COMPETING IDENTITIES: REPRESENTATIONS OF THE BLACK FEMALE SPORTING BODY FROM 1960 TO THE PRESENT

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ABSTRACT

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The bodies of African American women athletes have historically constituted a site where the vast, and largely problematic, complexities of gender and race are revealed and contested. I approach this study through an interpretive textual analysis that examines how representations of black female sporting bodies --Wilma Rudolph in the early 1960s, Debi Thomas in the late 1980s, and last, Serena Williams in the late 1990s—signify cultural messages. Specifically, I turn to mainstream media such as magazines, newspapers, and commercial advertisements to unpack the meanings constructed around their bodies and to interrogate dominant discourses about race and gender. Ultimately, this project 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. The significance of this study lies in how perceptions of the bodies of African American women athletes allow the theorizing of citizenship, race, gender and nation.

By turning to representations of black female athletes, I examine how the intersection of race, gender, class, nation, and sexuality frames the black female
subject and how these women constantly negotiate and navigate these discursive boundaries to make rightful claims to society’s resources. In negotiating space in American society, Black women have had to employ various strategies such as the politics of race and respectability. Individual Black women understood respectability in different ways depending on their social, political, and cultural context. The reconfiguration of the discourse of respectability speaks to the ways in which race and gender are rearticulated around the Black female sporting body throughout different historical moments.

The two themes that have emerged and remained constant are the persistence of racism—blatant racism in the 1960s, color-blind racism in the 1980s, and commodity racism in the 1990s and early twenty-first century, and secondly, the struggle by African American women to carve out their own self-defined space within a racist and sexist culture.
This dissertation is dedicated to my daughter, Raquel Naomi Bell. Know that you are beautiful and that you are loved beyond eternity.
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CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION

On the April 4th, 2007 edition of MSNBC’s *Imus in the Morning*, host Don Imus referred to the Rutgers University women’s basketball team, which is comprised of mostly Black players, as “nappy-headed hos.” The show’s executive producer, Bernard McGuirk added that “they are hard-core hos.” Imus’ sports announcer, Sid Rosenberg, continued “the more I look at Rutgers, they look exactly like the (National Basketball Association’s) Toronto Raptors,” and McGuirk responded “The (Memphis) Grizzlies would be more appropriate.” This public exchange between white males exemplifies a common discourse of the black female body in mainstream America. The bodies of African American women athletes have historically constituted a site where the vast, and largely problematic, complexities of gender and race are revealed and contested. Values and ideologies are not only reflected in public comments about black females, but also in how Americans respond to these comments. In other words, as Susan Bordo puts it, the body is a “text of culture.”¹ The purpose of my dissertation is to interrogate the cultural messages that are signified in the representations of African American women athletes in American society from 1960 to the present. Specifically, I turn to images of Wilma Rudolph, Debi Thomas, and Serena Williams in mainstream media such as magazines, newspapers, and commercial advertisements to unpack the meanings constructed around their bodies and to interrogate dominant discourses about race and gender. Ultimately, this project 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.

The significance of this study lies in how perceptions of the bodies of African American women athletes allow the theorizing of citizenship, race, gender and nation. For the most part, scholars have turned to black male athletes such as Joe Louis, Jackie Robinson, and more recently, Michael Jordan and Tiger Woods to examine these questions, while overlooking African American women athletes. In the compelling anthology, *All the Women are White, All the Blacks are Men, but Some of Us Are Brave*, Black Women’s Studies, Gloria Hall and Barbara Smith, address the neglect of black women by Women’s Studies and Black Studies.² Today, similarly, African American women athletes have received little attention in these fields and others including Sports Studies and history. Even Black Women’s Studies has not yet substantively addressed the cultural significance of the representations of black female sporting bodies. Thus, this work brings together black feminist theory, feminist theory, sports studies, culture studies, and history to examine the construction of social identities of African American women at different key moments of transformation in the United States. I argue that representations of African American women athletes are a valuable tool in tracing the ways in which the legacy of their belonging and social standing mediates their contemporary citizenship. Justification for access to resources, citizenship rights, and inclusion to America’s polity for people of color is often linked to their images in the public sphere. To this end, cultural images are created to justify which groups of
individuals have a legitimate right to receive specific societal benefits, goods, and services. By turning to representations of black female athletes, I examine how the intersection of race, gender, class, nation, and sexuality frames the black female subject and how these women constantly negotiate and navigate these discursive boundaries to make rightful claims to society’s resources. In negotiating space in American society, Black women have had to employ various strategies such as the politics of race and respectability. Individual Black women understood respectability in different ways depending on their social, political, and cultural context. The reconfiguration of the discourse of respectability speaks to the ways in which race and gender are rearticulated around the Black female sporting body throughout different historical moments. For instance, in the 1960s the discourse of race and respectability was about racial uplift, while in the 1980s the discourse of respectability as a strategy centered on the insignificance of race. This malleable discourse, then, reveals how Black women athletes situated themselves in an ever-changing nation. This project examines how the discourse of respectability was shaped differently around the Black female sporting body depending on the social and political climate. In short, the purpose of this dissertation is to illustrate how representations of the black female form reflects and mediates African American Women’s citizenship and how these representations are sites of contestation over social identities.

