in college), he loses (his father stays in prison). *He Got Game*'s final scene illustrates how the film is about triumph as defeat. The film ends with the juxtaposition of father and son on the basketball court in their respective domains of jail and school. Wearing his Big State jersey, Jesus shoots hoops in the team's empty basketball stadium. The shot cuts from the basketball hoop at Big State to the hoop at the prison where Jake is being held. In a high-angle shot, the words "out of bounds" are depicted on the prison court marking the no-entry zone. Wearing his prison attire, Jake throws up a jump shot. In close-up, the ball travels through the air. On its course to the basket the frame reveals an armed guard standing atop the prison walls. As the ball goes into the basket, the shot cuts back to Jesus taking a similar jump shot. Slowly his body jumps and releases the ball. Travelling through the air against a black backdrop and mirroring the close-up of Jake's ball, Jesus's shot appears to be suspended in space and time. The ball swishes through the basket, and the shot cuts to an image of an armed guard at Jake's prison.

The camera cuts back to Jesus taking another shot then back to Jake. As Jesus imitates the final five seconds of a game, Jake readies himself for another shot. The cuts between Jesus and Jake continue. Focusing on the prison, the film shows Jake start to walk towards the "out of

bounds” area of the court. The armed guard sees him and points his gun at him and yells stop. The scene cuts back to Jesus whose play stops abruptly as if he can hear the armed guard shouting “stop right there.” The scene cuts to a close-up of the armed guard telling Jake to turn around. Jake crosses the boundary from the court to the out of bounds space. The guard tells him to turn around or he is a dead man. With dramatic music swelling and the guard’s hand on the trigger, Jake hurls his basketball over the prison wall before walking back to the court. Jake’s ball floats through the air as the camera cuts back to Jesus who sees the same ball falling from the stadium ceiling. Dropping his ball, Jesus runs over to grab Jake’s ball. A smiling Jesus stares at the ball, looks up, and smiles.

This final moment’s visual discourses on the embodied connections and experiences of father and son. Both Jesus’s and Jake’s bodies function as individuated multiplicities, representing each other’s alternative experiences. As father and son, their bodies reproduce racialized histories of Black men, representing, referencing, and relating to the vast number of boys and men with “hoop dreams” and those caught in the reality of “prison life.” To this point, *He Got Game*’s final basketball game between the two where Jesus wins and Jake loses frames how the film is about Jesus as Jake, success as failure, and triumph as defeat.

Through the film’s narrative of triumph as defeat and Jesus’s and Jake’s connected embodied performances of triumph and defeat, *He Got Game* relates the history of both the prison and sports industrial complex as a part of the “conveyor belt” or the circulating supply of Black labor for white capital interests.²¹⁷ As well, Jesus’s embodied performance relates to the history of other contemporary Black teenage basketball sensations, including Sebastian Telfair and LeBron James. Both Telfair and James had the opportunity of going to college or entering

²¹⁷ William Rhoden explains the “conveyor belt” in NCAA recruiting of Black athletes in *Forty Million Dollar Slaves*, 174-195.

the NBA draft. Unlike Jesus, they both chose to forego college for the NBA. For example, Jonathan Hock's sports documentary *Through the Fire* (2005) depicts Telfair's decision. *Through the Fire* follows Lincoln High School senior and basketball superstar Sebastian Telfair. A 5'10" point-guard from Coney Island, New York, Telfair makes the life changing decision of whether to attend college and play for Rick Pitino at the University of Louisville or enter the 2004 NBA draft. This narrative is very similar to *He Got Game*. Telfair plays for Lincoln High School's basketball team, which is also the team Jesus plays for in the film, another gesture to a verifiable sporting reality and real embodied sporting history and experience.

He Got Game structures the exceptionality of Jesus as "relational" to Jake in both the familial as well as the broader human relationships and matters connected to the narrative of other exceptional bodies—such as Telfair and James—of one body who "wins" (makes it out of the ghetto) but also to the larger amount of Black bodies who, within the framework of capitalist driven sports success, have been historically the overall losers in the game of life. In this sense, *He Got Game*'s narrative and embodied performance of triumph as defeat is a reminder of the illogic that if one Black person wins we all win. Instead, often when one Black person succeeds there are a host of others who do not.

Sports films contain, in one form or another, performances of triumph or/as defeat. When Black athletes are represented in these narratives, their embodied performances project and resonate broader narratives of triumph and defeat concerning Black people's real lives. Despite the ways in which sports films' narratives of winning and losing function as sporting and sociocultural ideologies within contained narratives, Black embodied performance allows for embodied and emotional excess that critiques the hegemonic ideals around success and failure in both sports and society.

Chapter Three:

Performing Dissent

In 1967, sociologist Harry Edwards called for a revolt of the Black athlete. Many Black athletes, Edwards explained, had come to the “realization that once their athletic abilities are impaired by age or injury, only the ghetto beckons and they are doomed once again to that faceless, hopeless, ignominious existence they had supposedly forever left behind.”²¹⁸ Edwards believed that the necessity for revolt was due to a violation of not only Black athletes’ but also Black peoples’ basic human dignity and rights in American society:

The roots of the revolt of the black athlete spring from the same seed that produced the sit-ins, the freedom rides, and the rebellions in Watts, Detroit, and Newark. The athletic revolt springs from a disgust and dissatisfaction with the same racist germ that infected the warped minds responsible for the bomb murders of four black girls as they prayed in a Birmingham, Alabama church and that conceived and carried out the murders of Malcolm X, Martin Luther King, and Medgar Evers, among a multitude of others. The revolt of the black athlete arises also from his new awareness of his responsibilities in an increasingly more desperate, violent, and unstable America.²¹⁹

Edwards contends that the injustices facing Black athletes are connected to the injustices of Black people in American society and that Black success or achievement in sports does not qualify or translate into more humane treatment for Black athletes specifically or Black people in

²¹⁸ Harry Edwards, *The Revolt of the BLACK ATHLETE* (New York: Free Press, 1971), xxvii.

²¹⁹ Ibid.

general. In fact, Edwards explains that the “façade of locker room equality” has obscured the imperative that Black athletes must take their “long vacant place as a primary participant in the black revolution.”²²⁰ In his call to arms for Black athletes, specifically Black male athletes to “[react] in a human and masculine fashion to the disparities between the heady artificial world of newspaper clippings, photographs, and screaming spectators and the real world of degradation, humiliation, and horror,” Edwards indicts the institutions of professional and amateur sports as racially hostile and unjust and charges Black athletes with leading the newest phase of Black revolution.²²¹ In Edwards’ masculinist charge for revolt, Black women were ignored as athletes/activists in the struggle for equal rights. This gendered politic “mirrored a deep flaw also found in other sections of the New Left and Black Power movement: women were largely shut out... as if African American women weren’t victims of racism or couldn’t be part of a strong voice against it.”²²² Notwithstanding this exclusion, Edwards conceived of the revolt of the Black athlete as part of a larger Black liberationist movement that needed to take place on multiple platforms in society and within various public domains. He recognized America’s dependence on Black athletic talent to assert dominance in sports and project the illusion of racial equality in the global arena and attempted to galvanize Black athletes to become activists and use resistance in sports to fight for social justice.

²²⁰ Ibid., xxviii.

²²¹ Ibid., xxvii.

²²² Dave Zirin, *What’s My Name, Fool?: Sports and Resistance in the United States* (Chicago: Haymarket Books, 2005), 77. Zirin explains that “Many of OPHR’s calls to action had statements about ‘reclaiming manhood’...Despite this exclusion many women athletes became major voices of solidarity after the fact [of Smith and Carlos’ act of resistance on the podium at the Olympic Games]” (77).

Edwards organized the Olympic Project for Human Rights (OPHR) and mobilized Black athletes to boycott the 1968 Summer Olympics in Mexico City.²²³ Influenced by Black freedom struggles, Edwards and the group's primary spokespeople, sprinters Tommie Smith and Lee Evans, wrote in OPHR's founding statement:

We must no longer allow this country to use a few so-called Negroes to point out to the world how much progress she has made in solving her racial problems when the oppression of Afro-Americans is greater than it ever was. We must no longer allow the sports world to pat itself on the back as a citadel of racial justice when the racial injustices of the sports world are infamously legendary... any black person who allows himself to be used in the above matter is a traitor because he allows racist whites the luxury of resting assured that those black people in the ghettos are there because that is where they want to be. So we ask why should we run in Mexico only to crawl home?²²⁴

In threatening to boycott the Olympics, the OPHR's demands included: Muhammad Ali's title and right to box be reinstated (he was stripped of his title and boxing license earlier that year after refusing to be inducted in the Vietnam War draft); Avery Brundage, a white supremacist who fought against the boycott of the 1936 Summer Olympics in Nazi Germany, be removed from his post as Chairman of the International Olympic Committee; limit participation of all-white teams and players for the apartheid nations of the Union of South Africa and Southern Rhodesia; add at least two Black coaches to the men's track and field staff for the 1968 Olympic

²²³ This is not the first attempt by Black people to start a boycott of the Olympics. Activist and comedian Dick Gregory called for a boycott of the 1964 Summer Olympics in Tokyo. Just like Edwards who links athletic revolt to Black freedom struggles, Gregory wanted Black athletes to join in larger campaign for Black civil rights.

²²⁴ Edwards, Evans, and Smith quoted in Dave Zirin, *What's My Name, Fool?*, 74.

team; appoint two Black people to policy making positions on the US Olympic Committee; and desegregate the New York Athletic Club.²²⁵ While the desired massive boycott by Black athletes did not occur, though notable athletes including Lew Alcindor (Kareem Abdul-Jabbar) did boycott, the actions of Olympians Tommie Smith and John Carlos during the Games are among the most iconic and circulated images of Black resistance in sporting history.

On October 16, 1968, Smith and Carlos took a stand, both literally and figuratively, against racial injustices in and beyond the world of sports. Following Smith's and Carlos's win of the gold and bronze, respectively, in the 200-meter track event, both athletes took their place on the winners' podium as the U.S. flag was raised and the national anthem played. Smith and Carlos bowed their heads and raised their black gloved fists to protest "how the U.S. used Black athletes to project a lie about race relations both at home and internationally."²²⁶ The Black Power salute signaled a potent act of Black resistance on the global stage, one that proclaimed that while they stood as individuals they represented a community of people and a politic of Black liberation. In their revolutionary book *Black Power*, Kwame Ture (formerly known as Stokely Carmichael) and Charles V. Hamilton put forth a political framework for reform, decreeing that "Black people must redefine themselves, and only *they* can do that."²²⁷ Putting this strategy into social and political action, Smith's and Carlos's intentional acts of protest redefined both themselves and the moment they were positioned within.

In describing their actions, Smith stated: "I wore a black right-hand glove and Carlos wore the left-hand glove of the same pair. My right hand stood for the power in black America.

²²⁵ Edwards, *The Revolt of the Black Athlete*, 58-59.

²²⁶ Zirin, *What's My Name, Fool?*, 74.

²²⁷ Kwame Ture and Charles V. Hamilton, *Black Power: The Politics of Liberation* (New York: Vintage Books, 1992), 37.

Carlos' raised left hand stood for the unity of black America. Together they formed an arch of unity and power."²²⁸ Smith and Carlos also wore no shoes to protest Black poverty in America. According to Carlos, he and Smith "wanted the world to know that in Mississippi, Alabama, South Central Los Angeles, [and] Chicago that people were still walking back and forth in poverty without even the necessary clothes to live in."²²⁹ The two athletes wore beads around their necks, as Carlos declared, "for those individuals that were lynched, or killed, that no one said a prayer for, that were hung [and] tarred. It was for those thrown off the side of the boats in the Middle Passage."²³⁰ Carlos, the son of a migrant worker, also unzipped his jacket to show solidarity with blue-collar working class people.²³¹ Carlos explained: "I was representing shift workers, blue-collar people, the underdogs... Those are the people whose contributions to society are so important but don't get recognized."²³²

Using these "silent gestures," Smith's and Carlos's embodied performance of dissent turned actions into discourses that resonated loudly with Black people both in the U.S. and around the world.²³³ In detailing the events after this pivotal moment of Black staged resistance, Edward explains that "[receptions] were thrown at the United Nations by black African nations honoring these athletes for the stand they had taken."²³⁴ Despite the actions taken by the U.S.

²²⁸ Smith quoted in Edwards, *The Revolt of the Black Athlete*, 104.

²²⁹ John Carlos quoted in Zirin, *What's My Name, Fool?*, 87.

²³⁰ Ibid.

²³¹ Australian silver medalist Peter Norman showed solidarity with Smith and Carlos, donning an OPHR button on his chest on the podium.

²³² Ibid.

²³³ This notion of "silent gestures" as description of these sprinters actions comes from the title of Tommie Smith's book, see Tommie Smith with David Steele, *Silent Gesture* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2007).

²³⁴ Edwards, *The Revolt of the Black Athlete*, 107.

Olympic officials and coaching staffs, suspending Smith and Carlos from the national team and expelling them from Mexico, “[thousands] of black people turned out to honor them in Washington, D.C. Many Black leaders—H. Rap Brown, Stokely Carmichael, Adam Clayton Powell, and Elijah Muhammad—paid their personal respects.”²³⁵

Smith’s and Carlos’s physical and visual gestures during the Olympics, like those of “speech acts,” have a performative and social function. Their embodied acts testify to how the Black body is not only read by others as an individuated multiplicity but also how it can be self-fashioned into a body that represents and signifies other embodied experiences. Smith’s and Carlos’s embodied performance at the Games was a deliberate use of their individual personage to represent the experiences of past and present Black bodies within specific contexts. Their actions demonstrate the capacity and capability of the Black body to function as a sign and signifier. With their intentional representational excess, Smith’s and Carlos’s acts dramatized Black social history in America: from the Middle Passage to lynching to the economic conditions effecting Black people in rural and urban cities across the country to the present moment of sporting excellence. Because of the hypervisibility of the two Olympian’s staged resistance, their performance of dissent transcended sports culture and shaped a global discourse about the conditions of marginalized Black people in American society.

I cast this example of dissent in a larger cultural domain to frame how Black people have historically used their body’s representational excess to proactively resist racial hegemony and use dissonance “to forge discursive as well as embodied insurgency.”²³⁶ To do this, I turn to Daphne Brooks’ exploration of the performative acts and strategies of dissent and resistance by

²³⁵ Ibid.

²³⁶ Daphne A. Brooks, *Bodies in Dissent: Spectacular Performances of Race and Freedom, 1850-1910* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2006), 3.

nineteenth- and early twentieth-century African and African American performers including Henry Box Brown, Isaacs Menken, Bert Williams, George Walker, and Pauline Hopkins. In *Bodies in Dissent: Spectacular Performances of Race and Freedom, 1850-1910*, Brooks describes how performers, activist, and artists “[worked] outside constrictive racial and gender paradigms” in order to “disrupt the ways in which they were perceived by audiences and to enact their own ‘freedom.’”²³⁷ By focusing on “the hypervisibility and cultural construction of blackness in the transatlantic culture,” Brooks explains that the aforementioned performers “[translated] alienation into [a] self-actualizing performance.”²³⁸ As Brooks notes: “Each figure developed means to move more freely and to be culturally ‘odd,’ to turn the tables on normativity and to employ their own bodies as canvasses of dissent in popular performance culture.”²³⁹ Coining the term “afro-alienation acts,” Brooks describes how people of African descent in the United States mobilized forms of “alienation and dissonant identity politics into his or her performances and, in doing so, stylized alternative forms of cultural expression that cut against the grain of conventional social and political ideologies.”²⁴⁰ The performers Brooks brings into critical focus “redirected conventional performance practices” and “mastered the art of spectacle, (representational) excess, and duality.”²⁴¹

Smith’s and Carlos’s performance of dissent at the Olympics is a contemporary sporting example of the kind of dissent Brooks describes of past Black performers. Smith and Carlos redirected the conventional performance practices of the moment. They mastered their own

²³⁷ Ibid., 3.

²³⁸ Ibid.

²³⁹ Ibid., 6.

²⁴⁰ Ibid., 4.

²⁴¹ Ibid., 65.

embodied spectacle, representational excess, and double consciousness of being both Black and American in both their identity formation and social reformation. Both Olympians challenged the culturally accepted image of (white) nationalism staged during the medal ceremony and translated their own/Black peoples' social alienation into a self-actualizing performance of individual and communal empowerment. Like the performers Brooks discusses, the two athletes used their bodies strategically to work outside of the constrictive social, racial, and political paradigms of the patriotic/nationalist moment, disrupting the ways they were perceived by domestic and international audiences and enacting their own freedom of political and cultural expression. Smith and Carlos suffered harsh backlash by both Black and white people at home and abroad for their actions and it is critical to understand that acts of resistance, where one enacts personal freedoms, can produce counteractions of containment by dominant forces. The attacks on Smith and Carlos remind us that there are often real consequences for those who perform dissent.²⁴² Notwithstanding the magnitude of the event and its after-effects, in using their alterity in the self-making process, Smith and Carlos stylized their bodies as individuated multiplicities into canvasses of dissent in order to rewrite master narratives on race relations in sports and American society.

I situate the primary objective of this chapter within this political, social, and cultural landscape. Here, I analyze performances of dissent in sports films. Ironically, the drama of Smith's and Carlos's actions have never been narrativized in a fiction film. Despite the ways in which the media image of that moment has endured and been circulated throughout history (one

²⁴² Smith and Carlos had trouble finding work in the years following the Olympic Games. Carlos believes that the lack of support within the Black community contributed his wife's suicide in 1977. Carlos explains: "There was pride, but only from the less fortunate. What could they do but show their pride? But we had lack businessmen, we had Black political caucuses, and they never embrace Tommie Smith or John Carlos. When my [Carlos's] wife took her life in 1977 they never said, 'Let me help'" (Carlos quoted in Zirin, 172-173).

that sports has recuperated as an act of bravery instead of blemish on U.S. Olympic history), this popular image of sporting defiance has, as of yet, never been given the Hollywood treatment.²⁴³ However, the iconic image of dissent does make an appearance in the based-on-true events, high school football drama *Remember the Titans* (Boaz Yakin, 2000), an inspirational sports biopic about T.C. Williams High School's Black football coach Herman Boone (Denzel Washington) and his newly racially integrated team's, the Titans, undefeated football season. Early in the film, the white, All-American left-tackle and team captain Gerry Bertier (Ryan Hurst) and Black, strong-side tackle Julius Campbell (Wood Harris) fight over Julius hanging a poster of the iconic image of Smith's and Carlos' Black Power salute on the wall of their training camp dorm room.

Smith and Carlos make only a cameo in this sports drama. One would imagine that their history of dramatic sporting and cultural conflict would fit squarely into the sports genre's appeal for films that "[recall] real events in sports 'history': athletic contests that the audience has witnessed in the past."²⁴⁴ However, the fact is that most sports films and Hollywood films in general are about white male self-definition, with Black characters being used for the purpose of that process. Cast in this light, the cinematic omission of Smith's and Carlos's performance makes sense. Sports films usually champion utopian stories of success on and off the playing

²⁴³ American sports culture has since recuperated this history of Smith's and Carlos's bravery. In fact, both men were the recipients of the 2008 Arthur Ashe Courage Award at the Excellence in Sports Performance Yearly (ESPY) Awards. A statue of the two was constructed on the campus of San Jose State University, where both attended and ran track. The story of Smith and Carlos have been covered in two documentaries. HBO produced *Fists of Freedom: The Story of the '68 Summer Games* (George Roy, 1999). Australian director Matt Norman's documentary *Salute* (2008) details the event. However, *Salute* focuses on Australian silver medalist Peter Norman, the uncle of director Matt Norman. The documentary explores the after-effects of Peter Norman's decision to stand in solidarity with Smith and Carlos. Specifically, Norman was reprimanded by Australian Olympic officials, largely because his act was in direct opposition to the country's White Australia policy. In fact, Norman qualified for the 1972 Olympic Games but was denied a spot of the national track team.

²⁴⁴ Baker, *Contesting Identities*, 13.

field. Therefore, even when issues such as racism are acknowledged, “individual performance is generally held up as the best way to overcome” social and racial disadvantage.²⁴⁵

For example, returning to *Remember the Titans*, the film’s football storyline is set in 1971, on the edge of the tumultuous civil rights era. The film depicts “how the goal line came to replace the color line” in a “family friendly” version of sports and social history.²⁴⁶ Because of the racial tensions and intra-team fighting during pre-season training camp, the players are punished by Coach Boone, resulting in grueling three-a-day practices and forced interracial mingling between Black and white players to get to know each other. Under the physical and emotional exertion and pressure placed upon them during training camp, the Black and white players finally do come together as a team. Notably, Gerry sticks up for the Black quarterback, Jerry “Rev” Harris (Craig Kirkwood), challenging his white best friend Ray Budds’ (Burgess Jenkins) lackluster blocking for Rev during practice. At the end of training camp, former foes Gerry and Julius become friends and the team leaves for home in racial harmony.

If both football and life are a contact sport, *Remember the Titans* shows how in order to overcome one’s opponent—whether that’s another team or racism—bodily contact/interaction with one another is necessary. In the narrative, the Titans must learn how to win and this process is done at the pre-season training camp. Staying and training at Gettysburg College, Coach Boone tells the players they must be perfect, a theme that reverberates throughout the film’s chronicling of the Titans’ undefeated season. Following the incident where Julius and Gerry get into a fight that turns into a huge team brawl, Boone admonishes the racially divided team, instructing them that they must harness their anger, aggression, and differences, particularly their

²⁴⁵ Ibid.

²⁴⁶ A.O. Scott, “Film Review: ‘Remember the Titans’—How the Goal Line Came to Replace the Color Line,” *The New York Times*, September 29, 2000.

racial differences, into a unified form to achieve perfection. The film implicitly dismisses the actions of Smith and Carlos as a “tantrum.” In the conditioning/practice scene that follows, the players are in rows doing footwork drills. Coach Boone tells them that everything they are going to do is changing. He explains that they *are* change. With each blow of his whistle, the players move into a new position. Boone decries that they are going to change the way they run, block, tackle, and, most importantly, the way they win. Part of how they change the way they win is that they unite as a racially integrated team against all-white teams and perform perfection. Together they are an example of the power and possibilities of interracial coalition work. Thus, the notion of perfection carries over off the field, and sporting performances stand in to describe how “in order to form a more perfect union” in sports and society all men must be considered equal and given an equal playing field.

Upon returning from training camp to the Alexandria community, the team is met with the harsh realities of racism following the school desegregation in Virginia. Prior to the first game of the season, Coach Boone is told by the school board that if he loses one game he will be fired. Charged with the necessity to be perfect, the Titans win every game. During this time, their stellar play unites them as teammates and inspires the town of Alexandria to look past their racial differences—at least on game nights. Despite some close games, the Titans end up in the Virginia high school state championship match. However, before the final game, Gerry gets into a devastating car crash, leaving him paralyzed. The Titans go on to win the championship game in a last-minute, final play, ending their season with a perfect record and ranked as tied for second place as the best high school football team in the nation.

While a team is made up of individuals, the cohort is represented by a singular identity that is able to overcome the social disadvantages of interracial teamwork through the sports

advantage of interracial teamwork. The notion that the team name on the “front” of the jersey should mean more than the individual name on the “back” reifies this exaltation of the team’s actions as the primary performance that matters. In the film, Coach Boone requires perfection of his players. Julius reminds a losing Titan team during half-time of the championship game: “You [Coach Boone] demanded perfection. Now I ain’t saying I’m perfect, ‘cause I’m not and I ain’t never gonna be. None of us are. But we have won every single game we have played till now so this team is perfect. We stepped out on that field that tonight so if it’s all the same to you Coach Boone that’s how we want to leave it.” The Titans’ on the field victories are representative of their off the field victories, particularly their ability to break down racial barriers amongst each other and, by extension, within their divided community. The film represents the field as a site for cultural conflict to be both played out and overcome. In sports films, the field is a privileged space, “often conceptualized as a separate, unconnected area in which athletic contests play themselves out in isolation from culture and history.”²⁴⁷ *Remember the Titans* uses the field to not only connect to race issues but also to overcome racial issues.