I approach this study through an interpretive textual analysis that examines how representations of black female sporting bodies signify cultural messages. This project is organized chronologically, starting with Wilma Rudolph in the early 1950s, Debi
Thomas in the late 1980s, and last, Serena Williams in the late 1990s. This approach allows me to gauge shifting notions of race and gender. More importantly, it examines the trajectory of mainstream America’s attitudes about the black female form. Do representations of Rudolph’s black sporting body signify the same cultural message as Thomas in the ‘80s or Williams in the ‘90s? Is there change or have attitudes remained on a continuum? Since slavery, African American women have been plagued by pervasive stereotypes that continue to devalue their bodies and denigrate their existence. Given these stereotypes, how do bodies of African American women athletes in the public sphere impact black womanhood in the imagined nation? Do sporting bodies transform negative images of African American women by offering more complex and positive representations?

In this first chapter, I introduce key theories that have informed this project. For example, Stuart Hall points out that representation connects meaning to culture. A constructionist approach tells us that what the body comes to mean is the result of social interaction. It is cultural participants who place meaning on the body; meanings emerge from various discourses. Hall describes discourses as ways of referring to or constructing knowledge about a particular topic of practice: a cluster of ideas, images, and practices which provides ways of talking about a particular topic. These ways of talking about a particular topic not only construct meaning. They also, as Michel Foucault theorized, produce knowledge. Therefore, representations of African American athletes in various mainstream media construct race and gender; they produce knowledge about the black female body. I also engage Black feminist theory to
explore the discursive formations of the black female body. Theorists such as bell hooks, Patricia Hill-Collins, and Beverly Guy-Sheftall and others analyze the body as a text and a site of political struggle. They also acknowledge the profound importance of the story the bodies of African American women tell about historic and cultural realities. I also engage Evelyn Brooks Higginbotham’s concept of the politics of respectability to explain the various meanings constructed around images of Black female athletes. The idea that cultural representations are political is one of the major themes of media and cultural theory of the last decades. Attention to representation allows us to map dominant ideologies as they circulate through culture and construct gendered, classed, and racialized bodies.

Chapter Two focuses on Olympic track star Wilma Rudolph in the 1960s. Her entrance into America’s public sphere is marked by social protest movements and a quest for a renewed black identity. Michael Omi and Howard Winant observe that such movements redefine the meaning of racial identity and consequently, race itself. For African American women, a renewed black identity in the 1960s also included rearticulating gender as well as race. They struggled not only against “Jim Crow” but also “Jane Crow.” I contend that representations of Rudolph were instrumental in reshaping identities for Black womanhood. At the same time, her sporting body signifies the dilemma of competing identities. On the one hand, her athletic success affirmed the dignity and capabilities of African American women as productive citizens. On the other hand, she could also appear to confirm derogatory images of Black women since women’s track was constructed as a “mannish sport.”
Representations of Rudolph tell us much about how gender mattered in the reconfiguration of Black identity. For example, embedded in Rudolph’s representations is a bourgeois respectability rooted in racial uplift ideology. Rudolph utilized a discourse of race and respectability to compete against racist stereotypes of Black women track athletes as well as working-class Black women as biologically inferior.

Chapter Three interrogated images of 1988 bronze medalist Debi Thomas, the first African American woman to compete in Olympic figure skating. Contextualizing her sporting body in the social and political climate of the 1980s helps explain the various cultural messages constructed around her body. Such an explanation provides an understanding as to why Thomas’s sporting body signifies in different ways from Rudolph’s sporting body. For one, the signs of Blackness in the 1980s rearticulated a womanhood that offered the perception of racial equality and a level playing field. Thomas’s sporting body was proof that progress had been gained from the struggles of the ‘60s. I discuss these differences by analyzing race and gender ideologies during the Reagan and Bush administrations. Much has been said about the cultural implications of Black sporting bodies during the Reagan /Bush administrations, yet women athletes have not been included in these scholarly analyses. Thus an analysis of Rudolph’s sporting body tells us much about mediated constructions of Black womanhood, the sociopolitical climate, and the transformations taking place in American culture.

Patricia Hill-Collins suggests that the mass media generates class-specific images of Black women that help justify and shape the new racism of desegregated, color-blind America. With the new racism, the power relations of race remain hidden. A color-
blind society is one example of the new racism. In a color-blind society, racism is a less blatant form of racism. It is the belief that the passage of civil rights legislation eliminated racially discriminatory practices and that “any problems that Blacks may experience now are of their own doing.” Thus America, as the myth goes, is now a nation where desegregation and multiculturalism have made equality possible for all irrespective to race, class, gender, and sexuality. Additionally, the discourse of race and respectability once used as a strategy of racial uplift no longer functions in the same way in representations of Thomas’s sporting body. The signs of blackness as read on the female sporting body rearticulate new meanings in the 1980s. Thus, I argue that representations of Thomas help shape a discourse about racial integration and African American women’s place in it. Thomas’s image on the front cover of *Time* magazine and other images of her in mainstream magazines such as *Newsweek, Sports Illustrated, Seventeen* and others reflect a significant social site of cultural struggle for shaping, redefining, contesting, and representing claims about the place and space for Black women in American society. I examine how the competing categories of race, gender, nation and sexuality construct Thomas’s social identity. Thomas’s dichotomously constructed image challenges stereotypical constructions of race and gender for African American womanhood while simultaneously reinforcing white upper-middle –class heterosexual ideals.

In Chapter Four, I turn to tennis star Serena Williams to analyze the black female sporting body in American society during the late 1990s and into the 21st century. No other African American female athlete has achieved the celebrity status of Williams.
From her appearance in a “cat-suit” in 2002 and in her image in television and print advertisements—McDonalds and Wrigley’s gum—that followed, the multiple ways she has been represented speaks to how meanings constructed around the Black female body are not stable. Williams’ sporting body offers various messages about the Black female form. She signifies in both similar and dissimilar ways from those achieved by Thomas and Rudolph. Again, much of this can be attributed to the social and political climate in the 1990s. Here I contextualize Williams in a neoliberal democracy and the commodification of black culture to reveal who benefits when a particular spin or version of Williams is promulgated, accepted and naturalized as “the way things are.” I investigate Williams’ polysemic blackness by contextualizing her female body within the contemporary capitalist political economy. Unlike the images of Thomas and Rudolph, the politics of respectability takes on a masculine form in the images of Williams’ sporting body. Here, I draw from the work of Victoria W. Wolcott who discerns between a feminine respectability centered on bourgeois Victorian ideology and a masculine respectability centered on more masculine ideology of self-determination.\textsuperscript{11} The concept of a masculine respectability also engages hip-hop culture; the sign of Williams is a product of hip-hop culture. How do ideas of consumption and commodification frame articulations of race and gender? How then does Williams’ black female sporting body serve as a site upon which these articulations manifest? Ultimately, I argue that an intertextual reading of Williams in these advertisements offers a counterhegemonic space for agency.
In the last chapter, I juxtapose representations of Rudolph, Thomas, and Williams to evaluate the constructions of social identities of African American women at different key moments of socio-cultural transformation in the United States. Through various shifts in the representation and conceptualization of race and gender from the 1960s to the present, Black female sporting bodies continue to serve as sites of ideological conflict between dominant and historically marginalized groups over the construction of social identities. Here I extrapolate how the competing discourses of race, gender, class, sexuality and nation operate in different ways depending on the particular socio-political climate. Still, racial and gender hierarchies remain constant as they change their forms to appear natural and common-sensical from one generation to the next. This hegemonic strategy, or what I call shape shifting, disguises these racial and gender ideologies in order to appeal to the masses, thereby gaining their consent. Overall, the dominant discourse of the black female body as constructed through mainstream media impacts how America comes to know Black womanhood; as a result, this knowing circulates cultural messages about Black womanhood which influences social policy. My focus here is to examine how these representations might impact social policy. To date, whether or not social policies have benefited African American women and the role that these representations might have played remains the subject for further study. Most importantly, the conclusion also explores how black female sporting bodies create space for oppositional moments within the various discursive confines.
The Black Female Body in American Culture