In contrast to this Disney produced version of sports and civil rights campaigns, Smith’s and Carlos’ actions do not fall into the “conservatism of utopian entertainment [that] comes from the way it offers representations of a better life if we just follow the rules and try harder.”²⁴⁸ Civil rights related sports films like *Remember the Titans* champion self-reliance and hard work through teamwork, especially since there is no “I” in “team.” They cast Black freedom struggles for equality within a problematic narrative of interracial coalition work, where it is only the act of “perfection” on and off the field that can create racial harmony. In contrast,

²⁴⁷ Tudor, *Hollywood’s Vision of Team Sports*, xxii-xxiii.

²⁴⁸ Baker, *Contesting Identities*, 13.

Smith and Carlos knew that success in the world of sports (notably Smith won the gold medal, signifying that he was the best athlete in the world) does not create a world of racial harmony for them or their respective communities. In counterdistinction to the utopian entertainment in sports films, Smith's and Carlos's actions are less of a depiction of a way to overcome social disadvantage and more of a way to reveal social inequity and fight for equality. Therefore, I use Smith's and Carlos's actions to frame the literal and ideological stakes in sports film narratives about performances of dissent.

When it comes to most Hollywood sports films, performances of dissent by Black athletes are dramatized in specific ways to underscore “the assumption that the vast majority of viewers want reaffirmation of the racial status quo—or avoidance of racial difference entirely.”²⁴⁹ Many examples of Black resistance in sports films are contained in narratives about “Black firsts,” or times in which Black athletes make (white) sporting history. In this regard, these kinds of performances of dissent are typically in films about Black athletes competing against white athletes in an attempt to breakdown the established racist/segregated “rules of the game,” which historically champions white superiority in the realms of sports and society. Therefore, athletic contests between Blacks and whites that end with Blacks becoming the “first,” proving their value and validity as athletes in sports, construct dissent as a kind of performance that supports the ideals of meritocracy and the American Dream, ostensibly providing “legitimacy to ‘the logic of white supremacy’ that has been ‘premised on the inherent inferiority of blacks and the equally fallacious assumptions of the superiority of whites.’”²⁵⁰

²⁴⁹ Ibid., 25.

²⁵⁰ David J. Leonard, “Do You Believe in Miracles? Whiteness, Hollywood, and a Post-9/11 Sports Imagination” in *All-Stars & Movie Stars: Sports in Film & History*, eds. Rob Briley, Michael K. Schoenecke, and Deborah A. Carmichael (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 2008), 220-221.

For example, as discussed in the previous chapter, James Gartner's *Glory Road* is about Texas Western's first all-Black starting lineup team to win a NCAA Division-1 Basketball Championship in 1966. Telling the story from the perspective of Texas Western's white coach, Don Haskins (Josh Lucas), *Glory Road* follows "classic Hollywood's practice of using African American characters for the purpose of defining its white protagonist."²⁵¹ *Glory Road* shows how white-male paternalism is a guiding force for Black athletes who must learn self-discipline, self-reliance, and hard work. In doing so, they earn respect through becoming the best, reaffirming the ideals of meritocracy and the American Dream that insists hard work pays off if one follows the rules of the game. Other examples of "Black firsts" are found in tales of desegregation in sports; most notably the various Jackie Robinson biopics including *The Jackie Robinson Story* (Alfred E. Green, 1950) and *42* (Brian Helgeland, 2013), both of which recount when Robinson broke Major League Baseball's (MLB) color line in 1947.²⁵² Just as with *Glory Road*, these types of sports film narratives about performances of dissent as "Black firsts" rely on white paternalistic mentors to guide Black athletes to be the first to gain access to certain levels of collegiate and professional sports.²⁵³

The performances of dissent I analyze in this chapter are not these dominant, Hollywood narratives of "Black firsts" in sports. As Ture and Hamilton suggest in *Black Power*, I focus on performances of dissent that are about Black people redefining themselves in and beyond the

²⁵¹ Baker, *Contesting Identities*, 26.

²⁵² Larry Peerce's made-for-television film, *The Court-Martial of Jackie Robinson* (1990) is an example of a film that actually charts the experiences of Robinson before being drafted into Major League Baseball (MLB). The film focuses on the events leading up to his court-martial for insubordination after he refused to sit in the back of the army bus. This film is one of the rare films that take into account the ways in which Robinson was a civil rights activist outside of baseball. There are no films that address how Robinson in his post-baseball years became an outspoken figure about the institutional racism that still persisted in sports including baseball.

²⁵³ *Ibid.*, 27.

world of sports. Thus, I began this chapter with the historical context of the Black athlete in revolt as a way to situate the sociopolitical dimensions of the films I analyze as representative of real and imagined Black resistance to hegemonic forces in both sports and society. Because of the ways in which Black athletes, particularly Smith and Carlos, perform dissent as a staging of their own body as a kind of political intervention, I focus on sports films that frame the Black sporting body as an individuated multiplicity that invokes and evokes this specific history of Smith and Carlos as well as other related Black sporting and non-sporting experiences of resistance. In this sense, Smith's and Carlos's actions on October 16, 1968, become the fulcrum and site of similarity from which to explore how representations of performances of dissent in films implicitly recall and engender this moment in history.

In this chapter, I define performances of dissent in sports films as ones that depict Black sporting bodies refusing to both literally and figuratively "play the game" set before them. To play the game is to recognize that sports offer a unique space for Black competition, performance, and affective response. However, sports also devise games as formal structures of regulation with fixed rules for those participating. Black bodies on screen are often framed as threats, restricted to containable and presumed apolitical activities such as sports and genres like sports films. Therefore, representations of Black athletes refusing to play the game not only challenge sports' formal structures of regulation and control, but also challenge the hegemonic racial order that shapes Black representation in real (society) and imagined spaces (film). Through this challenge, we can see the histories and narratives that threaten to come to the surface in Black embodied performances of dissent.

To analyze performances of dissent in sports films, I turn to Haile Gerima's 1971 short-film *Hour Glass*, which depicts a Black basketball player's journey to social and political

consciousness, and Michael Mann's 2001 biopic *Ali*, which chronicles the life of political pugilist Muhammad Ali from 1964 to 1971. Gerima's *Hour Glass* does not depict a typical utopian, idealized sports narrative where a Black male heroic individual overcomes obstacles and achieves success through hard work, determination, and the help of a paternalistic white mentor. Rather, it explicitly critiques such narratives through its representation of a Black athlete performing dissent. Mann's *Ali* does contain many of the tropes typical of traditional, Hollywood sports films. However, the film focuses on the political and politicized figure of Muhammad Ali, a man whose embodied history performs in excess of dominant narrative constraints in sports and society. A "fanciful metonym," Ali is a cultural revolutionary who revolutionized the Black athlete, functioning as a global sign and signifier whose iconographic status carries the burden of over-representation.²⁵⁴ Therefore, *Ali* provides an important history of the boxer's acts of resistance and performances of dissent, including his conversion to Islam and refusal to be inducted into the Vietnam War, as a refusal to play the game of racial injustice.

Both *Hour Glass* and *Ali* demonstrate how the Black body can and does supersede its own iconography and the narrative constraints of the sports film genre.²⁵⁵ While the formal style and production realities of both films differ, *Hour Glass* and *Ali* construct performances of dissent as refusals to play the game at the level of the narrative and embodied performance. In both films, I analyze how the protagonists' bodies are represented as individuated multiplicities that represent, reference, and relate to Black sporting and non-sporting embodied histories, experience, and acts of dissent. The concept of individuated multiplicities in performances of

²⁵⁴ Farred, "When Kings Were (Anti-?)Colonials," 244 & 251.

²⁵⁵ Calling Haile Gerima's *Hour Glass* a "sports film" brings up complicated issues surrounding the genre itself, most specifically if there is such a thing as a sports film or are they just films that involve/include sports. I contend that if sports figure in the narrative and thematic of the film then the film is a sports film. For more on the generic ambivalence of sports films, see Glen Jones, "In Praise of an 'Invisible Genre'?"

dissent functions differently in both films. In *Hour Glass*, the protagonist's anonymity allows for the Black sporting body to register multiple, individuated embodied experiences related to and beyond the dissenting acts depicted. In *Ali*, Muhammad Ali's boxing fame and national platform structures how his body is read as an individuated multiplicity. Ali connects to and represents other embodied histories, specifically those of other boxers with similar experiences on the national stage. In examining how both Black athletes function as individuated multiplicities, I detail both films' documentary impulse, identify connections across bodies, and acknowledge related histories concerning Black peoples' lived and imagined experiences of dissent.

Hour Glass:

Ethiopian born filmmaker Haile Gerima's 1971 film *Hour Glass* is a provocative example of a sports film about dissent. After emigrating to the United States in 1967 to attend the Goodman School of Drama in Chicago and later moving to Los Angeles to attend UCLA's film school, Gerima wrote, directed, and edited *Hour Glass*, his "project one" film that was shot in Super 8, as a first assignment required of all graduate film students.²⁵⁶ Unlike all of the fictional films I discuss in this dissertation, *Hour Glass* is not a feature length, Hollywood produced film. However, the film depicts a narrative about a particular kind of performance of dissent that typical sports films ignore. Thirteen minutes long, the film's surreal elements and dreamscape diegesis help to figuratively expand the film's compressed running time. While the

²⁵⁶ Allyson Nadia Field provides a comprehensive explanation and analysis of the "project one" films created by L.A. Rebellion filmmakers, including Gerima's *Hour Glass*. See Allyson Nadia Field, "Rebellious Unlearning: UCLA Project One Films (1967-1978)" in *To Emancipate the Image: The L.A. Rebellion of Black Filmmakers*, eds. Allyson Nadia Field, Jan-Christopher Horak, and Jacqueline Stewart (Los Angeles: University of California Press, forthcoming 2014).

“hour glass” of *Hour Glass* denotes a slippage of time, the film’s narrative, ideological scope, and temporality is quite expansive. In its content and formal style, *Hour Glass* stands as a significant counternarrative and critique of the more contemporary sports films I discuss throughout this dissertation. As well, *Hour Glass* is significant to Gerima’s later films, functioning as a “laboratory of ideas” on double consciousness and personal transformation that become central to his later and more well-known works such as *Bush Mama* (1975) and *Sankofa* (1993).²⁵⁷

Using an experimental formal structure, *Hour Glass* is an unconventional and, perhaps, best described as oppositional sports film informed by Third Cinema practices of “cinematic resistance” and aesthetic experimentation evidenced in Cuban documentary and Brazilian Cinema Novo.²⁵⁸ Gerima was influenced by Third Cinema’s integration of film form and revolutionary ideology, a practice that “[insists] that a film’s political and ideological content always trumps the aesthetic content” whereby the act of “inserting social reality at the very core of film practice [is meant to compel] the audience to intervene in the social reality rather than passively accept it.”²⁵⁹ In *Hour Glass*, Gerima employs this Third Cinema strategy of politicization and provocation.

Gerima made *Hour Glass* at a particularly important moment in Black film history. The film emerged from a set of production practices particular to Black independent filmmakers known today as the L.A. Rebellion. The L.A. Rebellion was a key artistic movement of Black

²⁵⁷ Ibid.

²⁵⁸ Mike Murashige, “Haile Gerima and the Political Economy of Cinematic Resistance,” in *Representing Blackness: Issues in Film and Video*, ed. Valerie Smith (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 2003): 183-204.

²⁵⁹ Cynthia Young, *Soul Power: Culture, Radicalism, and the Making of a U.S. Third World Left* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2006), 218.

film artists from the late 1960s through the early 1980s that worked to produce antiracist, alternative films that could serve the Black community and narrate more “authentic” representations of Black life. This cohort, alternatively called the “Los Angeles School of Black Filmmakers,” includes, among others, Charles Burnett, Julie Dash, Larry Clark, Alile Sharon Larkin, Billy Woodberry, Jamaa Fanaka, Ben Caldwell, and Barbara McCollough.²⁶⁰ As early as 1986, Clyde Taylor, who coined the name the L.A. Rebellion, predicted: “By the turn of the next century, film historians will recognize that a decisive turning point in the development of Black cinema took place at UCLA in the early 1970s. By then, persuasive definitions of Black cinema will revolve around images encoded not by Hollywood, but within the self-understanding of the African American population.”²⁶¹

L.A. Rebellion filmmakers created characters that “personalize the broader traumas, triumphs, tragedies and anxieties peculiar to the African American experience.”²⁶² The representation of the Black collegiate athlete in Haile Gerima’s *Hour Glass* contributes to this practice of characters embodying historical subtext. The films produced by these filmmakers, Ed Guerrero argues, “have contributed to creating an emergent, decolonizing, antiracist cinema that in its images, sounds, aesthetics, and modes of production has attempted to reconstruct the world on the screen from black points of view cast in liberating image and new paradigms.”²⁶³

Reconstructing the world on screen from a Black point of view to challenge both cinema and

²⁶⁰ See Ntongela Masilela, “The Los Angeles School of Black Filmmakers” in *Black American Cinema*, ed. Manthia Diawara (New York: Routledge, 1993): 107-117.

²⁶¹ Clyde Taylor, “The L.A. Rebellion: New Spirit in American Film.” *Black Film Review* 2.2 (1986): 11, 29.

²⁶² Greg Tate, “A Word” in *Daughters of the Dust: The Making of an African American Woman’s Film*, Julie Dash (New York: The New Press, 1992), 69.

²⁶³ Guerrero, *Framing Blackness*, 137.

society's racializing projections, Gerima's *Hour Glass* reminds us that Black bodies carry within themselves history, memory, and experiential overlap that make them signify more than just themselves.

In this analysis, I explore how Gerima frames the film's protagonist's body as an individuated multiplicity. In doing so, I explain how the body invokes historical embodied memories, representing, referencing, and relating to Black sporting and non-sporting embodied acts of defiance and resistance. Focusing on the student athlete's performance of dissent in the film, I argue that the film illustrates what Stuart Hall calls the "double movement of containment and resistance" that characterizes cultural struggles among dominant and subordinate groups as an embodied practice – represented here as playing and refusing to play the game of basketball and the game of life as proscribed by transforming the body's athletic motion and contest into an embodied action of social movement and political contestation.²⁶⁴

Hour Glass begins with a provocative, low-angle, black and white shot of the film's unnamed Black student athlete standing with a noose wrapped around his neck as the resonant echo of a ticking clock films the soundscape. Like the narrator in Ralph Ellison's *Invisible Man*, who does not have a name because, as he explains: "none seemed to fit, and yet it was though I was part of all of them, had become submerged within them and lost," Gerima's student athlete functions as an individuated multiplicity.²⁶⁵ The "hanging" image and the return of the rope frame the Black body as both an "historical situation" and "a manner of doing, dramatizing, and

²⁶⁴ Stuart Hall, "Notes on Deconstructing 'The Popular,'" in *People's History and Socialist Theory*, ed. Raphael Samuel (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul): 227-241.

²⁶⁵ Ralph Ellison, *Invisible Man* (New York: Vintage, 1980), 240-241.

reproducing an historical situation.”²⁶⁶ Gerima’s protagonist stages Black history, invoking the tales of countless Black bodies that were the victims of the spectacular racialized violence and public ritual of lynching in American society. As the protagonist walks out of the frame, the film cuts to reveal players on a basketball court, moving and connecting this history of “Black bodies in pain for [white] public consumption” from the act of lynching to the basketball arena.²⁶⁷

In this basketball playing sequence, the camera is set above the rim as the film’s protagonist shoots a jump shot and sinks the basketball through the hoop. Through a series of wide-angle and close-up shots, the camera depicts a fast paced game of basketball. When the camera focuses in on the protagonist, the non-diegetic sounds shift from the noise of the ball bouncing and players shuffling up and down the court to the sound of a roaring crowd. In a low-angle shot, the protagonist is foregrounded with lights shining above him in the background. This juxtaposition of the *mise-en-scène* and sound imitates the look and feel of an athlete playing in an arena filled with raucous fans. Gerima visually depicts traditional sporting activity but disrupts the image’s meaning through a shift in the soundtrack to The Last Poet’s spoken word jazz-poetry. The Last Poets were an assemblage of musicians, poets, and activists, based out of New York, who were influenced by the Black Power movement and recorded albums of politically and socially conscious poetry accompanied by instrumentation in the 1970s.²⁶⁸

²⁶⁶ Butler, “Performative Acts and Gender Constitution: An Essay in Phenomenology and Feminist Theory,” in *Writing on the Body: Female Embodiment and Feminist Theory*, eds. Katie Conboy, Nadia Median, and Sarah Stanbury (New York: Columbia University Press, 1997), 404.

²⁶⁷ Alexander, ““Can You be Black and Look at This?,”” 79.

²⁶⁸ Mark Anthony Neale, *What the Music Said: Black Popular Music and Black Public Culture* (New York: Routledge, 1999), 51.

Within the scene's changing shots, we witness the teams' play on the court as the crowd noise is drowned out by The Last Poets. The first spoken word poem we hear is their track "Niggers Are Scared of Revolution." The Last Poets decree that: "Niggas are scared of revolution/ Niggas play football, baseball, and basketball/ While the white man is cutting off their balls."²⁶⁹ Through the juxtaposition of the sporting performance on the screen and the polemical critique on the soundtrack, Gerima demonstrates how Black music's aesthetic appeal is used to illustrate social urgency for Black bodies. Gerima's use of The Last Poets illustrates the allusions made between basketball and various forms of Black music, and the soundscape implicitly links basketball and jazz, foregrounding their mutual use of improvisation and showmanship.

"Niggers Are Scared of Revolution" critiques how Black athletes allow themselves to be exploited in professional sports and suggests that their activities on the court are counter to the revolutionary needs of the larger Black community.²⁷⁰ While basketball is a "perfect example of how African Americans took an American invention and made it their own," the film depicts how the sport has framed the Black body in society as a "player," or a willing and active participant in his own exploitation for material success and assimilation, both of which "hide

²⁶⁹ The Last Poet's "Niggas are scared of revolution" uses the linguistic figure of the "nigga" as a place to critique the social and cultural trappings of white American society that Black people have bought into, making them proponents of their own victimization. At the same time, the song explains that "Niggas are me," and thus the Last Poets' criticism of their faults recognize the shared identity. Specific to basketball from the 1970s to the contemporary moment, the notion of the "nigga" marks an important shift in basketball's relationship to Black people, an urban aesthetic, and hip-hop culture. Todd Boyd explores the rhetorical concept of the "nigga" in basketball. Evaluating the declaration made by Charles Barkley in 1992—"I'm a '90s nigga... I told you white boys you've never heard of a '90s nigga. We do what we want to do," Boyd makes the claim that "African American makes, through sports, can create a space of resistance and free expression that announces a relative notion of empowerment, while at the same time acknowledging the racial and class hierarchies that still dominate sports and society as a whole" (133). See Todd Boyd, "The Day the Niggaz Took Over: Basketball, Commodity Culture, and Black Masculinity," in *Out of Bounds: Sports, Media, and the Politics of Identity*, eds. Aaron Baker and Todd Boyd (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1997):123-142.

²⁷⁰ Neale, *What the Music Said*, 51.

from view the exploitative conditions marking racialized bodies elsewhere.”²⁷¹ Gerima uses the interplay of the athletic activity and the music to transform the body’s individuated action on the court through The Last Poet’s demand for social action, “[underscoring] the importance of the [aural] alongside the visual in black culture.”²⁷² The music demonstrates how the athlete must “think on his feet,” healing the mind/body split through the juxtaposition of image and sound. The athlete must not be “just a player” or, even worse, “get played.”

The soundtrack’s shift from The Last Poet’s “Niggers are Scared of Revolution” to “Run, Nigger” underscores this embodied reconciliation. As the game continues, the poem declares that “time is running out,” employing the repeated phrase of “tick tock” to align the athletic activity depicted with both the temporal construction of “sports time” and the need for the construction of—to invoke the late Amiri Baraka’s words— “nation time.”²⁷³ Grant Farred explains that sports time is structured by the authority of the clock where “the actual time of the game, a configuration of temporality that precisely measures literally every tick of the tock ... is not only independent of but operates distinct from ‘real time.’”²⁷⁴ Gerima disallows this exceptional space of sports time by situating the body within and of historical time. The mix of the athlete’s body and the poem’s warning that “time is running out” equates Black movement to a kind of temporal instability. Therefore, music and image combine to disorient as well as reorient the athlete’s body outside of the disciplinary logic of sports time into historical time.

²⁷¹ Gerald Early, “Why Baseball was the Black National Pastime,” in *Basketball Jones: America Above the Rim*, eds. Todd Boyd and Kenneth L. Shropshire (New York: New York University Press, 2000), 29 and Baker, *Contesting Identities*, 21.

²⁷² Ed Guerrero, “Negotiations of Ideology, Manhood, and Family in Billy Woodberry’s Bless Their Little Hearts,” *Black American Literature Forum*, 25.2 (Summer 1991), 317.

²⁷³ Amiri Baraka, “Nation Time,” March 4, 2012, <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=WxV8YO524jM>.

²⁷⁴ Grant Farred, “The Event of the Black Body at Rest: Mêlée in Motown,” *Cultural Critique* 66 (Spring 2007), 67.

When The Last Poet's express that "time's done run out" and the athlete falls to the floor, his body is halted amidst sports' demand for perpetual motion and contest, evidenced by the play continuing around him. In "The Event of the Black Body at Rest: M  lee in Motown," Grant Farred argues that the Black sporting body at rest "provokes a temporal dilemma" and has the ability to reframe sports time and white public space—such as the basketball arena—by allowing for the Black sporting body to "arrest time" and "step out" of its disciplinary logic.²⁷⁵ Specifically, Farred analyzes the event of the Black body at rest by (re)focusing on professional basketballer Ron Artest's (currently known as Metta World Peace) infamous moment of proneness that disrupted the flow of sports time during a NBA game. Farred succinctly summarizes the events of the m  lee:

During a November 2004 game with the Detroit Pistons, a rapid sequence of 'physical' events culminated with Artest charging into the stands to attack offending (and offensive) Pistons fans. With less than a minute left in the game and his Pacers leading handily, Artest, once regarded as the best defender in the National Basketball Association (NBA), committed a flagrant foul on then Pistons' center, Ben Wallace. Taking offence at the foul, Wallace shoved Artest (nothing extraordinary in an NBA game), where after Artest retreated to the scorer's table. Laying himself down, face up, on the scorer's table, Artest set the stage for a run-of-the-mill "incident" in the NBA to become an event.²⁷⁶

The event that ensued was instigated by a Piston's fan. Laying on the scorer's table, a white, male inebriated Pistons' fans threw beer on to Artest, who responded by charging into the stands

²⁷⁵ Ibid., 68.

²⁷⁶ Ibid., 60-61.

to fight the offending fans. Artest was joined by teammates, and, as Farred describes, a melee ensued and the game was ended. Farred describes the event as provoking “a ‘crisis’ about sport, about sportsmanship, about player salaries and their concomitant privileges, and race. All of which produced, in a predictable convergence of these factors, an opportunistic attack on the culture of hip-hop and its influence on the NBA.”²⁷⁷ NBA Commissioner David Stern suspended Artest for the rest of the 2004-2005 NBA season, the longest suspension ever given to a player.

Farred explains that “[at] rest, but not restful, at rest and still restive, provocative in his restfulness, Artest became the black body that was temporarily prone, not moving, the body that for a momentous second or two refuses the perpetual motion that is inveterately expected of the NBA athlete.”²⁷⁸ Farred argues that the immobility of the Black body provides a temporal opening into an event that generates its own supplementarity. His description of Artest’s body at rest can be read as an example of the Black body functioning as an individuated multiplicity. Farred connects Artest’s embodied performance to that of Smith and Carlos as well as other sporting and non-sporting figures. He argues that Artest’s body at rest shows “how resonant the memory of historic black bodies is, how easily black bodies at rest map onto each other, how ‘uneventful’ acts of defiance, decades apart recall other, more obviously political instantiations of black bodies at rest.”²⁷⁹

Therefore, when “time runs out” for the Black athlete in the film and he falls to the ground, the flow of the traditional sporting performance within the film ends. The fall functions as, as Farred describes of Artest’s actions, an event that generates its own supplementarity. *Hour*

²⁷⁷ Ibid.

²⁷⁸ Ibid., 65.

²⁷⁹ Ibid., 66.

Glass demonstrates this through a disruption in the diegesis. This disruption engenders a process whereby the student athlete “steps out” of sports time’s interplay of control and regulation. In doing so, he “steps into” a new domain of critical awareness borne out of an oppositional gaze and a new perspective on his sporting performance. This critical gaze is depicted literally as the film’s protagonist looks out into the stands and directly into the camera. From the athlete’s point of view, the camera reveals a crowd of white patrons in the stands, focusing particularly on a white couple. The film switches back and forth from black and white to color film stock as patriotic music fills the soundscape. The couple in the stands is flanked by two cut-out American flag decals. The white man wears an ivy wreath around his head while the woman adorns a crown. He gives her a torch and she gives him a scepter with an eagle head. These items represent symbols of freedom and justice. The camera zooms in on the couple as they both lift their arms up to give a “thumbs down” gesture with their hands towards the athlete. The scene ends with the camera cutting back to the athlete still sitting down on the court, rubbing his head in frustration. While, presumably, contact with another player caused the athlete to fall to the ground, Gerima depicts this moment as one that involves not only physical injury but also psychological injury for the Black student athlete.

Gerima constructs the athlete’s body as an individuated multiplicity, where his single performance plays out a broader history of Black bodies performing for the entertainment and consumption of white fans. In the scene, he shows how the racially bifurcated basketball world is divided “between ‘the black court’ and the ‘white arena.’”²⁸⁰ In this domain, the athlete “imagines the white spectators as modern-day Roman emperors” in order to historically indict

²⁸⁰ Ibid., 71.

such university basketball programs as gladiatorial institutions where many Black bodies participate in sports for the scopic, financial, and visceral pleasure of white audiences.²⁸¹

Refusing to be interpolated as a player that white spectators champion on the court and root against in real life, evidenced in the thumbs down he receives from the white couple in the stands, the student athlete figuratively “steps out” of the temporal and disciplinary logic of sports time to see the people behind the machinations of such time and control. Significantly, his moment of embodied rest engenders a profound moment of ideological un-rest within him; and it is this instant that *Hour Glass*’s student athlete’s performance of dissent begins. Here, the athlete embodies the double movement of containment and resistance and the double consciousness of being a composed yet contesting figure. Gerima thus frames his body as defiant and unruly in a way that does not reinscribe onto the Black cinematic body racist tropes but recodes these descriptions of embodiment within a new paradigm as liberating attributes.

The performance of dissent in *Hour Glass* is the refusal to play the game, and Gerima depicts this performance as not an instantaneous action for the protagonist but a process of being and becoming a politicized subject. No longer a body to be watched and consumed on the court but alienated in the classroom and society, the student athlete returns to his dorm room, resolved to seek out knowledge on Black identity and self-empowerment. In his room, he reads literature on Black liberation and post-colonial identity, including, among others, J.C. Furnas’s *Goodbye to Uncle Tom*; W.E.B. Du Bois’s *The Souls of Black Folk*; Frantz Fanon’s *Toward the African Revolution*, *Wretched of the Earth* and *Black Skin, White Masks*; Eldridge Cleaver’s *Soul on Ice*; and Immanuel Wallerstein’s *Africa and the Politics of Independence*. Gerima thus represents the athlete’s individuated performance of dissent as connected to a global, Pan-African struggle for

²⁸¹ Field, “Rebellious Unlearning.”

Black liberation, framing him as both an individual Black body and a part of the Black body politic.

The dorm room is also a space where the diegesis breaks down into dream logic, with the athlete imagining a horrific scene where a young, naked Black boy is imprisoned in a stark white room filled with liquor bottles. Covered with sheets with images of civil rights leaders including Malcolm X and Martin Luther King Jr., an elderly white woman rips the sheet portraiture off the boy and hangs them on a wall crossed out by shadows as their respective speeches “Message to the Grassroots” and “I Have a Dream” are drowned out with screams and gunfire. In his final nightmare within this dreamscape, the voice of Angela Davis is heard speaking about the events surrounding Jonathan Jackson’s armed-and-fatal attempt to free the Soledad Brothers in a hostage situation at the Marin County Courthouse in 1970. This time when the elderly white woman tries to take the sheet with Davis’s portraiture off the young boy, he jumps up and wrestles it away from her. Allyson Nadia Field explains that “the male fantasy of protecting Angela Davis... reflects the gendered politics of the Black Panthers, but also springs from the general outrage against the pervasive mistreatment of Black women.”²⁸² The agency of the young boy mirrors the awakened political consciousness of the athlete within the film’s “real-life” diegesis, illustrated through the cut to the student athlete standing between the camera and a poster-image of Davis on his wall. As well, the prison *mise-en-scène* connects Davis’s notion of the “prison industrial complex” to Gerima’s critique of the sports industrial complex. As Theresa Runstedt explains:

In the case of the sports- and prison-industrial complexes, both involve mutually favorable relationships between public/non-profit and private entities that benefit

²⁸² Ibid.

from the continual flow of bodies through the system. According to popular wisdom, sports and prisons are practical solutions to the complicated economic and social problems associated with the United States' 'surplus population'... It is no accident that these two industrial complexes arose at the very same moment that the nation began to deindustrialize (as transnational conglomerates moved their production sites overseas), the government started cutting back/privatizing social programs, and the mainstream media/entertainment industries became increasingly corporatized and consolidated.²⁸³

Therefore, the boy's successful fight against the elderly woman and the athlete's intervention between Davis and the camera is an act of resistance that critiques the ways in which Black bodies are used as labor in both prisons and sports.

Cutting back to the basketball court and the athlete in his dorm room, Gerima underscores the protagonist's double consciousness. He is internally wrestling with his two-ness here, that of being a Black athlete whose individual exceptionalism is exploited on the court and that of becoming a politicized individual attuned to the global struggles of Black liberation. Gerima's film suggests that there is no separation of the playing field from society and its social issues, meaning that the basketball court does not pass as a depoliticized space where Black labor is invisible as exploited labor. In illustrating the double-consciousness of the student athlete, *Hour Glass* also depicts the double movement of containment and resistance in society that the athlete struggles to overcome. In the hostile university setting, the film's protagonist is constricted. Through political consciousness and social awareness, he becomes mobilized to resist his literal and figurative confinement. Thus, Gerima depicts the performance of dissent in

²⁸³ Theresa Runstedt, "Child's Play?" Black Labor in the Sports-Industrial Complex," February 28, 2012, <http://www.racialicious.com/2012/02/28/childs-play-black-labor-in-the-sports-industrial-complex/>.

Hour Glass as not only a refusal to play the game of basketball but a refusal to play the game of racial injustice and inequality. The student athlete's body is transformed into a different kind of contestant within the film. No longer solely playing in futile sporting competitions for the pleasure of white audiences, the Black student athlete's body is reconfigured as an activist.

As the film continues, the student athlete turned activist packs his books and clothes in a suitcase and leaves his dorm in search of Black community. Breaking out of the constrictive white-university setting and surrounding community, his once literal investment in athletic motion and contest is transformed into an active and ideological investment in Black social movements and political contestation. On his journey, the student athlete grapples again with the noise of the ticking clock. Walking through the city with a noose tied around his neck, he finally takes hold of the rope and pulls it toward him before the camera cuts to him getting on public transportation. As he gets on a bus and travels outside of the alienating, affluent cities of Westwood and Beverly Hills, Elaine Brown's "Seize the Time," plays on the soundtrack. Brown was the first and only woman to serve as chair of the Black Panther Party. Here again, Gerima uses music as a call-and-response strategy within the film. Brown's song calls out to the student athlete—"the time is now"—to which he must respond and seize the moment. Making his way into and through the Black community, the film ends with him walking down the street before turning into an alley where he stops at an anonymous, unmarked door. Opening it and looking into the darkened space, he walks through the door, a symbolic move that the student athlete is ready to face the unknown head on. Closing it behind him, the darkness engulfs the frame and the film abruptly ends.

In obvious terms, *Hour Glass* is not a typical sports film that chronicles how a Black athlete overcomes adversity in order to win the final, championship game. The film clearly has

an allegorical structure that rejects the typical sports film structure. The narrative of triumph that underscores most sports films is interpreted quite differently in this film, where success is framed as the act of coming into political consciousness. *Hour Glass*'s atypical sports narrative is one that privileges a performance of dissent, a refusal to participate in and be an object of exploitive pleasure and entertainment. It is a refusal to discipline the body to sports time in order to "seize the time" not only for one's own self-empowerment but for the empowerment of others. Thus, the film depicts the Black sporting body as a rebellious body, one that resists control and regulation in its anti-sporting performance.

Constructing the athlete's body as an individuated multiplicity, one that speaks back to a history of lynching, Gerima presents historical figures through the body: he is both athletes and activists, underscoring the shared connection between the realms of athletics and activism. The documentary impulse, or references to real bodies and real histories, in *Hour Glass* resonate through him as well as the film's spatiotemporal setting and narrative of dissent.

Gerima was inspired to make the film after witnessing the ways in which many Black athletes at UCLA were apathetic towards their own education and the social issues facing Black people on UCLA's campus and in broader society.²⁸⁴ Gerima was influenced as well by his own alienation on campus, one that occurred simultaneously with the celebration of athletics at UCLA, particularly its men's basketball program made famous under championship-winning Coach John Wooden. *Hour Glass* fictionalizes the social and political atmosphere on campus at the time for Black students, one that was a period of unrest following many racially charged incidents on campus, including the firing of Angela Davis. Davis, who was an assistant

²⁸⁴ Haile Gerima, L.A. Rebellion: Creating a New Black Cinema (Q&A with Haile Gerima and Allyson Nadia Field, UCLA Film & Television Archive, Hammer Museum's Billy Wilder Theater, Los Angeles, California, October 23, 2011).

professor in the philosophy department at UCLA, was fired by the Board of Regents of the University of California in 1969 for her ties to the communist party, later rehired, and then fired again in 1970 for what they called her use of “inflammatory language” during her speeches. As the Bruins created a basketball dynasty based on John Wooden’s “pyramid of success,” students of color protested for the implementation of ethnic study programs and affirmative action programs to assist in enrolling students of color at the racially homogenous university. This was especially emphatic when Black students protested on campus following the murders of two Black Panthers, Alprentice “Bunchy” Carter and John Huggins, in Campbell Hall in 1969.²⁸⁵ *Hour Glass*’s narrative of a black student athlete’s resistance and defiance reflects and rearticulates the institutional history of social and political unrest at UCLA during this time.

Beyond the narrative’s resonance with the recognizable sporting and social reality at UCLA, the embodied performance of the film’s student athlete as an individuated multiplicity references and relates to Black sporting bodies and experiences of resistance and defiance. There are other connections that resonate in and beyond the film to related experiences of Black bodies performing dissent. In such, I can abstract as well as reflect on the historical embodied memories by identifying connections across Black bodies and acknowledging related histories.²⁸⁶

One local connection across bodies that can be made is to Lew Alcindor, known today as Kareem Abdul-Jabbar, who led the Bruins to three consecutive basketball national championships during the late 1960s. Abdul-Jabbar experienced success on the court and discrimination on campus and in society, leaving him feeling isolated and alienated like *Hour*

²⁸⁵ Ibid.

²⁸⁶ Ibid., 19.

Glass's student athlete. While still playing for UCLA, Abdul-Jabbar decided to boycott the 1968 Olympics, performing dissent through a refusal to play for the U.S. Men's Olympic Basketball team as a protest against racial inequality in all sectors of society.²⁸⁷ He explained his choice to *Sports Illustrated*, stating:

“I got more and more lonely and more and more hurt by all the prejudice ... I pushed to the back of my mind all the normalcies of college life and dug down deep into my black studies and religious studies. I withdrew to find myself. I made no attempt to interface. I was consumed and obsessed by my interest in the black man, in Black Power, black pride, black courage. That, for me, would suffice.”²⁸⁸

This statement mirrors the actions of the student athlete in *Hour Glass* who rejects the normal college life and setting in pursuit of his own Black identity and cultural awareness.

As well, connections can be made to basketball players beyond UCLA. For example, the two-ness experience of *Hour Glass*'s protagonist resonates with the experience of former NBA star Chet Walker, who played basketball at Bradley University in the 1960s. In his memoir *Long Time Coming: A Black Athlete's Coming of Age*, Walker describes his desperation to leave his college campus, explaining:

“Bradley had me as its employee; they had me as a commodity for as long as I was of use. If I publicly expressed my anger or desire to leave, they would destroy me.... One minute I was an All-American basketball player as full of

²⁸⁷ Dave Zirin, *A People's History of Sports in the United States: 250 Years of Politics, Protest, People, and Play* (New York: The New Press, 2008), 163.

²⁸⁸ Abdul-Jabbar quoted in Zirin, *A People's History of Sports in the United States*, 163.

myself as a powerful young man could me. But the next minute, I was reduced to the nigger in the doorway. No amount of sports heroism in America could change that. Early on I understood this doubleness and that it would never truly change for me.”²⁸⁹

Gerima depicts this doubled experience for *Hour Glass*'s protagonist in the montage of him playing and the couple in the stands, the basketball court functioning as a space where he is both celebrated and condemned. Coming to critical consciousness, the student athlete in the film is empowered to leave his affluent college campus in order for him to reconnect to the Black community. *Hour Glass* fictionalizes the social and political discontent and conditions that were the roots of dissonance for many Black athletes.

The connections between the performance of dissent in *Hour Glass* and sporting figures that performed dissent can be abstracted even further to recall the history of athletes in sports beyond basketball during this era. As stated previously, *Hour Glass*'s narrative and protagonist's embodied performance relates to the history of Olympians Smith's and Carlos's performance of dissent. Like Smith's and Carlos's actions, Gerima's student athlete's performance of dissent comes when the sporting performance ends and the Black body stages its own critical intervention. *Hour Glass* implicitly references Smith's and Carlos's historical moment of dissent, situating the Black student athlete's body as connected to and representative of Black sporting and non-sporting performances of resistance. In this regard, the student athlete's performance of dissent represents an act of resistance, the work of athletes and activist, and the spirit of athletes as activist.

Ali:

²⁸⁹ Chet Walker, quoted in Zirin, *A People's History of Sports in the United States*, 281.

Muhammad Ali's life in and out of the ring has been dramatized in several fictional and nonfictional films. For example, in *The Greatest* (Tom Gries and Monte Hellman, 1977), Ali, in a similar fashion to athletes-turned-actors Jackie Robinson and Joe Louis, plays himself on screen in the biopic based on his autobiography.²⁹⁰ Born in Louisville, Kentucky in 1942 as Cassius Marcellus Clay Jr., the "Louisville Lip's" prominence in the world of professional boxing soared after he won the light heavyweight gold medal at the 1960 Summer Olympic Games in Rome.²⁹¹ On February 25, 1964, Ali won the heavyweight title by TKO (technical knockout) against reigning champion Sonny Liston. His legendary fights include, among others, the "Rumble in the Jungle" against George Foreman in Kinshasa, Zaire (currently the Democratic Republic of the Congo) in 1974 and the "Thrilla in Manilla" against Joe Frazier in Quezon City, Philippines in 1975.

Ali is a global sports icon whose influence and humanitarian work expands beyond the world of sports.²⁹² Grant Farred describes Ali as an "inimitable figure who effortlessly deployed his ideological belief against his opponents as a critique of their investment in the American system (frequently labelling them 'Uncle Toms,' as he did his most famous opponents, Joe Frazier and George Foreman)."²⁹³ A countercultural and antiestablishment figure during the

²⁹⁰ See, Muhammad Ali with Richard Durham, *The Greatest: My Own Story* (New York: Random House, 1975).

²⁹¹ This moment in Ali's sports' history is significant and contains many historical contexts. At the 1960 games, Ali received a replacement gold-medal for his boxing championship in the 1960 Summer Olympics in Rome. Ali claims to have thrown his gold medal in the Ohio River after returning to America to only be greeted with Jim-Crow segregation policies when he was refused service at a "white's only" restaurant establishment, treated. The veracity of this tale has been disputed. However, Ali discusses the racially charged incidents leading up to him throwing away his gold medal in his autobiography. See, Muhammad Ali, "The Medal," *The Greatest*, 53-86.

²⁹² For an example, see Amani Martin's ESPN *30 for 30* short-documentary *Ali: The Mission* (2013). The documentary explores the events of 1990 when the boxer traveled to Iraq to negotiate and fight for peace and the release of U.S. civilians taken hostage by Saddam Hussein.

²⁹³ Farred, "When Kings Were (Anti-?)Colonials," 243.

politically and socially tumultuous 1960s and 1970s, Ali's political and social consciousness was translated through his discursive repertoire in and out of the boxing ring. He fused verbal dexterity and Black vernacular traditions, expressing himself unlike any boxer in history. Because of his rhetorical and physical prowess, Farred explains that Ali was ostracized in the late 1960s by the U.S. establishment:

... he presented himself not only as an extraordinarily skillful boxer, but as a politically outspoken pugilist who saw his fight extending far beyond the ring. He campaigned for both the heavyweight championship of the world and, as he frequently reminded the media in his press conferences, for 'justice' in American society.²⁹⁴

Ali was a rebellious figure who constantly drew attention to his own embodiment. Ali "proclaimed his blackness with charm and confidence that was at once confrontational and disarming."²⁹⁵ Ali's performances in and out of the ring are legendary in the world of sports, and his radical cultural and religious politics at the time (and even now) made him an exemplary, self-fashioned performer of dissent whose representation exceeds his performances in sports and popular culture's imagination.²⁹⁶ Ali thus is a politicized, anti-establishment sporting figure whose performances of dissent are refusals to play the game of being "the people's champ" as defined by others, particularly the U.S. government's national agenda to use him as a pawn in their foreign policy. Throwing America's domestic racism back in their face, he reminded the world that the Viet Cong "ain't ever called [him] nigger."

²⁹⁴ Ibid., 242.

²⁹⁵ Ibid., 243.

²⁹⁶ Ibid.

Ali's refusal to play the game challenges institutional structures of control and regulation, a performance of dissent explored in Michael Mann's sports biopic *Ali* (2001). The film chronicles the boxer's life and the changing social and political landscape from 1964 to 1974, including the deaths of Malcolm X, Martin Luther King, Jr, and the anti-war movements in the 1970s. The film's documentary impulse, or gestures toward real history, is evident in its constructed appeal as testimony to the cultural obsession with Ali's real life story. Beginning with his title winning fight against Sonny Liston (Michael Bentt), *Ali* covers the boxing champion's ascent to being "The Greatest," his religious conversion becoming a Black Muslim with the Nation of Islam, and his first three marriages to Sonji Roi (Jada Pinkett Smith), Belinda Ali (Nona Gaye), and Veronica Porche (Michael Michele). The film shows that Ali was a practicing Muslim prior to his 1964 fight against Liston. Going by the name Cassius X, he rejected his surname "Clay" in a refusal to be tied to a name given to his ancestors by their masters during slavery. The film depicts Ali's relationship with religious mentor Malcolm X (Mario Van Peebles), which became strained after Malcolm X was suspended from the Nation of Islam by the group's leader Elijah Muhammad (Albert Hall). As Farred notes, "Ali's complexity of character is especially evident in the scene after the death of his one-time mentor in the Nation of Islam, Malcolm X, where 'The Greatest' breaks down, with no small amount of self-recrimination."²⁹⁷ While the film only covers a decade of Ali's life, this moment Farred describes, among others, hints towards Ali's future dissatisfaction with the Nation of Islam's racist ideologies and his conversion to a more orthodox form of Islam, Sunni Islam, like that of Malcolm X.

²⁹⁷ Ibid., 242.

After Cassius's victory against Liston, Elijah Muhammad gives him his new name: Muhammad Ali. Ali fights Liston again and wins. Alongside the story of his famous bouts, the film shows Jabir Herbert Muhammad's (Barry Shabaka Henley), one of Elijah Muhammad's sons, role in the management of Ali's career, one that the film critiques as exploitative of Ali's faith/trust in the Nation of Islam. Three years after winning the heavyweight title, Ali refused to be drafted into the Vietnam War in 1968, which resulted in him being stripped of his title and his boxing license revoked. It would be three years before his license was reinstated. Mann shows these intervening years as ones where Ali goes through personal, professional, and financial strain. Later in the film, Ali learns that the Supreme Court has overturned his conviction and he returns to boxing to reclaim his heavyweight title. His first attempt to regain the title fails, as he loses to the then current champion Joe Frazier (James Toney), his first career loss. While he planned to fight Frazier again, Frazier loses the title to George Foreman (Charles Shufford). The film ends following his victorious defeat of Foreman in the Don King (Mykelti Williamson) promoted "Rumble in the Jungle" match in Zaire, home of "America's tyrant" and violent dictator Mubuto Sese Seko (Malick Bowens).²⁹⁸ Ali wins the hotly contested match against Foreman, knocking him out in the eighth round and regaining the title as the Heavyweight Champion of the World. The film's final image is of a triumphant Ali, standing on the ropes of the boxing ring, arms up in victory as he looks out onto a crowd of thousands of Africans cheering him on in the rain.

Ali's narrative is similar to and different from most boxing films' plots that dramatize the common storyline of the rise, fall, and redemption of the boxer. "The heroic triumph over long

²⁹⁸ Sean Kelly, *America's Tyrant: The CIA and Mobutu of Zaire* (Washington, DC: American University Press, 1993).

odds,” Aaron Baker notes, “explains in part why so many boxing films have been made, and also probably why some of the biggest male stars in the movies have played boxers.”²⁹⁹ To this point, *Ali*’s titular global sports star is played by Will Smith, the global (Black) film star. In the film, Ali’s sports career trajectory follows the typical thematic used in sports films. However, despite its triumphant end, through Ali’s hypersignification, the film constructs a performance of dissent that is counter to most sports films. Baker argues that “movies about boxing fit the tendency in the American social problem film whereby conflicts are individualized, therefore more easily overcome, and ‘never appear systemic.’”³⁰⁰ *Ali* is quite different on this front. While the film focuses on Ali as an individualized figure, it does so in a larger social landscape that conversely depicts and critiques how national conflicts become individualized rather than vice versa. The film shows how the real life “Ali drew on the political and cultural struggles of black Americans against the 1960s Establishment and adopted their critiques of society’s racism, routine degradation, and exploitation as his own.”³⁰¹ Thus, Ali in *Ali* does not obscure a focus on systemic issues effecting Black people but actually shines a light on them. The performance of dissent in the film comes from Ali’s refusal to play the game of “specialness,” where he stands in counterdistinction to those around him suffering social, racial, and political injustice. Through his actions in and out of the ring, Ali demonstrates that he will not be controlled by the whims, wishes, and wants of others.

Ali shows how Ali’s body is framed by other as and is self-fashioned as an individuated multiplicity. Through analyzing how Ali’s embodied performance in the film choreographs

²⁹⁹ Baker, *Contesting Identities*, 101.

³⁰⁰ Ibid.

³⁰¹ Farred, “When Kings Were (Anti-?)Colonials,” 243.

history, meaning how it references historical narratives concerning Black peoples' lived experiences, I explore how Ali's body resonates multiple and entangled histories and experiences. I do this through close textual analysis of the film's opening sequence and the military induction scene. In describing Ali's performances in these moments, I explain how Ali's body is a repository of critical muscle memory of Black sporting and non-sporting acts of defiance and resistance.

The film's opening montage depicts Ali's body as an individuated multiplicity within a charged racialized and racializing scenario. The first shot details that it is February 24, 1964, the night before Cassius Clay's first fight with Sonny Liston in Miami Beach. The twenty-two year old Clay jogs through the empty streets of Chicago, making his way through the nightscape of the urban city. Cutting between a nightclub performance of Sam Cooke (David Elliot) singing a medley of songs, beginning with "Twisting the Night Away," the diegetic music is carried into the shots of Clay running, twisting and turning his way on the city roads. As Clay heads down a street, a police car with two white officers inside pulls up behind him. One officer yells out: "What you running from, son?" Wearing a gray sweatshirt with a hood over his head, Clay looks slightly over his shoulder but does not turn to face the officers. As he continues to run forward, the officers get a call from their dispatch service about an actual police matter, driving off and leaving Clay to continue running. The film cuts back to Sam Cooke in the nightclub singing "(Don't Fight It), Feel It."

In the beginning of the sequence, Clay is interpolated by the police officers, fixing him between their conceptions of Black people and his reality as a Black person. Instead of seeing an Olympic Gold medalist, the cops merely see a Black man on the street. Ali's body is framed as an individuated multiplicity through the act of misrecognition. Harvey Young explains that the

creation of “*the black body*” reifies “an abstracted and imagined figure, [one that] shadows or doubles the real one.”³⁰² Ali’s body, a target of racializing projection, is an *idea* of the Black body based on the stereotype of Black people as deviant criminals. The officer’s use of the term “son” evokes the histories of Black men and boys who were hailed by white men and became a casualty of acts of misrecognition. Ali’s individual body is framed as one that is (mis)identified as “the Black body,” which is subject to policing, harassment, and racial profiling. In many ways, the rest of the film is about Ali’s deliberate choice to not be anyone’s idea of a Black body/boxer. At the same time, Ali’s refusal to be hailed by the officers by not stopping or facing them as they called out to him demonstrates how his body becomes an intentional site of resistance.

This moment of racial profiling is one of the many influences on Ali’s literal and figurative refusal to play the game. The film’s opening sequence depicts the “formative fragments” of Ali’s life, “[juxtaposing] times, places, and perspectives in a deliberately dense and initially almost opaque collage.”³⁰³ Sam Cooke’s medley continues, shifting in the diegesis from Cooke’s live performance to non-diegetic soundtrack music. The film cuts back to Clay, now in close-up, training in the gym, alternating with shots of his memory of Sonny Liston taunting him in the ring after Liston’s fight. Shots of Ali in the gym are visually distinct, shifting in speed from real time to slow motion.

The film cuts to a flashback of a young, pensive Clay watching his father, Cassius Clay, Sr. (Giancarlo Esposito), paint a commissioned portrait of a white, blonde-haired Jesus. In focusing on Clay’s incredulous gaze at the painting over his father’s shoulder, Mann underscores

³⁰² Young, *Embodying Black Experience*, 7.

³⁰³ Jonathan Rayner, *The Cinema of Michael Mann: Vice and Vindication* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2013), 141.

Ali's initial skepticism over Christianity and a white savior for Black people. The film flashes to another moment of Ali as young child on the bus with his father. Passing the bus's white patrons, the two make their way back to the "colored only" section of the bus. The camera's perspective privileges the young Clay's point-of-view. As father and son make their way to the back, Clay comes upon a man holding a newspaper with the bolded headline: "Nation Shocked at the Lynching of Chicago Youth." Clay is transfixed by the headline and stares closely at the widely circulated image of Emmett Till, a Chicago Black teenager who was murdered in August 1955 in Money, Mississippi. The camera zooms in on the image of Till's mutilated body.

In referencing the image of Till's lynched body, the film acknowledges and identifies related histories concerning Black people's lived and imagined experiences of dissent. Till's brutalized body was shown at his open-casket funeral and on the cover of *Jet* magazine. In the magazine, "[the] caption of the close-up photograph of Till's face read: 'Mutilated face of victim was left unretouched by mortician at the mother's request. She said she wanted "all the world" to witness the atrocity.'"³⁰⁴ While Till's death was a specific experience of racialized terror, his dead body functions as an individuated multiplicity, representing countless other Black men and women, children and adults, who were (and continue to be) lynched, beaten, and killed for merely being Black in the wrong place at the wrong time. Elizabeth Alexander explains that for many Black writers, including Audre Lorde, Toni Morrison, Bebe Moore Campbell, Gwendolyn Brooks, Anne Moody, Charlayne Hunter-Gault, and Shelby Steele, Till's body/story "was the basis for a rite of passage that indoctrinated these young people into understanding the vulnerability of their own black bodies, coming of age, and the way in which their fate was

³⁰⁴ Alexander, "'Can you be BLACK and Look at This?'" 87.

interchangeable with Till's."³⁰⁵ Thus, Till's body, within a larger social landscape, has functioned as a harrowing individuated multiplicity, an individual and communal image that radicalized a generation and is emblematic of narratives of trauma concerning Black people's lived experiences.

At the same time that the image of Till represents and creates the experiences of other Black bodies' fatal experiences, *Ali* also underscores how much Till's image affected the boxer. In his autobiography *The Greatest*, Ali explains how Till's murdered body deeply impacted him:

Emmett Till and I were about the same age. A week after he was murdered in Sunflower County, Mississippi, I stood on the corner with a gang of boys, looking at pictures of him in the black newspapers and magazines. In one he was laughing and happy. In the other, his head was swollen and bashed in, his eyes bulging out of their sockets and his mouth twisted and broken. His mother had done a bold thing. She refused to let him be buried until hundreds and thousands marched past his open casket in Chicago and looked down at his mutilated body. I felt a deep kinship to him when I learned he was born the same year and day that I was. My father and I talked about it at night and dramatized the crime. I couldn't get Emmett out of my mind until one evening I thought of a way to get back at white people for his death. That night I sneaked out of my house and walked down to Ronnie King's and told him my plan. It was late at night when we reached the old railroad station on Louisville's East Side. I remember a poster of a thin white man in striped pants and a top hat who pointed at us above the words UNCLE SAM WANTS YOU. We stopped and hurled stones at it, and

³⁰⁵Ibid., 87-88.

then broke into the shoeshine boy's shed and stole two iron shoe rests and took them to the railroad tracks. We planted them deep on the tracks and waited. When a big blue diesel engine came around the bend, it hit the shoe rests and pushed them nearly thirty feet before one of the wheels locked and sprang from the track. I remember the loud sound of the ties ripping up. I broke out running, Ronnie behind me, and then I looked back. I'll never forget the eyes of the man in the poster, staring at us: UNCLE SAM WANTS YOU. It took two days to get up enough nerve to go back there. A work crew was still cleaning up the debris. And the man in the poster was still pointing. I always knew that sooner or later he would confront me, and I would confront him.³⁰⁶

I quote this passage at length because the film's focus on this moment in Ali's life emphasizes the important history that Till's image embodies, one of "collective identification with trauma."³⁰⁷ The image of Till in the film's opening sequence does not explicitly state this fact. However, in a later scene in which Ali and Malcolm X are having a conversation about moments of individual and collective trauma, including the 16th Street Baptist Church bombing in Birmingham, Alabama in 1963, Ali recalls keeping the picture of Till: "I couldn't take my eyes to it. I couldn't throw it away." Alexander explains that for Ali and others like him, "Emmett Till narratives illustrate how, in order to survive, black people have paradoxically had to witness their own murder and defilement and then pass along the epic tale of violation."³⁰⁸ The passage

³⁰⁶ Muhammad Ali, *The Greatest* (New York: Random House, 1975): 34-35. This passage is also referenced in full in Elizabeth Alexander's "'Can you be BLACK and Look at This?': Reading the Rodney King Video(s)" (89). Alexander explains that not only the relationship between Clay and Till but also illustrate and articulate through the Uncle Sam Poster "a relationship between him and state power" that will be evident throughout his career (90).

³⁰⁷ Alexander, "'Can you be BLACK and Look at This?'" , 90.

³⁰⁸ Ibid.

also foreshadows Ali's encounter with state power, represented through the Uncle Sam poster, which he later confronts in his defiant act at the induction ceremony depicted in the film.

Describing the film's flashbacks, Steven Rybin explains "that the past is always part of the present experience for Ali."³⁰⁹ As the opening sequence continues, the film cuts to a scene with Malcolm X lecturing to a hall of people. Malcolm X explains that he's not a civil rights activist pushing a "we shall overcome" agenda. As he speaks to the crowd, the camera reveals Clay standing in the back of the room. Malcolm decries that the Nation of Islam does not teach religious Black people to turn the other cheek. He states: "The Honorable Elijah Muhammad teaches you to obey the law, to carry yourself in a respectable way. In a proud Afro-American way. But at the same time, we teach you if anyone puts their hands on you, brother you do your best to see that they don't put their hands on anyone else." The conversation, illustrated as an implicit dialogue between the two through the scene's shot-reverse-shot structure, underscores Ali's performance of dissent as aligned with the radical politics of the Nation of Islam.

The film depicts Ali performing dissent through his rejection of public expectations. After he becomes the heavyweight champion, a reporter asks if he's going to be the people's champ like Joe Louis. Ali rebuffs this constrictive idea, saying: "I'm definitely going to be the people's champ. I'm just not going to be the champ the way you want me to be the champ. I'm gonna be the champ the way I want to be." In shaping his own public persona based on his personal politics, Ali's performance of dissent in the film is the refusal to let others dictate his image. This notion comes to a head when Ali refuses to be inducted into the United States' armed forces.

³⁰⁹ Steven Rybin, *The Cinema of Michael Mann: Crime Auteur* (Lanham: Scarecrow Press, Inc., 2013), 175.

Throughout *Ali*, Ali is shown as a target of the U.S. government and the FBI, who considers him a Black militant because of his ties to the Nation of Islam. In the scene at the induction ceremony in Houston, Texas on April 28, 1967, Ali stands in a line with other white and Latino men facing conscription. The camera tracks across the bodies as individuals in the line step forward as their name and assigned service are called out. When the lieutenant gets to Ali, he calls him by his former name Cassius Marcellus Clay and names the U.S. Army as his designated service. The shot changes to a close-up of Ali's face as he stands completely still. The lieutenant walks over to Ali, explaining the legal consequences if he refuses to step forward. The camera stays tightly framed on Ali's face, his countenance unflinching. Asking him if he understands, Ali answers yes. The camera switches perspective, framing the cohort of conscripted servicemen from behind the lieutenant. As the lieutenant calls out Ali's name twice more, the image of the group of men fills the frame, showing Ali still and unmoving, standing with them as an American citizen with rights but not on behalf of what they embody, specifically America's choice to deny him his religious rights. Following his refusal to be inducted, the FBI arrests Ali, who is later sentenced to five years in jail and a \$10,000 fine. He is stripped of his heavyweight title and his passport is seized. The rest of the film depicts the years in which Ali fights and eventually wins an appeal of this conviction and his return to becoming the heavyweight champion.

At the induction center, Ali's refusal demonstrated "his valuation of his personal, religious beliefs over the national agenda."³¹⁰ Harvey Young brilliantly reads Ali's real-life performance in that moment as a "mastery of presentation and representation of his own body." Ali, who did not have to attend the ceremony—his feelings on the war had circulated in the press

³¹⁰ Young, *Embodying Black Experience*, 111.

for quite some time prior to the moment—did so with the purpose of responding in the manner in which he did that day. In his choice to attend the ceremony, Ali is an agent of his own exhibition. Young explains that Ali’s performance of dissent as stillness is one that reclaims and appropriates the act of stillness itself, a position that has historically disempowered the Black body. Pointing to the repeated experiences of enforced stillness across the Black body throughout history, Young states:

In order to see how enforced stillness repeats across the black body, we can think of black bodies, throughout history, shackled together, either loosely or densely packed in cargo holds; forced to stand motionless on auction blocks as they were poked, prodded, groped, and inspected by doctors and potential ‘masters’; tied to whipping posts on plantations; placed in jails and prison at disproportionate rates the postemancipation period to the present day. Ali, in the moment of the induction ceremony, reclaims the stillness of the black body and transforms it into a position of power.³¹¹

Transforming his fixed body into a position of power, Ali “proved that the black body could be a body for itself and a body for select others.”³¹² Ali’s body—in both real life and in the film representation—functions as an individuated multiplicity that reclaims stillness for Black people. In his decision to control his own body, Ali’s performance in that moment represents, references, and relates to the embodied experiences of other past Black boxers that faced containment.

In “Between the Ropes: Staging the Black Body in American Boxing,” Young describes boxers Tom Molineaux’s, Jack Johnson’s, Joe Louis’s, and Muhammad Ali’s similar

³¹¹ Ibid., 118.

³¹² Ibid.

experiences. He explains that each boxer has “a direct connection to the experience of black captivity, faced societal caricatures and stereotypes of blackness, and attempted to create a persona that differed from the prizefighters who proceeded him.”³¹³ Tom Molineaux was a Black captive who was taught to fight on his plantation and later won his freedom. He traveled to London and fought for the British heavyweight championship title in 1810 against white Englishman Tom Cribb. Molineaux lost that fight as well as the rematch. Young describes Molineaux as fighting past his prime, “setting a precedent that would be followed by a series of future black boxers including Jack Johnson and Joe Louis.”³¹⁴

Young expertly ties the complexities of Molineaux’s body to that of Jack Johnson, particularly through the rhetorics of captivity and exhibition. John “Jack” Arthur Johnson, who would become the first Black heavyweight champion, “not only became increasingly aware of his own exhibited status but also actively sported his own body for financial gain. Through performance, a performance of himself as a body on display, the prizefighter asserted control over the presentation of his body.”³¹⁵ As a boxer, Johnson would taunt his opponents in and out of the ring. Johnson’s most famous fight is against former (white) heavyweight champion Jim Jeffries. The significance of the Johnson-Jeffries fight cannot be underestimated, especially since Jeffries had previously refused to cross the color line. Taking place on the 4th of July in 1910, Johnson represented more than just a fighter attempting to win the highest boxing title. As Young explains: “To black men and women, ‘Johnson’ represented the race. Able to look through the boxer’s flashy appearance and over his penchant for white women, the black bodies

³¹³ Ibid., 24.

³¹⁴ Ibid., 85.

³¹⁵ Ibid., 87.

who watched and applauded each of the champion's victories saw themselves in his visage."³¹⁶ Therefore when Johnson went on to decisively win the match against Jeffries, his literal victory was a symbolic victory against the myth of white superiority. Shattering the myth of Black athletic inferiority, Johnson's defiant performance in the ring "told the world that the white body could no longer lay hold to claims of dominance and supremacy."³¹⁷

Young contrasts the victory of Johnson in the ring and Black people's lived experiences. After Johnson's win, race riots broke out across the United States:

Despite an earlier victory, the black body, once outside the ring, was brought back into the "ring" and again staged for the amusement of a white audience. The act of lynching created a new spectacle that served to neutralize the exploits of the black body between ropes by featuring a body hanging from one. The return of the rope marked the beginning of a second performance, a replay of the first but with a different ending.³¹⁸

Johnson's representational excess had real social implications for others and himself. In many ways because of his hypervisible and hypersexual public image, Johnson's "unforgiveable blackness" made him a target for white people.³¹⁹ His affairs with white women spotlighted his racial transgressions. In 1912, Johnson was convicted under the Mann Act, a law that makes it illegal for a woman to be taken across state lines by a man who is not her husband for the

³¹⁶ Ibid., 94.

³¹⁷ Ibid.

³¹⁸ Ibid., 99.

³¹⁹ Geoffrey C. Ward, *Unforgiveable Blackness: The Rise and Fall of Jack Johnson* (New York: Vintage, 2004).

purpose of sexual intercourse. While Johnson first fled the country, he later returned to serve out his sentence. Johnson's life experiences influenced the public image of Joe Louis.

Louis was the anti-Jack Johnson.³²⁰ His public persona was carefully crafted by his manager, African American lawyer John Roxborough. Roxborough strictly forbade many of the antics of Johnson. For example, none of his fighters could be photographed with a white woman, fix a fight, or humiliate another boxer by prolonging the fight. Young argues that Louis “embodied the promise not only of Alain Locke’s New Negro but also the integrationist future of the black body. Both envisioned a muted *blackness* in which the stereotypical excesses that were best exemplified by Johnson—gold teeth, white women, lawbreaking, and so on—were rewritten into a quieter and, perhaps, lighter blackness.”³²¹ While Louis would go on to win the title as the heavyweight champion, he maintained his conservative public image, despite a much more problematic private life that included huge debts, extramarital affairs with Black and white women, and a drug addiction problem.³²²

Young uses the lives of Molineaux (representative of the stories of captive Black boxers in general), Johnson, and Louis to explore how each boxer was acquainted with the previous one. All of these figures, Young claims, influenced Ali. In refusing to be inducted in the Vietnam War, Ali did not want to be a Black captive like Molineaux to white interests, a “Great Black White Hope” like Joe Louis, or (later) run like Johnson to avoid imprisonment; he wanted to be his own man and face his conflicts head on.³²³

³²⁰ Young, *Embodying Black Experience*, 101.

³²¹ *Ibid.*, 103-104.

³²² *Ibid.*

³²³ *Ibid.*, 111.

Ali captures the ways in which the real life body of Ali functions as an individuated multiplicity, representing and revising the experiences of past Black boxers. Connected to Johnson through their persecution, Ali, influenced by the religion and politics of the Nation of Islam, rejected the lifestyle choices of Johnson and found him to be an inadequate role model for African Americans.³²⁴ He also viewed Louis, while a “positive” Black public figure, as a man who couldn’t be himself. Young explains: “Aware of how Joe Louis’s image was crafted to respond to Johnson, Ali was determined neither to be controlled nor to have his image created by others.”³²⁵ Therefore, *Ali*’s depiction of Ali as an “athletic renegade and hero of the counter-cultural left” frames his performance of dissent in relation to the embodied experiences of past Black boxers.³²⁶ *Ali*’s defiance in the film articulates his real-life resistance, even under the threat of imprisonment, to racial inequality and religious intolerance.

The film’s documentary impulse is depicted through its biographical storyline. Portraying figures ranging from Malcolm X and Maya Angelou to Jim Brown and Sam Cooke, the film aligns Ali with related sporting and non-sporting bodies who performed dissent and were active in civil rights and Black Nationalist movements. In connecting Ali to postcolonial struggles, the film’s final scenes in Zaire, problematically, position Ali as postcolonial champion figure. *Ali* depicts the local people as enamored with the fighter as they chant: “Ali, bumaye!” While the film gestures towards the violent dictatorship of President Mobutu, it glosses over the decolonization politics of that moment, the exploitative conditions marking Black bodies globally, and Ali’s own romantic view of Africa. Notwithstanding this point, Mann provides a

³²⁴ Young explains that Ali was offered the role of playing Jack Jefferson (based on the life of Jack Johnson), which was played by James Earl Jones, in stage production of *The Great White Hope* but turned it down because he didn’t want to glorify a Black male hero figure who chased after white women (109).

³²⁵ Ibid., 109-110.

³²⁶ Farred, “When kings were (Anti-?)Colonials,” 242.

complex rendering of a sports legend. By focusing on how he controlled the staging and exhibition of his body in and out of the ring, *Ali* depicts the prizefighter's performance of dissent as a complex and nuanced refusal to play by other peoples' rules. Ali's embodied performances of dissent implicitly "speak to" the future acts of Smith and Carlos at the Olympics in 1968, which were, in part, inspired by and in solidarity with Ali's defiant actions. Smith's and Carlos's gestures of resistance against oppression explicitly "talk back to" Ali's earlier performances of dissent in and out of the ring. The dialectic between both Smith's and Carlos's actions and Ali's actions stress the ways in which past acts of resistance engender and recall similar and repeated experiences across time 1968 and 2011.

While very different films, both *Hour Glass* and *Ali* underscore the ways in which sports films contain a documentary impulse at both the level of the narrative and embodied performance. Both films' narratives of dissent choreograph history and release into hermeneutical play the countless Black bodies and histories of defiance and resistance within and beyond the world of sports. The student athlete in *Hour Glass* and Ali in *Ali* both function as individuated multiplicities from the perspective of others and through deliberate self-fashioning, enacting their own personal and political freedom in sports and society. They both construct performances of dissent as refusals to play the game, refusals to perform. In *Hour Glass*, this refusal comes from an anti-sporting performance. In *Ali*, this refusal comes from a performance of stillness. Therefore unlike typical sports films that couch narratives of dissent in stories of "Black first" and triumphant tales of overcoming racism through hard work on and off the playing field, *Hour Glass* and *Ali* are two rare examples of sports films that are truly about Black resistance to oppression in sports and society.

Chapter Four:

Performing Gendered Visibility

Throughout this dissertation, I focus my analysis of Black sporting bodies almost exclusively on representations of male athletes. Of the vast number of sports films that have been made, only a fraction of those have been about Black sporting figures, with a nominal few of those centralizing the experiences of Black women in sports.³²⁷ Therefore in the previous chapters, my emphasis on representations of Black male sporting bodies' performing triumph, defeat, and dissent reflects the ways in which sports and sports films recreate and reaffirm not only racial but also gender hierarchies in popular culture. Broadcast media values and privileges men's sporting experiences. Sports plays a significant role in defining masculinity and commodifying the male body, which in "consumer capitalism and postmodern culture ... has become an increasingly visible locus of desire."³²⁸ These masculinist connotations underscore how sports "has been not only a site of male recreation and competition but also an arena in which boys and men learn, display, and prove their masculine power. In this capacity, the sports world has served as a major proving ground for masculinity with female athletes often perceived as unwelcome intruders."³²⁹ The media focuses disproportionately on the athletic exploits of

³²⁷ Using Harvey Zuker and Lawrence J. Babich's *Sports Films: A Complete Reference* (Jefferson: McFarland, 1987), Aaron Baker claims that there have been approximately two thousand sports films since the 1980s and forty more made-for-television, video, DVD, or theatrical sports films. Documentaries are not included in this total (*Contesting Identities*, 6). Since Baker's book, there have been over a dozen more sports films. Zuker and Babich take a much more inclusive look at films that involve sports, D. Pearson's, R. Curtis's, C. Haney's, and J. Zhang's selection criteria was much more exclusive, only including sound films, films that received general distribution in the U.S, and were produced in the U.S. in their grand total of sports films. They suggest that there are a total of 590 sports films from 1930-1995. Pearson, Demetrius W., et al., "Sport Films: Social Dimensions Over Time, 1930-1995," *Journal of Sport and Social Issues* 22.4 (2003). 149-150.

³²⁸ Miller, *Sportsex*, 16.

³²⁹ Cahn and O'Reilly, "Introduction," xii.

male athletes who dominate both sports and sports media coverage at the amateur and professional levels. Women are often not seen as participants but as bystanders in the world of sports. For example, when sports appear on television, “masculinized viewing structures” position women as either absent (no coverage of their games or they take place on ancillary cable networks) or as sideline figures, such as cheerleaders, wives, or girlfriends.³³⁰ As Deborah Tudor explains: “This creation of a physically inactive spectating position for women speaks about the role of women in contemporary sports and informs sports fiction films both in terms of narrative and visual organization.”³³¹

While there are notable exceptions, a large amount of contemporary sports studies scholarship reproduces this imbalance by focusing significantly on white male athletes and then on Black male athletes.³³² For example, legendary sports icon Michael Jordan’s sporting, cultural, and corporate significance is the subject of several articles, essays, and books.³³³ While Jordan, in relation to other male athletes, is in a league of his own, Black male bodies in general stand-in as representative bodies for broader discussions of sports and race, eclipsing the Black

³³⁰ Tudor, *Hollywood’s Vision of Team Sports*, 82.

³³¹ *Ibid.*, 84.

³³² Black women are rarely taken up as major subjects of focus within sport studies. However, there are contemporary Black female athletes, including Venus and Serena Williams and Sheryl Swoopes, who have been the subject of various articles. All three female athletes are groundbreaking players within their sports (tennis and basketball, respectively) whose sporting celebrity, talent, and controversy bring to forefront the complex and contradictory ways in which Black female bodies are understood within sports and American society. For examples, see Nancy E. Spencer, “Sister Act VI: Venus and Serena Williams at Indian Wells: ‘Sincere Fictions’ and White Racism,” in *Commodified and Criminalized: New Racism and African American in Contemporary Sport*, eds. Richard C. King and David J. Leonard (New York: Rowan & Littlefield, Publishers): 41-68 and Samantha King, “Contesting the Closet: Sheryl Swoopes, Racialized Sexuality, and Media Culture” in *Commodified and Criminalized: New Racism and African American in Contemporary Sport*, eds. Richard C. King and David J. Leonard (New York: Rowan & Littlefield, Publishers): 203-222.

³³³ For example, Jordan is the subject of several sport documentaries See David L. Andrews, ed. *Michael Jordan, Inc.: Corporate Sport, Media Culture, and Late Modern America* (New York: State University Press, 2001).

female subject and rendering her experiences invisible.³³⁴ In scholarship that does actually address issues of women in sports, scholars' accounts of "white, middle-class, heterosexual, and able-bodied women's experiences are falsely universalized as representative of all women's experiences within the sports world."³³⁵ Sheila Scranton and Anne Flintoff note that "[much] of the current discourses about women and sport remains ethnocentric and is viewed through a 'gendered lens.'"³³⁶ They explain that "[there] is little work that could be defined as offering a black feminist perspective on sport."³³⁷ As sports sociologist Yevonne Smith argues, "[these] omissions and biases continue to reinforce historical patterns of silence and contribute to the invisibility of women of color."³³⁸ Smith and other scholars including Ramona J. Bell, Nancy Spencer, and Linda D. Williams offer a Black feminist perspective and intersectional analysis to sports history. These sports studies scholars remind us—to paraphrase the title of *But Some of*

³³⁴ David J. Leonard and C. Richard King, "Celebrities, Commodities, and Criminals: African American Athletes and the Racial Politics of Culture" in *Commodified and Criminalized: New Racism and African American in Contemporary Sport*, eds. Richard C. King and David J. Leonard (New York: Rowan & Littlefield, Publishers), 8.

³³⁵ Hall, *Feminism and Sporting Bodies*, 44. For example of the small amount of sport studies scholarship on Black female athletes, see: Ramona J. Bell, "Competing Identities: Representations of the Black Female Sporting Body from 1960 to the Present," PhD Dissertation, Bowling Green State University, 2008; Yevonne Smith, "Women of Color in Society and Sport," *Quest* 44.2 (1992): 230-245; Nancy Spencer, "From 'Child's Play' to 'Party Crasher': Venus Williams, Racism, and Professional Women's Tennis," in *Sport Stars: The Cultural Politics of Sport Celebrity*, eds. David L. Andrews and Steven J. Jackson (London: Routledge, 2001):87-10; and Linda D. Williams, "Sportswomen in Black and White: Sports History From An Afro-American Perspective," in *Women, Media, and Sports: Challenging Gender Values*, ed. Pamela J. Creedon (Thousand Oaks: Sage Publications, 1994), 45-66.

³³⁶ Anne Flintoff and Sheila Scranton, "Sport Feminism: The Contribution of Feminist Thought to our Understandings of Gender and Sport," in *Gender and Sport: A Reader*, eds. Anne Flintoff and Sheila Scranton (New York: Routledge: 2002), 38.

³³⁷ *Ibid.*

³³⁸ Yevonne Smith, "Women of Color in Society and Sport," 230. Also see Jennifer E. Bruening, "Gender and Racial Analysis in Sport: Are All the Women White and All the Blacks Men?," *Quest* 57.3 (2005): 330-349.

Us Are Brave—that not all the sporting women are white and not all the Black sporting bodies are men.³³⁹

Sports films reproduce the gendered and racialized imbalance that marks sports as a social activity and cultural practice of “-isms.” Drawing on real sports figures and contests that circulate within the national imaginary, sports films focus on the homosocial world of men’s sports while denying the explicit homoeroticism of athletic activities in both society and film. In these male sports films, women function as subordinate or marginal figures. However since the 1990s, contemporary sports films—such as *A League of their Own* (Penny Marshall, 1992), *Girlfight* (Karyn Kusama, 2000), *Bend it Like Beckham* (Gurinder Chadham, 2002), *Blue Crush* (John Stockwell, 2002), *Million Dollar Baby* (Clint Eastwood, 2004), and *Whip-It* (Drew Barrymore, 2009)—have focused on the sporting lives and experiences of girls and women.³⁴⁰ Despite this increase, the representation of the cinematic Black female sporting body is miniscule in relation to her white female and Black male athlete counterparts.

In this chapter, I analyze the documentary impulse, or gestures to real bodies and real histories, in sports films about performances of gendered visibility, specifically looking at the ways in which Black women attempt to render their bodies visible within sporting arenas. Providing an historical contextualization of (white) women’s participation in sports in the United States, I address the issues surrounding embodiment that women’s athletic prowess engendered in American society. Using an intersectional analysis, I locate within this history the marginalization of Black women’s sporting experiences. Women’s participation in sports

³³⁹ Gloria T. Hull, Patricia Bell Scott, and Barbara Smith, eds., *All the Women Are White, All the Blacks Are Men, But Some of Us Are Brave* (New York, The Feminist Press at The City University of New York, 1982).

³⁴⁰ Jean O’Reilly, “The Women’s Sports Film as the New Melodrama,” in *Women and Sports in the United States: A Documentary Reader*, eds. Susan K. Cahn and Jean O’Reilly (Boston: Northeastern University Press, 2007), 283.

informs contemporary Hollywood's representation of women in sports films and the women's sports film. I examine sports films' gendered representations, explaining how hegemonic constructions of masculinity and femininity are used to reinforce patriarchy and how alternative constructions of "female masculinity" challenge male dominance and white superiority.³⁴¹ In focusing on women's representation, I explore the paradox of sports films' reliance on historical realism to address the invisibility and visibility, wherein absence speaks of a presence, of Black women's experiences within historical-based films about women's participation in sports, looking specifically at the film *A League of Their Own*.

I conclude this chapter with an analysis of two of the rare sports films about Black women: Gina Prince-Bythewood's *Love and Basketball* (2000) and Jesse Vaughan's *Juwanna Mann* (2002). *Love and Basketball* is a romantic sports drama about a tough-nosed Black female baller who attempts to navigate her love of basketball and her desire for the basketball loving boy next door. *Juwanna Mann* is a sports comedy about how a male professional basketball player, whose unsportsmanlike conduct gets him kicked out of the men's league, pretends to be a woman in order to play in the women's professional basketball league. In both films, I address how Black female visibility in sports is performed and analyze how discourses around femininity and masculinity construct panic around Black women's athletic bodies. In addressing how both protagonists "play like a man," I explore the "gender trouble" Black female sporting bodies' performances on the court engender in both the films.³⁴² Moreover, I analyze how both films' protagonists are framed as individuated multiplicities and evaluate both films' documentary impulse at both the level of the narrative and embodied performance. The notion of individuated

³⁴¹ Judith Halberstam, *Female Masculinity* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1998).

³⁴² I mobilize Judith Butler's concept of "gender trouble." See Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (New York: Routledge, 1990).

multiplicity functions differently when considering performances of gendered visibility. In this sense, Black female athletes dealing with “playing like a man” represent a gendered individuated multiplicity whereby the referenced and related bodies sporting and non-sporting bodies make legible gender transitivity and variable/alternative embodied histories and experiences. By acknowledging related sporting histories and experiences, I explore how both protagonists’ bodies’ represent, reference, and relate to the politics of respectability that initially framed Black women’s visibility in the Women’s National Basketball Association (WNBA).

Women in Sports History:

In recent years, feminist scholars have made important critical interventions into sports studies. Focusing on the history of women in sports, scholars including Cheryl Cole (1993), Jean O’Reilly (2007), Susan K. Cahn (1998, 2007), Pamela J. Creedon (1994), Susan Birrell (2000), Mary G. McDonald (2000), and M. Anne Hall (1996) have explored the social, cultural, and political factors related to women’s athletic achievement.³⁴³ For example, Cahn and O’Reilly’s *Women and Sports in the United States: A Documentary History* provides a 125-year chronological timeline of U.S. women’s pioneering achievements in sports, from 1882 when Boston’s YWCA held the first athletic games for women to 2005 when the U.S. Supreme Court ruled in favor of “whistleblowers who speak out against discrimination in school sports.”³⁴⁴ For

³⁴³ See Susan K. Cahn, *Coming on Strong: Gender and Sexuality in Twentieth-Century Sport* (Boston: Harvard University Press, 1998); Cheryl Cole, *Women in Sports: Issues and Controversies* (Thousand Oaks: Sage Publications, 1993); Pamela J. Creedon *Women, Media, and Sport: Challenging Gender Values* (Thousand Oaks: Sade Publications, 1994); M. Ann Hall, *Feminism and Sporting Bodies: Essays on Theory and Practice* (Champaign: Human Kinetics, 1996); Susan Birrell and Mary G. McDonald, eds., *Reading Sport: Critical Essays on Power and Representation* (Boston: Northeastern University Press, 2000); and Susan K. Cahn and Jean O’Reilly, eds. *Women and Sports in the United States: A Documentary History* (Boston: Northeastern University Press, 2007).

³⁴⁴ Susan K. Cahn and Jean O’Reilly, “Timeline: 125 Years of U.S. Women in Sports” in *Women and Sports in the United States: A Documentary History*, eds. Susan K. Cahn and Jean O’Reilly (Boston: Northeastern University

the above scholars, recuperating the history of women in sports is about challenging the “historical understanding of the gendering of sport, and, in particular women’s struggle to negotiate their contested place in the sports world.”³⁴⁵

There is a long and entrenched history of marginalization related to women’s participation in sports. One of the main factors that influenced women’s prohibition from and limited participation in sports and, thus, sports history was that sports for centuries have been thought to be the domain of men and athleticism to be an expression of masculinity. Women desiring to participate in sports were actively discouraged from athletic involvement by many men and women who thought that “women could succeed only by sacrificing what was seen as their natural femininity for masculine qualities of body and mind.”³⁴⁶ For example, in the nineteenth- and early twentieth-century, “health cautions around physical activity of white, middle- and upper-class, heterosexual women” limited female participation in sports.³⁴⁷ Women were warned that vigorous or strenuous exercise and athletic activity “exposed the female body to public view and damaged a woman’s reproductive organs, possibly ruining her chances for future motherhood.”³⁴⁸ It was commonly thought “that aggressively physical competition

Press, 2007): xxviii-xxx. This compiled timeline offers an impressive account of pioneers of women in sport. African American women register on the timeline in 1929 with Tuskegee Institute forming one of the first women’s college track teams.

³⁴⁵ Hall, 30.

³⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, xv.

³⁴⁷ Dayna B. Daniels, “You Throw Like a Girl: Sports and Misogyny on the Silver Screen” in *All-Stars & Movie Stars: Sports in Film & History*, eds. Ron Briley, Michael K. Schoenecke, and Deborah A. Carmichael (Lexington: The University of Kentucky Press, 2008), 105.

³⁴⁸ Cahn and O’Reilly, “Introduction,” xv.

unleashed physical and emotional passions that put girls at risk of bodily injury, sexual impropriety, and nervous collapse.”³⁴⁹

Throughout the early twentieth-century, women had more opportunities for recreation because of the increased efforts of physical educators, but women often played games with modified rules to “reduce physical strain and contain competitive impulses.”³⁵⁰ While women’s participation in sports increased throughout the century, the fear over women’s active bodies continued to limit women’s athletic opportunities. Cahn and O’Reilly argue that institutional policies of restricted access, “although not universally adopted, predominated until the 1960s, limiting girls’ and women’s competitive opportunities and sending a message that ‘real sport’ was an activity suited only to boys and men.”³⁵¹ For example in 1928, the International Olympic Committee (IOC) only allowed women to compete in track events of 200-meters or less, barring them from competing in long-distance running. It was not until 1960 that women were allowed to compete in the 800-meter race and not until 1984 that the IOC finally allowed women to compete in the marathon.³⁵²

Notwithstanding the forces for and against women’s participation in sports and the effects on women’s embodied performances, Title IX of the 1972 Education Amendment Act changed the landscape for women in sports. This federal civil rights law was a watershed moment in women’s sport history that effected women’s participation, performance, and embodied agency

³⁴⁹ Ibid.

³⁵⁰ Ibid.

³⁵¹ Ibid.

³⁵² Fear of women running has produced several myths about women’s bodily health. For example, it was believed that women’s uterus would fall out if they ran short or long distances. As a marathon runner, I can attest that this is false.

in the realm of athletics. Title IX made gender discrimination in private and public educational institutions that received federal aid from the government illegal. While not a law about gender equity in sports, its unanticipated impact on athletics was profound, resulting in a surge of girls and women participating in sports at all levels of play. “Today, although few schools have reached parity,” Cahn and O’Reilly explain, “girls and women constitute about forty percent of college athletes.”³⁵³

This cursory history of women in sports can be more accurately thought of as the history of middle and upper-class, heterosexual, white women in sports. According to Dayna B. Daniels, “[the] sports activities of poor and working-class women, certain groups of immigrants, nonwhite, aboriginal, and lesbian women are not included in mainstream historical records, newsreels, or the collective memories of most North Americans.”³⁵⁴ Linda D. Williams explains that the historical omission of Black female athletes in sports history creates gaps in understanding Black women’s experiences in relation to leisure physical activity and competitive sports. In “Sportswomen in Black and White: Sports History From an Afro-American Perspective,” Williams argues that the “the inattention to and disregard of the black female athlete by white culture has resulted in a distorted picture, which suggests that the black sportswoman’s experience in sport paralleled that of her white sisters.”³⁵⁵ Take for example a

³⁵³ Cahn and O’Reilly, “Introduction,” xvii. Cahn and O’Reilly explain that the legal validity of Title IX has been challenged on several occasion, twice in the 1990s when Congress had two hearings to discuss the measure, “questioning whether it had caused inadvertent discrimination against male athletes” (xvii). In addition, they point out that George W. Bush held a presidential panel to evaluate Title IX, “expressing concern that equality for women was reducing opportunities and damaging the psyches of boys and men” (xvii)

³⁵⁴ Ibid., 105.

³⁵⁵ Linda D. Williams, “Sportswomen in Black and White: Sports History From An Afro-American Perspective,” in *Women, Media, and Sports: Challenging Gender Values*, ed. Pamela J. Creedon (Thousand Oaks: Sage Publications, 1994), 47. This is not to say that sports history has forgotten all Black female athletes. Athletes including track phenom Wilma Rudolph, tennis legend Althea Gibson, and more contemporary stars including Florence Griffith Joyner, Jackie Joyner-Kersey, Venus and Serena Williams, Sheryl Swoopes, and Brittney Griner are well known.

sport such as track. For white women, in the 1920s and early 1930s, track athletics were very popular. However, by the 1950s, “the sport had a reputation as a ‘masculine’ endeavor unsuited to feminine athletes.”³⁵⁶ In other words, white women stopped running. They deemed the sport no longer socially suitable for them. In her chapter “‘Cinderellas’ of Sport: Black Women in Track and Field,” Susan Cahn explains that Black women withstood the ridicule of the masses, including assaults that winning track Olympians were not biologically female, and competed with great success.³⁵⁷ Cahn offers an important history on Black women’s participation and rise to national and international excellence in the sport, casting their experiences in the broader social-cultural and racial climate of the time. Cahn argues that:

The accomplishments of such Olympians as Alice Coachman, Mae Faggs, or Wilma Rudolph also demonstrated to the public that African American women could excel in a nontraditional yet valued arena of American culture. However viewed through the lens of commonplace racial prejudices, African American women’s achievement in a “mannish” sport also reinforced disparaging stereotypes of black women as less woman or feminine than white women.³⁵⁸

However, these exceptional athletes are also the exception to the rule. There has been very little work on sports outside of track and field and on non-“Black-first” figures and sporting pioneers. There is a need for sports studies scholarship to recuperate histories of everyday Black girls and women’s participation in competitive physical activity on both amateur and professional levels.

³⁵⁶ Cahn, *Coming on Strong*, 111.

³⁵⁷ Ibid. Cahn explains that in 1967 the IOC required mandatory sex checks and chromosome testing for women athletes. They feared that some women were not biologically “normal” women but hermaphrodites. The fears over women’s superior athleticism continue in the contemporary moment. For example, South African 800-meter runner Mokgadi Caster Semenya was the subject of public speculation and institutional sanctions following her decisive victory at the 2009 World Championships where she was subjected to gender testing. Semenya’s fellow competitors made racist and sexist statements about her after the meet, saying she was not a woman and it was unfair for them to have to race against her. For a long period, Semenya could not race while the results of gender test were being calculated.

³⁵⁸ Ibid., 112.

Similar to the ways in which white women's athletic prowess was read as deviant and "mannish," Cahn points to the particular racial politics surrounding Black women's performance. Specific to track, this historical narrative of racialized discourses of femininity continues to effect Black women athletes today. Toby Miller explains:

Although the Olympic triumphs of African American female sprinters since the 1960s have given them (quadrennial) national attention, they have suffered sexist and racist depictions in the media. For when women are given the mantle of national sporting symbolism, it is always overdetermined."³⁵⁹

Miller highlights how Black women's bodies are hypersignifiers of meaning. As athletes, Black women's bodies are overdetermined, functioning in society as individuated multiplicities that stand in for more than just themselves and give "expression to more than one need or desire."³⁶⁰

Thus, the history of Black women's participation in sports requires intersectional analysis in dominant (white) women's sports histories. In "Women of Color in Society and Sport," Yevonne Smith discusses the lack of historical analysis and womanist/feminist perspectives of women of color in sports and society.³⁶¹ Smith offers an important critique of the "exclusionary practices of white women scholars and of theory that treats [women of color] as invisible or as nonwomen; and that critical, relational analyses of the intersections of gender, race, and class are necessary."³⁶² Smith and other scholars, including M. Ann Hall and Susan Birrell, bring into critical focus the need for intersectional analysis within sports studies, one that recognizes that

³⁵⁹ Miller, *Sportsex*, 34.

³⁶⁰ *Oxford English Dictionary*, adj. "overdetermined," <http://www.oed.com>.

³⁶¹ Smith, "Women of Color in Society and Sport," 246.

³⁶² Hall, *Feminism and Sporting Bodies*, 43.

“[race] does not merely make the experiences of women’s oppression greater; rather it qualitatively changes the nature of that subordination.”³⁶³ “The interlocking oppressions of African American women,” Ramona J. Bell argues, “further complicate the [understanding of] the female body as a site of competing ideologies.”³⁶⁴

In “Competing Identities: Representations of the Black Female Sporting Body from 1960 to the Present,” Bell provides an important example of an intersectional analysis on Black female athlete’s representation. Bell explores the complex race and gender social identities of three athletes—track and field star Wilma Rudolph; Olympic bronze medal figure skater Debi Thomas; and tennis sensation Serena Williams. Using these figures as case studies, Bell argues that representations of Black female sporting bodies “are sites of ideological conflict over the construction of social identities between dominant and historically marginalized groups: African American women.”³⁶⁵ Bell aptly cites the work of Black feminist theorists, including bell hooks, Patricia Hill Collins, Darlene Clark Hines, and Beverly Guy Shefthall, who “analyze the body as text and a site of political struggle” and “acknowledge the profound importance of the story the bodies of African American women tell about historic and cultural realities.”³⁶⁶ In doing so, Bell addresses how compounding factors of race, gender, class, citizenship, and sexuality affect the cultural messages signified by Black female athletes.

This chapter mobilizes the intersectional work of Bell to address how Black women’s bodies are a complex site of signification. Similar to Bell’s analysis of media representations (e.g. television, magazines, and newspapers) of Black female athletes, I take up and center the

³⁶³ Ibid., 44.

³⁶⁴ Bell, “Competing Identities,” 11.

³⁶⁵ Ibid., 1.

³⁶⁶ Ibid., 5.

bodies of these marginalized women in sports films in relation to broader sociocultural and historical narratives. In doing so, I read how fictional Black female sporting bodies' performances of visibility—predicated on the ways in which sports, society, and scholarship have rendered them invisible—reveal historical narratives concerning Black women's lived and imagined experiences.

Gender Representation in Sport Films and Women's Sport Films:

The history of women's participation in sports has shaped and influenced gender representation in sports films. As I have explained above, sports are traditionally considered the domain of men where dominant forms of masculinity are portrayed and men's sporting performances are considered the standard. Dayna B. Daniels explains that this gendered conceptualization of sports has produced “[incorrect] beliefs about the histories of games and sports, and the invisibility of girls and women as participants, [and] have created a foundation of myths upon which the contemporary culture of sports and the construction of masculinity have been built.”³⁶⁷ Popular culture reproduces this gendered imbalance, and sports films' that represent women as athletes depict the unsteady tensions related to the history of women's complicated participation in the male dominated athletic world.

“Within the utopian narrative typical of American cinema,” Aaron Baker argues, “one particular version of ideal masculinity has been represented repeatedly in sports films.”³⁶⁸ Baker describes this version of ideal masculinity as having the qualities of the heroic individual who is able to overcome obstacles and achieve success through determination, self-reliance, and hard

³⁶⁷ Daniels, “You Throw Like a Girl,” 105.

³⁶⁸ Baker, *Contesting Identities*, 49.

work.³⁶⁹ In the construction of the male athlete as hero, Baker explains that heterosexuality functions as an extension of this ideal masculinity. Male athletes are supposed to be skilled in their sport and in control of women at all times. This control is supposed to deny the implicit and explicit homoeroticism of sports. “To acknowledge homoeroticism within the context of athletic activities,” Baker states, “would call the very idea of masculinity based on heterosexuality into question.”³⁷⁰ In fact, many sports films, including *Slap Shot* (George Roy Hill, 1977), *Bull Durham* (Ron Shelton, 1988), and *Varsity Blues* (Brian Robbins, 1999), use derogatory and homophobic language to put down and motivate male athletes.³⁷¹

Gender conflict in sports films is reinforced through men’s interaction with women. Women play supplemental characters, including “supportive wives and girlfriends (*Rocky*, 1976; *Bull Durham*, 1988) and ineffective obstacles to sporting achievement, such as the unscrupulous female owner, coach/agent (*Major League*, 1989) or the unsupportive love interest who must be won over or discarded (*Damn Yankees*, 1958).”³⁷² To this degree, women have subordinated positions within the storyline and are often made to be invisible or silent characters. Men are given visual and narrative authority in sports films. “The competitive opportunities offered to male athletes in most sports films,” Baker argues, is used to “justify patriarchal authority by naturalizing the idea of men as more assertive and determining.”³⁷³ In this framework, men are the only legitimate participants in sports. However, more contemporary sports films about

³⁶⁹ Ibid.

³⁷⁰ Ibid., 50.

³⁷¹ Daniels, “You Throw Like a Girl,” 123-124.

³⁷² Jean O’Reilly, “The Women’s Sports Film as the New Melodrama,” 285.

³⁷³ Baker, *Contesting Identities*, 50.

women challenge the notions that “to be an athlete is to be masculine and heterosexual” and “to be feminine and/or homosexual is antithetical to being an athlete.”³⁷⁴

While women play mostly a secondary role in most sports films, there are several films that depict female athletes. At times, she is represented as the only woman on a male team. Sports films examples include, among others: female ice-skater turned hockey player in *Mighty Ducks* (Stephen Hereken, 1992); female juvenile delinquent turned soccer star in *The Big Green* (Holly Goldberg Sloan, 1995); female football player turned cheerleader turned back to football player in *Little Giants* (Duwayne Durham, 1994); female soccer player turned football kicker in *Necessary Roughness* (Stan Dragoti, 1991); and female soccer player turned Title IX advocate in *Gracie* (Davis Guggenheim, 2007). Other times, she is represented in relation to a male love interest who also plays sports. Examples include, among others, the tennis romantic drama *Wimbledon* (Richard Loncraine, 2004) and the Olympic ice-skating romantic dramedy *The Cutting Edge* (Paul Michael Glasser, 1992). On the rare occasion, she is the coach of an all-male team, as seen in *Wildcats* (Micheal Ritchie, 1986), *Eddie* (Steve Rash, 1996), and *Sunset Park* (Steve Gomer, 1996).

However, women as the central figures within sports film narratives mark an important shift in the ways in which gender conflicts around femininity and masculinity play out in film. In films such as *Personal Best* (Robert Towne, 1982), issues of women’s sexuality are also negotiated in sports, and lesbian identities are, problematically, represented. Women’s sports films, or films about female athletes and their sporting achievements, Baker argues, often “center on how women can participate in sports yet retain a femininity defined primarily by their support

³⁷⁴ Daniels, “You Throw Like a Girl,” 114.

for the needs of others, especially men and children.”³⁷⁵ Thus, women’s athletic prowess, which is coded as masculine, has to be negotiated with their femininity in order to define what a successful sportswoman looks like.

In “The Women’s Sports Film as the New Melodrama,” Jean O’Reilly argues that while there has been a rise of women-centered sports films since the early 1990s, these films “about strong women reveal a disturbing return to the stifling conventions of a much older, well-established Hollywood genre, the melodrama.”³⁷⁶ Citing examples including *A League of Their Own*, *Girlfight*, *Bend it Like Beckham*, *Blue Crush*, and *Million Dollar Baby*, O’Reilly explains that these films “contain subversive messages about the place of women in the sports arena and in the world at large.”³⁷⁷ Narratives of sacrifice, repression, and excess similar to those in classic melodrama’s such as *Stella Dallas* (King Vidor, 1937) and *All That Heaven Allows* (Douglas Sirk, 1955) are modernized in women’s sports films where:

...gender conflict is the biggest issue, and female protagonist must often struggle simply to defend their desire to play sports, to be ‘mannish,’ in the dominant male society. The very fact of playing sports thus provides the main social and sexual transgression in the melodramatic plot structure that many of these films adopt.³⁷⁸

Baker argues that women’s sports films “operate inside what Judith Butler calls ‘the limits of discursive analysis of gender [that] presupposes and preempt the possibilities of imaginable and

³⁷⁵ Baker, *Contesting Identities*, 77.

³⁷⁶ Jean O’Reilly, “The Women’s Sports Film as the New Melodrama,” 284.

³⁷⁷ Ibid.

³⁷⁸ Ibid., 285-286.

realizable gender configurations within culture.”³⁷⁹ However, there are important examples that push back against the delimitations of fixed gender categories even if they end up being recuperated within the unstable binary structures of hegemonic gender configurations.

Karyn Kusama’s boxing film *Girlfight* is one exceptional example. *Girlfight* is the tale of Diana Guzmán (Michele Rodríguez), a fierce Latina teenage girl who turns to boxing as way to empower her both physically and emotionally. Diana lives with her brother Tiny (Ray Santiago) and her abusive father Sandro (Paul Calderon) who forces Tiny to take boxing lessons even though he dislikes it. Diana wants to take boxing lessons also but her father refuses to help her out financially. As well, her brother’s trainer Hector (Jaime Tirelli) is reluctant to work with her because she is a girl. Still, she persuades Hector to train her, and behind the back of their father, Tiny offers Diana the money their father gives him to pay for her lessons. At the gym, Diana learns discipline and flourishes as boxer. She “trains and transforms herself from a ‘nobody,’ a girl, to a successful and competitive gender-blind boxer.”³⁸⁰ Even when her choice to box puts into flux her burgeoning relationship with another male boxer Adrien (Santiago Douglas), who she fights and beats at the film’s end in an amateur tournament, Diana is depicted as empowered and successful in and out of the ring.

In her analysis on the spectatorial positions that *Girlfight* creates, Camilla Fojas states:

Diana gains the powerful position of physical, symbolic, and cinematic mastery: she wins the final boxing bout against a man, gains social position, and fully asserts her centrality as the bearer of the cinematic gaze. Yet this success is

³⁷⁹ Baker, *Contesting Identities*, 77.

³⁸⁰ Camilla Fojas, “Sports of Spectatorship: Boxing Women of Color in *Girlfight* and Beyond,” *Cinema Journal* 49.1 (Fall 2009), 111.

bound up with ambivalence about women of color in positions of mastery, an ambivalence that remains unresolved.³⁸¹

Fojas explains that this ambivalence comes from the fact that the film is not able to dismiss the cultural anxiety over women in boxing, “the irreducibility of female difference” in the violent world of gender-blind sports.³⁸² Still, Diana is a dimensional character who asserts athletic prowess and takes pride in her sporting ability. In and out of the ring, Diana “refuses to defuse anxiety about her difference by displaying normative femininity.”³⁸³ *Girlfight* shows how a female athlete, through sports, develops “‘imaginable and realizable’ gender identities that move beyond the ‘universal rationality’ of men as the only strong, active ‘stars’ and women as weaker supporters, or ‘team players.’”³⁸⁴ Female characters like Diana in *Girlfight* challenge fixed racial and gender categories, providing a necessary variance on hegemonic constructions of masculinity and femininity. As a woman of color, Diana challenges a media culture with “little practice in watching women of color exerting physical and symbolic power.”³⁸⁵ In her dominance within the ring, Diana offers a way to understand how alternative constructions of masculinity, what Judith Halberstam calls “female masculinity,” challenge notions of male dominance and white superiority in both sports and society.

³⁸¹ Ibid., 104. In his analysis of the film, Aaron Baker explains: “A big reason why critics have described *Girlfight* as a ‘knockout’ and ‘a brauva reworking of the teenage rites-of-passage genre’ is the presence of Michele Rodríguez, who with very little acting experience got the role of Diana by answering a casting call ad in *Backstage*. Rodríguez spent several months in the gym getting ready for the part, and her male trainers, who started out not believing that women should box, were impressed enough to think she justified the presence of female fighters in the ring” (*Contesting Identities*, 90). It’s important to note the ways in which Rodríguez’s athletic body and training for the film become a site in which gender roles in sport are challenged not only on screen but also in society itself.

³⁸² Fojas, “Sports of Spectatorship,” 115.

³⁸³ Ibid., 111.

³⁸⁴ Baker, *Contesting Identities*, 77.

³⁸⁵ Fojas, “Sports of Spectatorship,” 104.

In *Female Masculinity*, Halberstam focuses on alternative masculinities, reading the “how masculinity is constructed as masculinity” through the logics of embodiment.³⁸⁶ Halberstam explains that focusing on dominant, male-white masculinity, which has naturalized the relationship between power and maleness, is less generative to understand “the contours of that masculinity’s social construction.”³⁸⁷ Halberstam argues that masculinity “becomes legible as masculinity where and when it leaves the white male middle-class body” and “constructions of variable masculinity mark the process by which masculinity becomes dominant in the sphere of white middle-class maleness.”³⁸⁸ Thus, through the bodies of “others,” class, race, gender, and sexuality variables make legible the constructs and contours of masculinity and what is understood as dominant masculinity. In this regard, a focus on white-male embodiment obscures other kinds of masculinity that challenge gender conformity. Halberstam argues for “gender transitivity, for self-conscious forms of female masculinity, for indifference to dominant male masculinities, and for ‘nonce taxonomies’” where “the breakdown of gender as signifying system in these arenas can be exploited to hasten the proliferation of alternate gender regimes in other locations.”³⁸⁹ In doing so, she challenges our collective imagination of what masculinity, and in particular, female strength looks like in society.

Diana in *Girlfight* is one character who transgresses dominant notions of femininity and embodies female masculinity; the protagonists I later discuss in *Love and Basketball* and *Juwanna Mann* are other examples as well. In women’s sports films, strong female athletes who

³⁸⁶ Halberstam, *Female Masculinity*, 1.

³⁸⁷ *Ibid.*, 2.

³⁸⁸ *Ibid.*

³⁸⁹ *Ibid.*, 41.

have “musculinity” and “flex appeal” challenge fixed gender categories and the universal rational of sports as the domain of men.³⁹⁰ For example, Jessica Bendinger’s gymnastic drama *Stick It* (2006) is one contemporary example that portrays female masculinity, musculinity, and flex appeal. In *Stick It*, Haley Graham (Missy Peregrym) is a gymnast whose rebellious attitude and run-ins with the law lead her back into the world of competitive gymnastics that she previously walked out on. Court ordered to attend the elite Vickerman Gymnastics Academy (VGA) run by Burt Vickerman (Jeff Daniels), who despite his legendary career is basically a con-artist promising all the VGA parents that their girls have a chance at the Olympics in order to get them to pay for more training. Haley first rejects training and the rules of her new gym. But once she does compete, her talent and “floor it” attitude make her stand out. The film ends with Haley and her VGA teammates competing at the National Championships, where the biased judging sparks a revolution during event finals. The gymnasts ban together and choose their own winners, opting to scratch and have only one person complete their performance and thus win by default.

Unlike depictions of gymnasts that reinforce the sport’s earlier intent to cultivate desirable femininity, beauty, and elegance in women, *Stick It*’s most talented gymnast Haley’s body is constructed as the work of extreme physical labor, striking in its build and capabilities.³⁹¹

³⁹⁰ Yvonne Tasker explains that “‘musculinity’ indicates the extent to which a physical definition of masculinity in terms of musculature is not limited to the male body within representations” (3). See Yvonne Tasker, *Spectacular Bodies: Gender, Genre, and the Action Film* (New York: Routledge, 1993). Chris Holmund’s illuminating analysis on the women’s body building documentary *Pumping Iron II: The Women* (George Butler, 1985) addresses how the film’s representation of “muscularity, masculinity, and lesbianism” constructs “the threat of visible [gender and race] difference and the threat of the abolition of visible difference” where both “are contained and marketed—as flex appeal.” See Chris Holmund, *Impossible Bodies: Femininity and Masculinity at the Movies* (New York: Routledge, 2002), 22 & 29. *Million Dollar Baby* is another film example of a woman athlete embodying female masculinity.

³⁹¹ See Ann Chisholm, “Defending the Nation: National Bodies, U.S. Borders, and the 1996 U.S. Olympic Women’s Gymnastics Team,” *Journal of Sport and Social Issues* 23.2 (May 1999): 126-139.

She is a tall, tomboy figure whose musculature is not only obvious (as is with most elite gymnasts) but is “flexed” literally and figuratively in her athletic prowess. As such, she represents a form of female masculinity in a sport most often associated with femininity. In *Stick It*, the athleticism of gymnasts and the sport of gymnastics is actually given its due, with vibrant kaleidoscopic visuals to punctuate the beauty that comes with strength in various sports performances. The film’s visual and narrative organization center women’s bodies as strong and capable agents of their own performance and destiny.

While some women’s sports films offer alternative constructions of femininity and masculinity, they often do so in narratives about white women (*Girlfight* and *Bend it Like Beckham* are important exceptions). Black women’s representation in women’s sports films is scant. While there are several documentaries about Black female athletes, there are very few fictional sports films that have Black sportswomen as the central characters of the film.³⁹² There are so few, I can list them all here. Notwithstanding the two films I will later discuss, women’s sports films about Black women athletes include: made-for-television movies *Wilma* (Bud Greenspan, 1977) and *The Gabby Douglas Story* (Gregg Champion, 2014) and theatrically released films *The Longshots* (Fred Durst, 2008), *Fast Girls* (Regan Hall, 2011), and, arguably, *Bring it On* (Peyton Reed, 2002). While women’s sports films are few and far between, Black women’s sports films are infinitesimal, making analyzing sports performances of Black women more difficult but still necessary to address their (mis)representations. Thus in this chapter, my

³⁹² Sport documentaries about Black women include: *Venus Vs.* (Ava DuVernay, 2013), *Swoopes* (Hannah Storm, 2013), *Coach* (Bess Kargman, 2013), *Venus and Serena* (Maiken Baird and Michelle Major, 2013), *This is a Game Ladies* (Peter Schnall, 2004), *Heart of the Game* (Ward Serrill, 2005), *The Anderson Monarchs* (Eugene Martin, 2013), *Training Rules* (Dee Mosbacher and Fawn Yacker, 2009), and *Marion Jones: Press Pause* (John Singleton, 2010).

primary objective is to analyze performances of Black women's gendered visibility in sports as a part of a larger critique on the invisibility of Black women in popular media culture writ large.

The racial absences and biases in sports scholars' accounts of women's sports history I discussed earlier are reproduced in Hollywood films about women's sports history, which "reinforce historical patterns of silence and contribute to the invisibility of women of color."³⁹³ The paradox of Black women's invisibility and visibility within sports films is predicated on many sports films' reliance on historical realism. In this sense, Black women cannot appear in sports history they were not a part of because that would sacrifice the film's claim to historical status. However, *A League of Their Own*, which deals with (white) women's sports history, is an example of an historical women's sports film that illustrates the paradox of Black women's invisibility and visibility in sports, wherein their presence on screen speaks of their absence in women's sports history.

A League of Their Own fictionalizes the history of the All-American Girls Baseball League (AAGBL). The AAGBL was a professional baseball organization, originally founded as the All-American Girls Softball League by Philip. K. Wrigley and later sold to Arthur Meyerhoff. The league existed from 1943 to 1954.³⁹⁴ Created during World War II, Wrigley founded the AAGBL because he was concerned that men's absence from major league baseball would have irreversible damage on national interest in the sport. "Speculating that a women's league could temporarily replace the men's game, keeping stadiums occupied and fan interest alive," women's professional baseball was born. The AAGBL first included four Midwestern

³⁹³ Smith, "Women of Color in Society and Sport," 230.

³⁹⁴ Cahn, *Coming on Strong*, 147.

cities—Kenosha and Racine, Wisconsin; South Bend, Indiana; and Rockford, Illinois—and later spread to several other cities.³⁹⁵

A League of their Own provides a fictional account of the league, its teams, and the players who participated. The film narrativizes the tale of two sisters, Dottie (Geena Davis), a stand-out catcher, and Kit (Lori Petty), a fiery yet immature pitcher, as they try-out and play for the Rockford Peaches. The film details their sibling rivalry and showcases the talents of their fellow players. Coached by women's sports hating and disgraced Chicago Cubs player Jimmy Dugan (Tom Hanks), the Rockford Peaches make it all the way to the first World Series. When Kit and Dottie have a falling out prior the final games of the series, Kit is traded to the Racine Belles, the Peaches' opponent in the World Series. In the last play of the final game, Kit hits a line drive and rounds the bases. She ignores the third base coach telling her to stop and decides to head for home plate. With Dottie, as catcher, holding the ball and primed to tag her out, Kit runs full speed into her. Dottie drops the ball, and Kit scores the winning run for the Belles to win the World Series 4-3. At the end of the season, Dottie, the best player in the league, chooses to return back home to be with her war veteran husband and start a family. The film ends with Dottie, Kit, and fellow AAGBL players reuniting years later when the AAGBL is being recognized by the baseball hall of fame.

While a fictionalization of the real-life story of the AAGBL, the film uses various formal elements to attend to its historical realism. The film depicts fictive newsreels, authentic uniforms, and real team names. The film also details the AAGBL's strict rules of conduct, which included, among others: always appearing in feminine attire when not playing, no "boyish

³⁹⁵ Ibid., 148.

bobs,” no smoking or drinking in public, and all social outings approved by chaperones.³⁹⁶ Players were expected to maintain a respectable femininity in both appearance and behavior. These rules of conduct, geared toward promoting and maintaining “women’s baseball as a spectacle of feminine ‘nice girls’ who could ‘play like a man,’” become sites of comedic relief in the film, most particularly through the sexual antics of “All the Way” Mae Mordabito (Madonna Ciccone) who offers to have her breast “spontaneously” come out during a game in order to help draw crowds to the fledgling league and the butch switch-hitter Marla Hooch (Megan Cavanagh), whose attempts at grace and grandeur are subjects of humor.

While the film is historically based, the paradoxical performance of Black women’s visibility offers an important critique of its women’s equality narrative. In *A League of their Own*, Black women only appear in one scene, represented on screen during a montage showing the AAGBL’s rise in popularity. The scene begins with a ball rolling towards a group of three Black men and three Black women, presumably there to watch the game. Their placement near off-to-the side bleachers away from the stadium stands signifies the Jim Crow segregation policies that shaped public spaces, including sports arenas. As the ball rolls towards them, a Black woman picks it up. Dottie lifts her glove and kindly tells her to throw the ball to her. The woman, planting her foot, hurls the ball over Dottie’s head and directly into the mitt of Dottie’s teammate Ellen Sue (Freddie Simpson). Catching the ball, Ellen’s small yelp and the removal of her hand from her glove suggest the power of the woman’s pitch. Dottie looks back at the unidentified Black woman with a surprised face at her throwing accuracy and power. The camera switches back to a medium shot of the Black woman’s face. Her pursed lips appear to be

³⁹⁶ “All –American Girls Professional Baseball League Rule of Conduct, 1943-1954” in *Women and Sports in the United States: A Documentary Reader*, eds. Susan K. Cahn and Jean O’Reilly (Boston: Northeastern University Press, 2007), 59-61.

in-between the gestures of a smile and a smirk. She nods, knowingly, and begins to turn around as the scene ends.

This moment lasts no more than thirteen seconds in a film that is over two hours long. However brief, this example illustrates the paradox of Black women's visibility in sports films. The unnamed woman, who also goes unnamed in the film's credits, functions as an individuated multiplicity, standing for herself but representing a history of discrimination against Black female athletes in the league. Her throw of the ball signals her athletic prowess, but where she learned, practiced, or used this sporting ability is unknown. What is apparent is that she is not afforded the same opportunities, like Dottie and her teammates, to play the white and Black "national pastime."³⁹⁷ In this sense, her presence in the text illuminates her deliberate absence in AAGBL history. Through her visibility and embodied performance, the Black woman makes legible (and so does the film) the fallacy of women's equality in sports that the film celebrates. Her performance represents the explicit discrimination of Black women in professional women's sports, specifically the AAGBL. Just as the Major League Baseball (MLB) was segregated, Black women were barred from women's professional baseball. Susan Cahn explains:

The AAGBL also had an unwritten policy against hiring women of color, though it did employ several light-skinned Cuban players. Not until 1951, five years after the integration of professional men's baseball, did the league openly discuss hiring black women. Torn between the need for skilled players and a desire to promote a particular image of femininity, officials decided against recruiting

³⁹⁷ Gerald Early argues that despite the ways in which basketball is associated with Black people, baseball (the Negro Leagues in 1920s and 1930s) was the Black national pastime. See Gerald Early, "Why Baseball was the Black National Pastime," in *Basketball Jones: America Above the Rum*, eds. Todd Boyd and Kenneth L. Shropshire (New York: New York University Press, 2000): 27-50.

African Americans “unless they would show promise of exceptional ability.” This decision, and the fact that no black players were ever recruited, reflects the pervasive racism in American society during the 1940s and 1950s.³⁹⁸

Despite Jackie Robinson and Larry Doby integrating professional baseball’s International League and American League, respectively, in 1947, the AAGBL refused to have Black women break the color line. Through racial discrimination, the league maintained “an image rooted in white middle-class beliefs about beauty and respectability” that “[excluded] and [deprecated] black women, making black athletes almost by definition less likely to meet league standards.”³⁹⁹

In *A League of Their Own*, a Black woman’s visible and active sporting body simultaneously illustrates her placement and displacement in sports and sports history. Framing her literally and figuratively from the “side-lines” as a bystander/spectator, her sports performance (throwing of the ball) and the acknowledgement of her abilities (the nod) center and frame her reality, providing historical complexity on Black women’s access to and exclusion from sports. Her presence and performance, as spectator and sportswoman, makes visible and legible the film’s own critique of the narrative of “equality” presented in women’s sports films that use “realism” to claim historical status and defend historical erasure. Her body functions as an individuated multiplicity, representing and testifying to Black women’s desired participation in and omission from the “all-American game” that has historically celebrated Black men’s integration and whites women’s participation.

³⁹⁸ Cahn, *Coming on Strong*, 151.

³⁹⁹ Ibid., 152. Also, see Jeff Merron, “Reel Life: ‘A League of Their Own,’” *ESPN Page*, February 5, 2011, <http://espn.go.com/page2/s/closer/020511.html>. Merron explains: “Apparently the ‘All’ in ‘All-American Girls’ was just a figure of speech.”

Love and Basketball & Juwana Mann:

In order to evaluate Black women's performances of gendered visibility in contemporary sports films, I turn to and describe the narratives of two different basketball-themed films: Gina Prince-Bythewood's *Love and Basketball* and Jesse Vaughan's *Juwanna Mann*. In analyzing both films protagonists' sporting performances, I explore how *Love and Basketball* and *Juwanna Man* depict the "gender trouble"—the discursive limits and possibilities of "imaginable and realized gender configurations"—in sporting performances.⁴⁰⁰ Both protagonists "play like a man" on the court, showing how, as Judith Butler argues, "gender is in no way a stable identity or locus of agency from which various acts proceed ... gender is instituted through the stylization of the body."⁴⁰¹ In order to evaluate the stylization of the body in "playing like a man," I discuss how the films construct femininity and masculinity as sporting performances. Particularly locating these performances within the arena of the basketball court, I address the ways in which the court functions as a site of corporeal tensions around performing Black female visibility in spaces and sports coded as masculine. In analyzing Black women's performances of gendered visibility as "female masculinity" in both films, I address how the protagonists are represented as individuated multiplicities and examine the documentary impulse at both the level of the narrative and embodied performance. Both *Love and Basketball* and *Juwanna Mann* gesture towards the history and experience of Black women in the WNBA; and the films' protagonists' sporting performances represent, reference, and relate to the politics of respectability that initially framed Black women's participation in the league.

⁴⁰⁰ Butler, *Gender Trouble*, 12.

⁴⁰¹ Butler, "Performative Acts and Gender Constitution," 402.

Gina Prince-Bythewood's *Love and Basketball* is a romantic sports drama. Broken up into "four quarters" that spans fifteen years of the protagonists' lives, *Love and Basketball* follows the growing relationship between two neighborhood basketball players, Monica Wright (Sanaa Lathan) and Quincy "Q" McCall (Omar Epps). The "first quarter" begins in 1981 when Monica, eleven, moves next door to Q. Watching Q play, Monica asks to join. At first confused by her tomboy look and believing she is a boy, Q allows Monica to play basketball with his two other male friends. Once Monica removes her hat and reveals she's a girl, Q instantly regrets his decision. Despite his taunts that "girls can't play," Monica "schools" Q, declaring that not only can she ball better than him but that she's going to be the first woman in the NBA. Before Monica can score the game winning point, Q shoves her, causing her to cut her face on the ground. While Q later apologizes and the two make amends, they quickly go from friends, to boyfriend/girlfriend, to enemies before the "quarter" ends.

The film shifts to the "second quarter," 1988, with Monica and Q as seniors in high school. Both play for Crenshaw High School in Los Angeles. Playing point guard, Monica is hoping that her basketball skills land her an athletic scholarship. She has yet to be recruited, possibly because her aggressive play and fiery temper make her appear out of control on the court. For example, during a game where a University of California, Los Angeles (UCLA) scout is present, Monica gets a technical foul for unsportsmanlike conduct and is benched by her coach. With a recruiter from the University of Southern California (USC) in attendance at her final high school game to watch her team play for a state championship, Monica misses the game winning basket, fouls-out, and her team loses.

In contrast, Q, who is both popular on and off the court, is a rising star at Crenshaw, following in the footsteps of his father Zeke (Dennis Haysbert), a current Los Angeles Clippers

player in his final years of professional play. Unlike Monica, Q is being heavily recruited by top basketball programs as well as Ivy League schools, though he favors the former over the latter. Against the backdrop of their diverging basketball careers, Monica and Q's relationship takes a new turn. At the spring dance, a made-over Monica, who was set up by her sister with a college man to be her date, catches the eye of Q, much to the chagrin of his own date. The two later ditch their dates and return back to their homes. A letter from USC was left for Monica in her room, and she gets Q to open it. Monica receives the great news that she is being recruited to play at USC, which is also where Q signed his letter of intent. The "quarter" ends with Monica and Q sleeping together.

The "third quarter," 1988-89, chronicles Monica and Q's freshman year together at USC. Monica struggles as the back-up point guard for the Lady Trojans while Q shines as a starting freshman for the men's program. However, the basketball balance shifts for the two of them as the year progresses. Monica's high-school antics, particularly show-boating, are not tolerated by her college coach. Improving her work ethic, Monica catches a break when the Lady Trojan's starting point guard is injured during a game and she gets a chance to play. Monica later wins the starting spot on the team. In contrast, Q's college career is cut short. After finding out his father lied to him about cheating on his mother, Q spirals out of control. Distracted, his game suffers as well as his relationship with Monica. At the end of this quarter, Q chooses to leave school and prematurely enter the NBA draft. He breaks up with Monica, citing her putting basketball before their relationship as the cause.

The "fourth quarter" of the film begins in 1993 with Monica playing professional women's basketball abroad in Barcelona, Spain. A local celebrity overseas, Monica's love of basketball wanes despite winning several championships. Homesick, she returns back to Los

Angeles and gets a job working at her father's bank, turning in her Nikes for heels she can barely walk in. Q, who entered the draft and bounced around from several teams, is playing, mostly from the bench, for the Lakers. During a blowout Lakers' game, Q comes off the bench to play and injures himself during a dunk, falling and tearing his ACL. Monica visits Q in the hospital where she finds out he's engaged to another woman.

Devastated because she is still in love with him, a week before his wedding, Monica challenges Q to a one-on-one game. Monica, playing for Q's "heart," sets the stakes of the game: if she wins deep down Q will know his marriage is a mistake and if he wins she will buy him a wedding present. The two play a first-to-five match with Monica taking the lead early. Up 3-0, Monica's lead is cut when Q blocks a shot and makes his first basket. With Q taking the lead 4-3, Monica steals the ball from him on match point and ties the game. Determined, Monica takes the ball out, driving to the basket for a layup but misses. Q rebounds the ball and blowing past Monica, he dunks the ball, winning the game. A solemn Monica sulks off as Q reminds her, as the film's title suggests, "all's fair in love and basketball." Moments later he relents and suggests "double or nothing." The two kiss, reconciling. The film ends with a cut to the Lakers' stadium, half-filled with fans, including NBA legend Earvin "Magic" Johnson, as the WNBA's Los Angeles Sparks take the court, including actual Sparks' player Lisa Leslie. Wearing her sports hero Magic's number "32," Monica, whose last name now reads Wright-McCall, plays professional basketball for the Sparks as her husband, Q, and their baby girl sit courtside to watch her play. *Love and Basketball* romantic drama depicts Black women as agents of their own destiny.

In contrast, Jesse Vaughn's *Juwanna Mann* is a sports comedy about a fictional professional basketball player, Jamal Jeffries (Miguel A. Nunez, Jr.). His egomaniacal and

arrogant behavior get him kicked out of the men's professional basketball league. In the film's opening, it's obvious that fame has gone to Jamal's head, inflating it beyond repair. Jamal's job with the United Basketball Association (UBA) is put into jeopardy during a game. After receiving a technical foul, he is benched by his coach. Acting out and declaring himself the leader of the team, he curses out the coach, yells at the fans in the arena, and removes all of his clothes before finally being forcibly dragged from the court by security. Suspended and his contract null and void because he violated its "morals clause," Jamal takes no responsibility for his actions. His agent Lorne Daniels (Kevin Pollak) quits, opting not to represent him now that he is basically unemployable.

Losing money, friends, his house, his model-girlfriend Tina (Lil' Kim), and having most of his items repossessed by the bank, Jamal is forced to move back in with his Aunt Ruby (Jennifer Lewis), the only person to whom he shows any decency or respect towards. On a trip to the grocery store, Jamal stumbles upon young kids playing a pickup game of basketball. Their ball ends up rolling down the driveway to Jamal. Led by the only girl playing, the group admonish Jamal for his selfishness on the court. The kids go back to playing and Jamal stares at them, admiring their play. While at first it appears he's simply appreciating the pure love of the game that their play signifies, Jamal is actually enamored by the skills of the young girl dominating the court. In that moment, Jamal hatches his plan to make his way back into professional basketball. Calling up his ex-agent Lorne, he explains that he has found a phenomenal basketball player he wants him to meet and, shockingly, that player is a woman. After a comical scene of "getting dressed" in his new female identity with Diana Ross's "I'm Coming Out" playing in the background, Jamal, in drag, heads to a tryout that Lorne has set up.

Coming up with his alter ego name, Juwanna Mann, in a moment of confusion, Jamal/Juwanna tries out for the Women's United Basketball Association's (WUBA) team the Charlotte Banshees. Juwanna makes the team, even though she displays the same show-boating and selfish play Jamal did in the men's league. Befriending the Banshee's team captain Michelle (Vivica A. Fox), Jamal as Juwanna learns how to be a team player. While Michelle has a philandering boyfriend named Romeo (Ginuwine), Juwanna's interest in Michelle is more than platonic and the film contains several scenes with Juwanna implicitly/explicitly expressing her sexual desires towards Michelle. However, Juwanna is also being pursued, much to her annoyance, by ghetto-pimp figure Puff Smokey Smoke (Tommy Davidson).

Juwanna becomes a fan favorite in the women's league. With a more kind and team-player demeanor, Juwanna is a liked and likable public figure, growing in fame and marketability for advertisers. This causes a problem when Jamal is given a hearing with the UBA to overturn his expulsion from the league that is on the same date as the first playoff game for the Banshees. Choosing the Banshees over himself, he goes to the women's playoff game. His final play of the game helps carry the Banshees over their opponents but also reveals his "true" identity. Instead of doing a layup, Juwanna dunks the ball, breaking the backboard and shattering glass all over the court. As the team cheers her winning dunk, the joy is short-lived when her teammates notice that her wig is removed. The team, fans, and sports commentators gasp because they finally notice that Juwanna Mann is actually Jamal Jeffries. He is promptly kicked off the team.

Abandoned by the women's team, Jamal makes amends with them prior to their next playoff game, giving them a "pep-talk" explaining that they could win without him. He tells them:

I messed up. What I did was wrong and selfish and I'm truly sorry. When I first got here, I got to tell you, I thought women's basketball was a big joke. I thought that anything not about Jamal Jeffries was a big joke, but the joke was on me. I thought that the most important thing about basketball is to be a star and the only way to truly shine is to be part of a team. You never needed me to win this and you don't need me now. I needed you.

The Banshees not only win that game but also the championship. Later, Jamal has a hearing with the UBA basketball board to discuss his actions. During this hearing, Jamal's agent Lorne touts him as a true basketball star and future role model who should be allowed to re-join the men's league because he is a changed man. The commissioner of the board accuses Jamal of having disgraced both the men's and women's professional leagues. However, at that moment, the Banshees, led by Michelle, enter the room and dispute that claim. Michelle explains that the team forgives Jamal and that board should too. Michelle gives Jamal's his own WUBA championship ring, recognizing his contribution to helping them win. The film ends not only with Jamal receiving a kiss from Michelle but also with him back playing in the UBA. The next scene shows Jamal on the basketball court. As the crowd cheers him on, the announcer declares that Jamal is the only man who's played for the men's and women's professional leagues. Returning for his second year in the UBA, the film ends with a triumphant looking Jamal ready to run on the court as fireworks and screaming fans greet him back to the world of men's professional sports.

Love and Basketball and *Juwanna Mann* have very little in common outside of the fact that they both are sports films about men's and women's basketball and depict performances of gendered visibility. *Love and Basketball's* romantic drama attempts to take seriously women's

participation in sports. In contrast, *Juwanna Mann*'s farcical cross-dressing storyline undermines the film's pro-women's sports (read really as pro-teamwork) ending and uses women for the purpose of defining the film's male protagonist. The former film is obviously a women's sports film about Black female athletes and the latter, I concede, stretches the boundaries of the category.⁴⁰² However, both films proffer narratives about gendered visibility, specifically the paradox of Black female visibility in sports. *Love and Basketball* and *Juwanna Mann*'s protagonists deal with the perils of being a "female" baller "playing like a man" in an attempt to render her body visible and invisible on the court. Both films' protagonists' negotiated configurations of femininity and masculinity through sporting performances on the court are the means by which they are able to stylize their own identity in the world of sports.

In *Love and Basketball*, Monica's sporting performances on the court illuminate the tensions around discourses of masculinity and femininity in sports. Despite how others gender her sports performance, Monica identifies herself as just a "ball player." When Q tells her that her bad attitude, meaning aggressive/masculine behavior, on the court is why she's not being recruited, Monica retorts: "You jump in some guys face, talk smack, and you get a pat on your ass. But because I'm female I get told to calm down and act like a lady." Monica is aware of the gendered politics of her sporting performance. Thus, I address her negotiation of these unstable politics in her sporting performances of female masculinity throughout the film.

As explained in the plot summary, when Monica and Q first meet, her body is read as male because of the baggy shirt and jeans she wears and the cap covering her long hair. This initial act of mistaken identity by the boys transforms into their shock at her "surprising" ability

⁴⁰² I recognize the problematics of calling *Juwanna Mann* a women's sports film because the star of the film is a man. However, the fact that throughout the film he is "read" as a woman, is playing on a women's team, and the supplemental female characters have substantial roles makes this film "pass" as a Black women's sports film.

to play basketball. On the court, it is obvious that she is the best player, even better than Q. Her defiant sporting performance, in this case “playing like a boy” instead of literally and derogatorily “playing like a girl,” makes Q step his game up. Monica and Q verbally spar throughout the game. Q chastises Monica, calling her names and telling her that girls can’t play ball. Telling him that she can ball better than him, she lets her play, as they say, “do the talking.” While they both are playing with another teammate, the heated game continues mostly between the two. Q makes several difficult shots followed by Monica taking over and outperforming him. Q grows frustrated with Monica’s athletic ability and starts to miss several shots. With Monica taking the ball out, Q switches with his teammate to guard her. Dribbling the ball with Q defending her, Monica tells Q that she’s going to be the first girl in the NBA. Q lashes back that he will actually be the one in the NBA and that she will be his cheerleader. With a quick give-and-go with her teammate, Monica gets around Q and takes the ball to the basket. Before she can get the shot off she is fouled by Q, who pushes her into the ground where she cuts her face. The game ends abruptly with this injury.

This opening basketball sequence structures the film’s discourses around gender performance and the basketball court as a privileged space for males and expressions of masculinity. As a tomboy, Monica represents “an extended childhood of female masculinity.”⁴⁰³ Monica’s athleticism and dominant performance challenge the ways in which sports, in this case basketball, are considered the arena for boys and men. Her insistence that she is going to be in the NBA (at the time there was no WNBA) simultaneously illustrates women’s limited access to professional sports and asserts her own imagined gender transitivity where there could be space in the male gendered world of professional basketball that she could position herself within. As

⁴⁰³ Halberstam, *Female Masculinity*, 5.

long as she can ball better than the boys, she can stylize her own identity as the first woman in the men's league, paradoxically making visible the maleness of the sport and invisible her "difference" through her comparable sporting performance. In the end, the fact that she is thwarted by Q, who shoves her to the ground before she can make the game winning shot, reveals not only the tension around her female masculinity but also his fear of the success of such a performance.

Two scenes of Monica's sporting performance of female masculinity occurs during the "second quarter" when she is on her women's varsity basketball team. These moments of play depict the tensions between femininity and masculinity as an embodied sporting performance. The "second quarter" begins with a blacked-out screen and rapper MC Lyte's song "Lyte as a Rock" filling the soundscape. Lyte raps: "Do you understand the metaphoric phrase 'Lyte as a Rock?'/ It's explainin' how heavy the young lady is." The camera cuts to an out-of-focus shot of teenaged Monica playing for Crenshaw High School. The shot changes to a close-up of her Nike Air basketball shoes with Magic's number "32" handwritten on the side. A brief montage intercuts close-up shots of various parts of Monica's body with her play on the court, illustrating how her stylized play is a literal and figurative "sum of her parts."

Shifting from a music-video aesthetic to more typical sports coverage, the film shows Monica in the midst of a game. An obvious leader and star on her team, her sporting performance marks her as an exemplary athlete. As the other team is on offense, Monica works hard to defend the opposing point guard. Despite losing her man when the other team puts up a screen, Monica spins off the screen and runs to cover her player. In a decisive move as the opposing player goes up for a shot, Monica forcefully blocks the shot. After the play, Monica stares down the girl, walking up and brushing past her in an intimidating manner. The referee

instantly gives Monica a technical foul for unsportsmanlike conduct, and she is benched for the rest of the game.

The second scene of her sporting performance during high school basketball occurs during Crenshaw's championship game. The game is often depicted from Monica's perspective. After the tip-off, the scene cuts to the final minutes of play. The Lady Cougars are down and Monica sinks a basket to cut the opposing team's lead to one-point. Throughout the scene we can hear Monica's thoughts as she goes through each play, sizing up her opponents and telling herself what to do next. After stealing the ball and sinking another shot, she puts her team up by one-point. Playing strong man-to-man defense, Monica is charged with a foul for reaching in, sending the player to the free throw line to shoot one-and-one. The opposing player sinks both shots and now the Lady Cougars are down by one. With ten seconds left in the game, Monica feels the pressure all on her, telling herself: "It's on you Mon. Come on; get there. You just need to get there." She puts up a shot that hits the rim, missing the basket. She is forced to foul the opposing player to stop the clock. With five fouls, Monica fouls out of the game, and the team loses.

The gender tensions around Monica's sporting performance in both high school basketball games are evident in her style of play. In the first example, Monica's aggressive play is what makes her a gifted player on the court, evidenced in the block she makes. However, she is given a technical foul for behavior that is much more prevalent (and even tolerated) in men's basketball. Here, her sporting performance of female masculinity depicts not only the limits of gender discourse and conditioned experiences of femininity and masculinity but also the ways her play is read as excessive. She is too much on the court, which causes on and off the court problems. On the court, Monica is punished for her unsportsmanlike conduct in a sport that

distinguishes men's and women's teams through the use of "lady" before the team mascot name (she plays for the Lady Cougars). Off the court, her excessively masculine play causes panic over her sexuality. In the scene after the game when she is at home, Monica's mother Camille (Alfre Woodard), a housewife, admonishes her for her behavior on the court. Camille explains that she wishes Monica would grow out of her tomboy phase to which Monica replies: "I won't. I'm a lesbian." While she is just joking, this moment relates back to her performance on the court, one that is deemed too "mannish" and deviant and implies a heterosexual failure. As a transgressive body on the court, Monica's sporting performance challenges fixed gendered styles of play which are reestablished in her punishment for articulating an alternate gender regime in sports.

In both games, Monica's sporting performance of female masculinity on the court signifies how women's visibility on the court "brings wreck" to the idea of who gets to embody being an athlete. In *Check it While I Wreck It: Black Womanhood, Hip-Hop Culture, and the Public Sphere*, Gwendolyn D. Pough explains the rhetorical practices of "bringing wreck" as "moments when Black women's discourse disrupt dominant masculine discourses, break into the public sphere, and in some way impact or influence the United States imaginary."⁴⁰⁴ In the first game scene I described, the juxtaposition of the basketball game *mise-en-scène* and MC Lyte's "Lyte as a Rock" visually and narratively disrupts dominant masculine sporting discourses and the framing of sports as male domains. As Monica's body and play are profiled, Lyte raps: "Must I say it again, I said it before/ Move out the way when I'm comin' through the door/ Me, heavy? As Lyte as a rock / Guys watch, even some of girls clock/ Step back, it ain't that type of party/ No reply if you ain't somebody/ Get out of my face, don't wanna hear no more/ If you

⁴⁰⁴ Gwendolyn Pough, *Check it While I Wreck It: Black Womanhood, Hip-Hop Culture, and the Public Sphere* (Boston: Northeastern University, 2004), 12.

hate rejection, don't try to score." Not only does the use of rap music challenge the hegemonic male domains of hip hop, sex, and basketball, Monica's stylized body and sporting performance "brings wreck" to the masculine gender codes that structure the court as male by drawing attention (through the block) to her skills and right to be in the public sphere.⁴⁰⁵

Just as the presence of female MC's in hip hop culture "[opened] the door for a wealth of possibilities in terms of the validation of the Black female voice and Black women's agency," Monica's sporting performance of Black female visibility does the same.⁴⁰⁶ Monica's body functions as an individuated multiplicity that represents the experiences of other Black female ballers trying to render themselves visible as athletes on the court, in sports media, and in sporting and popular culture at large. Moreover, in her championship game performance, Monica's point-of-view is often privileged to demonstrate her sporting agency. In the final moments of the game, Monica is in "flow." Sports studies scholars Susan A. Jackson and Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi describe flow as:

... a state of consciousness where one becomes totally absorbed in what one is doing, to the exclusion of all other thoughts and emotions. So flow is about focus.

⁴⁰⁵ Todd Boyd describes the relationship between hip hop and basketball as black cultural expressions connected by an urban aesthetic. For Boyd, hip hop and basketball "are two arenas where Black people have had the best opportunity to express themselves, and where there continues to be a critical mass of individuals who use the opportunity to influence the culture at large, and hopefully, make some money in the process. These are two rarified spaces where the most fundamental elements of Blackness are articulated and played out, both internally, and for the masses" (12). While Boyd offers an important evaluation about basketball's relationship to hip hop from the late 1970s to the present (though he does address basketball history prior to the 1970s), his work deals solely with the NBA, an all-male professional league. Therefore, this masculinist relationship between hip hop and basketball underscores the hegemonic gender constructions of both realms. The lack of consideration of what women athletes and female MCs bring to both arenas goes unaddressed. In relation to music, several feminist scholars of hip hop have tried to revise this by tracing women's histories in rap culture. However, no one has discussed the relationship between hip hop and women's basketball. See Todd Boyd, *Young, Black, Rich & Famous: The Rise of the NBA, the Hip Hop Invasion, and the Transformation of American Culture* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2003).

⁴⁰⁶ Pough, *Check it While I Wreck It*, 85.

More than just focus, however, flow is a harmonious experience where mind and body are working together effortlessly...⁴⁰⁷

Monica's fully engaged performance, or flow, is depicted when she steps on the court. Shutting out the noise of the arena, she is fully concentrated on the moment. Time both slows down and lapses as the final minutes of the game are shown. With her internal monologue filling the soundscape, the film depicts how her mind tells her body what to do as she faces her opponents. The camera privileges her point-of-view as she dribbles the ball. As we see the court from her perspective, she tells herself: "Don't get tight... She's laying off... pull up." Monica sinks the shot over her opponent and the camera switches to show her triumphant reaction. Thus, Monica's sporting performance in the film is one of mastery over body and mind where her internal narration details her mental and physical strategy. Even when her team loses and she is visibly upset, her disposition is not because of the false notion that sports causes women to uncontrollably exhibit emotional passions (hysteria). She is upset because her team lost and her sporting performance was not good enough on the court that night.

Monica's sporting performance of female masculinity challenges sports as defined as by masculinist regimes of competition and enjoyment. Male privilege and power is challenged through her various other sporting performances as well. In college as she practices, trains, and takes charges (from her coach and opponents), she performs her athleticism through hard work and self-determination. Even in the one-on-one game she plays with Q at the end of the film, she is asserting her own agency, her own desire to be "seen" by him through her sporting performance. Her dominance on the court, her ability to "play like a man," affords her the

⁴⁰⁷ Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi and Susan A. Jackson, *Flow in Sports: The Keys to Optimal Success and Performance* (Champaign: Human Kinetics, 1999).

opportunity to play professional women's basketball abroad and later in the U.S. with the WNBA. Even with *Love and Basketball's* precarious feminist ending, Monica's sporting performance of female masculinity challenges gender convention and prompts her "to have it all:" love, basketball, and a family.

In *Juwanna Mann*, the female baller Juwanna is both literally and figuratively "playing like a man" throughout the film. The film is premised on Jamal functioning as an individuated multiplicity, representing himself but also creating the experiences of Juwanna. Dressing in drag, Jamal as Juwanna attempts to pass as a man in women's sports. Coded as masculine, Jamal's aggressive, dominant, and selfish style of play is contrasted with the Banshee's feminized team-work style. The film's negotiations of femininity and masculinity in Juwanna's sporting performances are often rendered for comedic effect. Allegedly there is nothing funnier than a man having to learn to play like a girl, especially when he's dressed like one. Through Juwanna's sporting excellence, the film reifies the hegemony of misogynistic sports culture, essentially depicting the notion that men are better than women at sports. As the film's tagline explains: "The only way he can stay pro is to play (like) a girl." Jamal having to both play a girl and play like a girl are negotiated in his and others attempts to get him to stop "playing like a man" in both men's and women's professional sports.

Juwanna's sporting performances of literal and figurative female masculinity signify the constructed nature of femininity and masculinity as she attempts to render her male body invisible on the court. *Juwanna Mann's* drag performance is not an example of gender subversion. Juwanna's embodied performances do not really challenge male hegemony but more or less affirms gender differences and hierarchies. Instead, Juwanna's performance, as Judith Butler describes of drag and cross-dressing, functions as a parody of gender identity that

denaturalizes fixed meanings of femininity and masculinity and reveals certain gender ambivalences around such discursive configurations.⁴⁰⁸ In this sense, Juwanna's performance of Black female visibility disrupts and troubles fixed notions of gendered athletic performance in sports.

Several of Juwanna's sports performances are played up for comedic effect. For example, in her tryout, Juwanna arrives late, dressed in make-up and a track suit. When she hits the court, she dominates with Jamal's typical showboating and selfish playing style. Going head-to-head with the butch lesbian Latisha Jansen (Kim Wayans), Juwanna is sexualized on the court. Latisha tells her that she hopes her game is as tight as her ass and that she can make the ball bounce like her breasts. Juwanna's sporting performance is one that simultaneously has her being read as female, thus an object to be sexualized by men and women, and as male through her exceptional athleticism. Even though she is playing with other gifted female athletes, Juwanna literally and figuratively stands out. Her game is beyond everyone else's on the court. The film balances these moments of gender tension with Juwanna's "comedic" drag embodiment. During the practice, her fake boobs flop all over the place, suggesting both the need for a sports bra but also reminding us that she is in fact a constructed gendered figure. As well, she is forced to re-arrange her "package" on the court. The film constantly broadcasts her dual identity. Nonetheless, her athletic prowess is unparalleled by her soon-to-be teammates and she is positioned as an outsider on the team. She, in effect, cannot help but to "play like a man." For this reason, Lorne makes Jamal promise to not have Juwanna dunk because women do not

⁴⁰⁸ Butler, *Gender Trouble*, 174.

dunk in the league.⁴⁰⁹ Juwana's contained play (no dunks) thus represents gender stability and gender deviance.

Throughout the film, Juwana's selfish and hyperstylized play (she does 360-degree lay-ups) draws criticism from her teammates, who, while aggressive and hardworking, play team-based basketball. When she's "playing like a man," Juwana draws the unwanted attention of the ghetto minstrel Puff Smokey Smoke, who says he "likes a girl with ball control." However, when Juwana accidentally passes the ball to a teammate and is rewarded with a pat on the butt, she finally becomes a team player, largely so she can grab women's behinds. This moment, while ridiculous, illustrates how Juwana's sporting performance changes. Her sporting performance goes from "playing like a man" to "playing like a girl." As she passes the ball and lets others score, Juwana finally is able to be visible and render Jamal invisible through her style of play.

Because of Juwana's unselfish play, the Banshees make it to the playoffs. In the playoff game, her new style of team play helps keep the Banshees in the game. In the final moments, the Banshees are losing. With a chance to win the game, Juwana steals the ball and runs down the court. For the fans and sportscasters, there is a moment of anticipation that she might dunk the ball. Juwana does dunk, breaking the implicit gender rules of basketball (girls don't dunk) to the praise of her teammates. When she breaks the glass backboard, she symbolically breaks the glass ceiling of women's "below the rim" sporting performances. In this sense, Juwana's sporting performance of female masculinity does not only defamiliarize gendered expectations (the dunk over the layup) but also returns to gender binaries of "playing like a man" and "playing

⁴⁰⁹ Women do dunk in professional basketball. To this point, dunking is actually quite dangerous and puts shooters at risk of injury. Many women opt for the lay-up. While it is certainly less common than in the NBA, women dunk in the professional and amateur levels. West Virginia University's Georgeann Wells was the first woman to dunk in collegiate play. Los Angeles Sparks' Lisa Leslie was the first woman to dunk in the WNBA.

like a girl.” While it is Juwanna’s wig falling off that reveals Jamal, the dunk as a presumed male sporting performance engenders his exposure. In this sense, Juwanna’s decision to “play like a man” and dunk reestablishes gender norms and hierarchies. The act makes “Jamal’s” body visible while Juwanna’s body is turned into a fraudulent body, diminishing what it means to play as/like a woman in sports.

For the above reasons, *Juwanna Mann* is a problematic film. Jamal’s drag produces ambivalence around gender identity. His dual sporting performances call attention to femininity and masculinity as a performance. However, the film’s use of women and women’s sport for the self-definition of men reifies the limits of gender discourses and hierarchizes men’s athleticism as better than women’s. Notwithstanding this point, the film’s ending, in some ways, pushes back, against its own constrictive gender ideological constructions. The film ends with Jamal back in the men’s league. However, in marking his re-debut, the announcer proclaims that Jamal is the only man who has played in both men’s and women’s professional leagues. This statement and Jamal’s look of pride does not suggest the notion of a battle of the sexes that ends in male conquest. Instead, his dual presence in both leagues changes him and his sporting performance on the court. His institutionally sanctioned access to both “playing like a man” and “playing like a girl” simultaneously reveals how gender performance is both imitative and contingent and how gender options outside of constrictive binaries produce better athletes and, by extension, better people. In the end, Jamal’s sporting performance is imagined as a stylized gendered hybrid that disrupts the logics of solely male embodied performance in sports.

In *Love and Basketball* and *Juwanna Mann* both protagonists attempt to perform a vexed gendered visibility on the court. Gina Prince-Bythewood and Jesse Vaughn both use markers and gestures to real bodies and real histories concerning Black women’s visibility in the realm of

sports. The documentary impulse is evident both at the level of the narrative and embodied performances in both films. *Love and Basketball*'s markers and references include real athletic and academic institutions and sports figures including: Crenshaw High School, USC, the Los Angeles Clippers, the Los Angeles Sparks, Lisa Leslie, Dick Vitale, and Robin Roberts. *Juwanna Mann*'s markers and references are fictionalized via the professional men's and women's basketball league the UBA and WUBA. They mimic the ways in which the WNBA is a counterleague to the NBA, whose Board of Governors approved the women's league's founding on April 24, 1996. Both films' documentary impulse at the level of the narrative and embodied performances of the protagonists playing in professional sports mark the history of the WNBA. Both Monica and Juwanna's sporting performances of gendered visibility represent, reference, and relate to the politics of respectability that initially framed Black women's participation in the WNBA.

Monica and Juwanna's performances of gendered visibility in basketball connect and relate to the history of women in the WNBA. In *Love and Basketball*, Monica, who first has to play overseas in order to play professional women's basketball, is finally able to play professionally in the U.S. for the Los Angeles Sparks. In many ways, Monica's performance rearticulates the history of basketball phenom Cheryl Miller, who played at USC from 1978-1982. Miller was drafted into the United States Basketball League (USBL), a men's league that operated from 1985-2007 where many future NBA players, including Tyrone "Muggsy" Bogue (who has a cameo in *Juwanna Mann*), got their start in the league. While Miller never got to play in the WNBA, she did coach the WNBA team the Phoenix Mercury. Juwanna plays for a team in the Women's United Basketball Association, a fictionalized version of the WNBA. The representation of ambivalence around Juwanna's gender in the film also rearticulates the sexual

ambivalence of star female players in the WNBA, including Houston Comet's Sheryl Swoopes.⁴¹⁰ As well, Juwana's embodied performance relates to the (future) history of players like George Washington University's Kye Allums, the first publically transgender basketball player in NCAA women's basketball, and the (past) history of Renée Richards (formerly Richard Raskind), who won a landmark Supreme Court case to win the right to play in professional women's tennis without having to submit a gender test.

Both films relay some of the gender tensions surrounding women's sporting performances in the WNBA. The WNBA officially started its first season in 1997. With eight original teams, the women played during the summer off-season of the NBA. While the WNBA is not the first professional women's league in the U.S., it is the only professional women's league still functioning domestically. The politics of respectability around women's performance, particularly Black women who dominate the league, framed the marketing, sponsorship, and fan consumption of the WNBA. As Sarah Benet-Weiser explains of representations of women's "naked female aggression" in the league:

Action shots of strong, sweaty female bodies, simply by their sheer corporeality, challenge dominant masculine conventions involving sport. This challenge to the clearly male-dominated realm of team sports requires complicated cultural

⁴¹⁰ Sheryl Swoopes made headlines when fans of the WNBA found out she was in a same-sex relationship. This news was in part shocking because Swoopes had previously been married to her high school sweetheart. In fact, when she got pregnant during the first season of the league, Swoopes was celebrated by the league when she became a mother and came back to play six weeks later. She and her child were featured in a Nike commercial for the league. The league's reliance on narratives of heteronormativity were used to assuage fears that the masculine style of play of the female players did not mean that the league was full of lesbians. This cultivation of hegemonic femininity off the court and need for aggressive/masculine play on the court marks the politics of women's visibility within professional basketball. However, when Swoopes came out as "not gay" but in a same-sex relationship, the gender ambivalence of her body, sexuality, and media culture became the dominant narrative of Black women in sports. See Samantha King, "Contesting the Closet: Sheryl Swoopes, Racialized Sexuality, and Media Culture."

negotiations by both the league and its sponsors to establish that professional women's basketball is a legitimate sport.⁴¹¹

Banet-Weiser argues that women in the league were marketed to fans through an appeal to femininity in sports. She explains that the “WNBA, as a cultural arena, is clearly about normative femininity, heterosexuality, maternity, and perhaps most important, respectability.”⁴¹² Thus, the politics of respectability that marks real female athletes in professional sports frame the discourses in women's sports films, generally, and *Love and Basketball* and *Juwanna Mann*, specifically. Both films construct their protagonists' sporting performances as affirmations and challenges to normative femininity, heterosexuality, and respectability in order to render their bodies visible (as women in sports) and invisible (as athletes) on the basketball court.

In both *Love and Basketball* and *Juwanna Mann*, race is never explicitly discussed. However, in the fact that there are Black men and women on the screen foregrounds race in these sports films, particularly since they are exceptions to dominant sports films' white protagonists. In doing so, both films articulate alternative narratives about Black women in sports, history, film, and popular culture. *Love and Basketball* and *Juwanna Mann* depict performances of gendered visibility wherein Black women negotiate the paradox of their visibility within public space. As sports history and sports scholarship reproduces the biases and absences of Black women's participation in sports, *Love and Basketball*'s and *Juwanna Mann*'s fictionalized accounts challenge popular culture through their representations of Black women's sporting prowess. Both films' conceptions of “playing like a man” trouble the ways in which we understand how masculinity and femininity are mutually constitutive in women's sporting

⁴¹¹ Sarah Banet-Weiser, “Hoop Dreams: Professional Basketball and the Politics of Race and Gender,” *Journal of Sport & Social Issues* 23.4 (November 1999), 403.

⁴¹² *Ibid.*, 404.

performances. In doing so, both films narrate alternatives to dominant histories and experiences of women in sports and project and represent narratives concerning Black women's lived and imagined sporting experiences.

Conclusion:

The Black Sporting Body and Critical Muscle Memory

Throughout *Sporting Bodies, Displaying History*, I have argued that contemporary sports films contain a documentary impulse at both the level of the narrative and embodied performance. I have explained how sports films ground themselves in an historical real and literally and figuratively choreograph history on screen. To demonstrate this literal process, I addressed how sports films use sports history as source material. In addition, sports films use editing, cinematography, actor training, and sports consultants to establish a sporting world on screen grounded in reality wherein sports events look and sound like real athletic contests. In figuratively choreographing history in sports films, I explored how representations of Black sporting bodies implicitly reference, at the level of embodied performance, historical narratives concerning Black peoples' lived experiences.

Throughout my textual analysis of sports films, I paid particular attention to historical context to demonstrate how these films, mythologized through filmic and generic conventions, represent, reference, and relate to Black sporting and non-sporting embodied histories in both film and American society. In doing this, I framed how sports films' documentary impulse blurs the cinematic and social world, making sports films a privileged genre to analyze the historicity in representations of Black sporting bodies in motion and contest. In grounding my film analysis of Black sporting bodies within sports films' documentary impulse, this dissertation asserts that, through critical analysis of embodiment and performance, the referenced and related contexts that sports films evoke are just as important as the particular instance being represented on screen.

Therefore, in this dissertation, I argued that representations of Black sporting bodies convey an historical force that exceeds the narrative constructions, constraints, and biases of sports iconography and popular culture representations of Black bodies and their experiences, specifically Black representation in Hollywood sports films. As Chapter One explained, the Black sporting body is an historical contestant that bears witness to and challenges hegemonic discourses on sports, history, and the playing out of Black lived as well as imagined experiences. To this point, representations of the Black sporting body are mutable subjects that are both situated within and supersede the film's diegesis. In establishing this rhetorical framework of the Black sporting body as an historical contestant, I argued that because of the historical violence inscribed upon the cinematic Black body representations of the Black sporting body have always been invested with surplus meaning. The individual Black athlete on screen functions always as more than just a singular representation. Taking this fact into account, I argued that the Black sporting body functions as an individuated multiplicity, a singular figure that represents, references, and relates to multiple, individuated sporting and non-sporting embodied histories and experiences within specific contexts.

To this point, I provided a conceptual framework for this dissertation that uses theories of embodiment and performance to focus on how, specifically, an analysis of Black embodied performance critically intervenes in dominant modes of sports film criticism, particularly criticism on race and representation. By using interdisciplinary theories of Black embodiment and performance to analyze narrative sports themes of triumph and defeat, dissent, and gendered visibility, my dissertation shifted away from sports film scholarship that focuses on historical changes in Black representation as well as moved beyond a generic focus on dominant sports tropes including heroism, teamwork, celebrity, and nostalgia. By centering my analysis on Black

embodied performance, I have argued that the Black body in sports films articulates a complex representational web of cultural meaning and signification about Black history and Black experiences.

Throughout this dissertation I have, like the photographic work of Hank Willis Thomas discussed in the Introduction, tried to render explicit the implicit connections between Black embodied experience, performance, sports, social history, and popular culture. Not only did I evaluate sports iconography and ideologies in my dissertation, I demonstrated how an attention to framing and context in sports films structures how to read representations of Black sporting bodies in/as history. In many ways, my conceptual framework privileges theories of embodiment and performance to explore how representations of Black sporting bodies illustrate what James Baldwin describes in *Stranger in the Village*: “People are trapped in history and history is trapped in them.”⁴¹³ My emphasis on the Black sporting body as/in history shapes this dissertation’s engagement with sports films documentary impulse and the Black body as an individuated multiplicity that is able to harbor/create the experiences of multiple, individuated bodies within specific historical contexts.

Therefore, throughout this dissertation, I have focused on how the Black sporting body represents, references, and relates to history within the film’s diegesis and beyond. By focusing on specific embodied performances within each chapter’s narrative theme, I was able to move beyond looking at representations of Black sporting bodies at face-value to explore the obscured embodied histories and experiences through an analysis that bridges aesthetic, critical, and historical contextualization.

⁴¹³ James Baldwin, “Strangers in the Village,” in *The Norton Anthology of African American Literature*, Second Edition, eds. Henry Louis Gates Jr. and Nellie Y. McKay (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 2004): 1707.

Specifically in Chapter Two's focus on performances of triumph and defeat, I evaluated how Black sporting bodies perform triumph and defeat. In framing my textual analysis of sports films within narratives of winning and losing, I addressed how triumph and defeat become both an embodied performance and an affective state. In doing so, I explored how performances of triumph and defeat as well as its shadow performances of defeat as triumph and triumph as defeat reference and relate to other sporting and non-sporting embodied histories and experience of triumph and defeat.

Chapter Three's analysis of performances of dissent centered the sports and social history of Olympians Tommie Smith and John Carlos. In critiquing how Hollywood sports films construct dissent within narrative of "Black firsts," I considered dissent in sports films as one that evokes or engenders the specific Olympic moment of Smith's and Carlos's act of protest. I argued that performances of dissent are refusals to "play the game" of sports and social/racial injustice. In doing so, I explored how Smith's and Carlos's acts of dissent frames and contextualizes representations of dissent in sports films about Black resistance.

Chapter Four's focus on gendered visibility spoke back to the gender imbalance of the previous chapters. The representations of Black female sporting bodies in sports films is dismal. Through evaluating the history of women in sports and how that informs and shapes women's representation in sports films, I demonstrated how sports are considered the domain of men and the expression of masculinity. In this chapter, I highlighted the fact that there is little sports scholarship on Black athletes and very few sports films with Black female protagonists, rendering them illegible within sports cinema and sports social history. Through analyzing two fictional sports films about Black women, I explored how their female protagonists negotiate the perils of "playing like a man."

Throughout all of these chapters, I paid particular attention to how representations of Black sporting bodies function as individuated multiplicities and analyzed the contemporary sports films I discuss for their documentary impulse at both the level of the narrative and the level of embodied performance. As I move forward with this project, I will expand the number of narrative performance themes I discuss. I plan to research and explore performances of “Black firsts” (which are only discussed briefly in Chapter Three) and performances of the transnational Black body in sports films.

In the future, I will expand on how I read Black sporting bodies as communicative bodies, refining my project to take into account how spectatorial experience and the concept of the Black body as an individuated multiplicity shape the historical experiences invoked by the documentary impulse in sports films. In this sense, I will investigate how performances of Black bodies in motion and contest move from double-voiced to double-bodied texts which speak of/as repositories of a specific kind of Black critical memory for Black spectators.

To do this, I will mobilize Harvey Young’s description of Black critical memory. Influenced by Houston Baker’s examination of Black agency within “Black memory” as individuated recollections, Young explains that “[critical] memory is the act of reflecting upon and sharing recollections of embodied black experience” where “if we identify blackness as an idea projected across a body, the projection not only gets incorporated within the body but also influences the ways that it views other bodies.”⁴¹⁴ The meanings attached to Black bodies create a shared experience. As a result, Young argues that “critical memory assists the process of identifying similarities—shared experiences and attributes of being and becoming—among black

⁴¹⁴ Young, *Embodying Black Experience*, 19. See Houston A. Baker Jr., *Critical Memory: Public Spheres, African American Writing, and Black Fathers and Sons in America* (Athens: The University of Georgia Press, 2001).

folk not by presuming that black bodies have the same memories but by acknowledging that related histories create experiential overlap.”⁴¹⁵ As well, he attests that “critical memory invites consideration of past practices that have affected the lives and shaped the experiences of black folk.”⁴¹⁶ Critical memory highlights the process of looking back into time, a temporal evaluation that is done from the present moment. Young explains that in looking back, “the appeal of critical memory is that it grants us access to past experiences of select individuals. At the same time, it does not bind us to their (or our) present reality.”⁴¹⁷ In this dissertation’s analyses of representations of Black sporting bodies, I suggest that sports films dramatize how the Black body can function as a looking glass and repository of critical memory that allows for attention to historical specificity and variability based on shared experience. In this sense, a focus on critical memory can assist in the process of uncovering the embodied historical resonances evidenced in representations of Black sporting bodies in motion and contest for Black spectators.

Specific to this project’s future directions, I will reinterpret and develop this notion of critical memory to address athletes’ bodies in sports films as a kind of “critical muscle memory,” a movement-enacted process of recollection and reflection on shared Black experiences represented in and beyond the film’s diegesis. For Black spectators, I contend that critical muscle memory effects the historical experiences invoked by the documentary impulse in sports films. Literally speaking, muscle memory is a term that comes out of human kinetics, a study of

⁴¹⁵ Young, *Embodying Black Experience*, 18.

⁴¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 19.

⁴¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 19-20.

the relationship between “the motions of bodies and the forces acting upon them.”⁴¹⁸ “Regarded as an inherent property of muscles,” muscle memory is the “ability to reproduce past movements” without necessarily conscious effort.⁴¹⁹ A form of motor learning, muscle memory is procedural, meaning it consolidates specific motor tasks into memory through repetition of physical action. In a literal sense, I suggest that muscles, which are the results of regiments of exertion and exercise, rules and discipline, and physical and psychic competence, are not only etched into and protrude from the human form but they also form the body into a literal and figurative instrument capable of spectacular embodied performance(s). This literal notion of forming the body’s agency, one that rests within the body’s memory as musculature, can be abstracted to metaphorically describe the process of indexing past social, political, and cultural movements and related Black experiences.

Therefore, I take this literal process and consider, figuratively, how the notion of a critical muscle memory underscores an internalized, shared experience of Black past movements that are acted out and contested over time by and through representations of the Black sporting body. Therefore, in focusing on the critical muscle memory present in Black sporting bodies, I can connect representations of Black athletes to the embodied histories and experience of sporting and non-sporting Black bodies together and bind them to broader historical narratives of social movements and political contestation that resonate with Black spectators. In doing so, I will show how the literal and figurative embodied movements of one body—as individual signature—and movements of past bodies—as collective history—converge into complementary and conflicting texts of embodied history and performance for spectators. As I move this project

⁴¹⁸ *Oxford English Dictionary*, n. “kinetics,” accessed May 29, 2012. <http://www.oed.com>.

⁴¹⁹ *Oxford English Dictionary*, n. “muscle memory,” accessed May 29, 2012. <http://www.oed.com>.

forward, in bridging this dissertation's intervention into dominant sports film criticism via theories of embodiment and performance with an exploration of critical muscle memory, I hope to further develop a methodological framework that engages both Black embodied performance and Black spectatorial experience through a complex understanding of the documentary impulse in sports films.

Filmography:

Films Analyzed

Introduction:

The Blind Side (John Lee Hancock, 2009)

Chapter 1:

On the Shoulders of Giants (Deborah Morales, 2011)

Chapter 2:

Above the Rim (Jeff Pollack, 1994)

Coach Carter (Thomas Carter, 2005)

Cool Runnings (Jon Turteltaub, 1993)

Friday Night Lights (Peter Berg, 2004)

Glory Road (James Gartner, 2006)

He Got Game (Spike Lee, 1998)

Hoop Dreams (Steve James, 1994)

More Than a Game (Kristopher Belman, 2008)

Rocky (John Avildsen, 1976)

Sunset Park (Steve Gomer, 1996)

Through the Fire (Alistair Christopher and Jonathan Hock, 2005)

Chapter 3:

Ali (Michael Mann, 2001)

Hour Glass (Haile Gerima, 1971)

Remember the Titans (Boaz Yakin, 2000)

Chapter 4:

A League of Their Own (Penny Marshall, 1992)

Girlfight (Karyn Kusama, 2000)

Juwanna Mann (Jesse Vaughn, 2001)

Love and Basketball (Gina Prince Bythewood, 2000)

Stick It (Jennifer Bendinger, 2006)

Films Referenced:

42 (Brian Helgeland, 2013)

Air Bud (Charles Martin Smith, 1997)

All That Heaven Allows (Douglas Sirk, 1955)

Angels in the Outfield (William Dear, 1994)

Bend it Like Beckham (Gurinder Chadham, 2002)

Blue Crush (John Stockwell, 2002)

Body and Soul (Robert Rossen, 1947)

Branded (Heidi Ewing and Rachel Grady, 2013)

Bull Durham (Ron Shelton, 1988)

Bush Mama (Haile Gerima, 1975)

Coach (Bess Kargman, 2013)

Color Adjustment (Marlon T. Riggs, 1992)

D2: The Mighty Ducks (Sam Weisman, 1993)

D3: The Mighty Ducks (Robert Lieberman, 1996)

Damn Yankees (George Abbot and Stanley Donen, 1958)

Eddie (Steve Rash, 1996)

Fast Girls (Regan Hall, 2011)

Finding Christa (Camille Billops and James V. Hatch, 1991)

Gracie (David Guggenheim, 2007)

Gridiron Gang (Phil Joanou, 2006)

Heart of the Game (Ward Serrill, 2005)

Hoosiers (David Anspaugh, 1986)

In Search of Our Fathers (Marco Williams, 1992)

Invincible (Ericson Core, 2006)

Kobe Doin' Work (Spike Lee, 2009)

Little Giants (Duwayne Durham, 1994)

Major League (David S. Ward, 1989)

Marion Jones: Press Pause (John Singleton, 2010).

Miracle (Peter Berg, 2004)

Million Dollar Arm (Craig Gillespie, 2014)

Million Dollar Baby (Clint Eastwood, 2004)

Moneyball (Bennett Miller, 2011)

Necessary Roughness (Stan Dragoti, 1991)

Penitentiary, II, III (Jamaa Fanaka, 1979, 1982, 1987)

Personal Best (Robert Towne, 1982)

Pumping Iron II: The Women (George Butler, 1985)

Raging Bull (Martin Scorsese, 1980)

Rocky II (Sylvester Stallone, 1979)

Rocky III (Sylvester Stallone, 1982)

Rocky IV (Sylvester Stallone, 1985)

Rocky V (John Avildsen, 1990)

Rocky Balboa (Sylvester Stallone, 2006)

Sankofa (Haile Gerima, 1993)

Secretariat (Randall Wallace, 2010)

Slap Shot (George Roy Hill, 1977)

Space Jam (Joe Pytka, 1996)

Stella Dallas (King Vidor, 1937)

Sugar (Anna Boden and Ryan Fleck, 2008)

Suzanne (Camille Billops and James V. Hatch, 1982)

Swoopes (Hannah Strom, 2013)

Talladega Nights: A Ballad of Ricky Bobby (Adam McKay, 2006)

The Anderson Monarchs (Eugene Martin, 2013)

The Big Green (Holly Goldberg Sloan, 1995)

The Cutting Edge (Paul Michael Glasser, 1992)

The Gabby Douglas Story (Gregg Champion, 2014)

The Game Plan (Andy Fickman, 2007)

The Greatest (Tom Gries and Monte Hellman, 1977)

The Jackie Robinson Story (Alfred E. Green, 1950)

The Longest Yard (Robert Aldrick, 1974)

The Longest Yard (Peter Segal, 2005)

The Mighty Ducks (Stephen Herek, 1992)

The Rookie (John Lee Hancock, 2002)

Tongues Untied (Marlon T. Riggs, 1989)

Training Rules (Dee Mosbacher and Fawn Yacker, 2009)

Varsity Blues (Brian Robbins, 1999)

Venus Vs. (Ava DuVernay, 2013)

When We Were Kings (Leon Gast, 1996)

Whip-It (Drew Barrymore, 2009)

Wildcats (Michael Ritchie, 1986)

Wilma (Bud Greenspan, 1977)

Wimbledon (Richard Loncraine, 2004)

Films Conferred:

Any Given Sunday (Oliver Stone, 1999)

Bingo Long Traveling All-Stars (John Badham, 1976)

Blue Chips (William Friedkin, 1994)

Brian's Song (Buzz Kulik, 1971)

Bring it On (Peyton Reed, 2002)

Field of Dreams (Phil Aden Robinson, 1999)

Finding Forrester (Gus Van Sant, 2000)

Hardball (Brian Robbins, 2001)

Heart of the Game (Ward Serrill, 2005)

Hoop Reality (Lee Davis, 2008)

Jerry Maguire (Cameron Crowe, 1996)

No Crossover: The Trial of Allen Iverson (Steve James, 2010)

Not Just a Game (Dave Zirin, 2010)

'O' (Tim Blake Nelson, 2001)

Pride (Sunu Gonera, 2007)

Soul of the Game (Kevin Rodney Sullivan, 1996)

The Express (Gary Felder, 2008)

The Great White Hope (Martin Ritt, 1970)

The Hurricane (Norman Jewison, 1999)

The Longshots (Fred Durst, 2008)

This Is a Game Ladies (Peter Schnall, 2004)

Unforgiveable Blackness (Ken Burns, 2004)

White Men Can't Jump (Ron Shelton, 1992)

Without Bias (Kirk Fraser, 2010)

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