Black women’s bodies have historically symbolized a site where the vast and largely problematic complexities of gender and race are represented. Both black and white feminists agree that the “female body is a contested site” that remains a “battleground for competing ideologies.” These competing ideologies arise because of the social construction of race and gender. Given the various meanings placed on the body, women and more specifically, women of color have fought against cultural hegemony to define their own sense of self. There is the popular notion that race and gender are natural and therefore fixed, can not be altered. Many scholars disagree. They point out that such a notion exists because it allows the dominant group—white and male—to maintain power. In fact there is nothing natural about race or gender. Scholar Audrey Smedley contends that “race, then, originated, not as a product of scientific investigations but as a folk concept; it initially had no basis, no point of origin, in science or the naturalistic studies.” Similar to the construction of race Judith Lorber notes, “most people find it had to believe that gender is constantly created and re-created out of human interaction, out of social life, and is the texture and order of that social life. Yet gender, like culture, is a human production that depends on everyone constantly ‘doing gender.’” As a social movement, second-wave feminism raised consciousness about the exploitation and control of women’s bodies. Elizabeth V. Spelman traces the difference constructed on the female body back to ancient views. She confronts Plato’s question of women’s nature and his “somatophobia: the body is seen as the source of all the undesirable traits a human being could have, and women’s lives
are spent manifesting those traits.” In the mind/body dualism, the body is looked at as the weaker of the two. The body dies, gets sick, causes pain (and pleasure). It is material. The mind is associated with the immaterial, reasoning and intellect, the soul, the part that survives after death. It's platonically linked to males, who both Plato and Aristotle insisted had superior reasoning to women; other people from different cultures, and animals who did not show this reasoning ability were barbaric, inferior. Thus the body for women has historically been a site of oppression and degradation. In addition, because of the intersection of race and gender, African American women, as France Beale noted in the 1970s, are doubly burdened. The interlocking oppressions of African American women further complicate the female body as a contested site of competing ideologies.

American attitudes toward the black female body have a long and troubled historical discourse. Black feminist theorists have documented how the black female body has been interpreted, manipulated, and given to us particularly in American culture. In “The Body Politic: Black Female Sexuality and the Nineteenth Century Euro-American Imagination,” Beverly Guy-Sheftall informs us that in order to properly understand the history of American attitudes about the Black female body, we must begin with a close look at how both blackness and femaleness figured within the European imagination. Guy-Sheftall states “by asserting a sexual link between Black women and apes, Europeans marked this group of women as lewd, lascivious, and savage—the antithesis of virtuous, European women.” The idea of linking Black women and apes dates back to the Middle Ages. To begin to understand American
attitudes about the black female form, we can turn to the plight of Sarah Baartman; her narrative tells a horrific story of difference in 19th Britain. Her story is significant in many ways. For one, American race sensibilities are taken from English ideology towards human differences. In Difference and Pathology: Stereotypes of Sexuality, Race, and Madness, Sander L. Gilman explores the iconography of female sexuality and observes how “Baartman’s sexual parts serve as the central images for the black female throughout the nineteenth century.”

The case of Sarah, or Saartji Baartman, the so-called “Hottentot Venus” illustrates the power of discursive constructions of the black female body in the public sphere that remains with us today (see figure 1). Baartman was a young Khoisan woman taken from South Africa and coerced into public performances in Paris and London where she was exhibited like a wild beast by a British doctor and a French animal trainer in the early nineteenth century. Because of European fascination with her “unusual” anatomy, mainly her well-endowed hips and buttocks, Baartman became a public spectacle. It was also rumored that she had abnormally shaped genitalia. Europeans’ obsession in watching the mythically shaped Baartman facilitated the transformation of Baartman’s Black female body into a site of sexual abnormality and therefore deviance. If Europeans could show through Baartman’s sexual parts that she was inherently different, then they would have sufficient evidence that “blacks were a separate (and needless to say, lower) race, as different from the European as the proverbial orangutan.” Essentially, Baartman serves as a tragic example of what Black female bodies signified in the 19th and early 20th century, a site whereby “difference” could be
physically located and measured. For viewers of Baartman and for the scientists of the day, the meanings placed of her body situated her slightly above animals in the nonfactual chart of the Great Chain of Being. As a result, Black women were placed in binary opposition to white women. To this end, Baartman also served as a visible representation of this difference. I theorize in “Competing Identities” that the ambivalence, fetishism, and disavowal, which lead to commodification of the black female body did not end with Sarah Baartman, but continues until the present.

The culturally constructed meaning around Baartman’s body that explained her difference can also been seen in early America. This explanation of difference was used to justify Black female labor. Nowhere is this more evident than in African slavery in North America. Relegating black Africans to permanent indentured servitude solved several problems for the predominately white, male ruling class. For one, it quelled class conflict between planters and servants (both black and white), and two, gave the early colonists a reliable supply of labor, thus fortifying capitalist greed. All of this was contingent upon the social construction of race and gender; to this point, black women’s bodies served as a forced receptacle for nation building. In other words, the American economy largely depended on the institution of slavery which was solidified through the black women’s bodies. For instance, by American law the child of an enslaved black mother was also enslaved, no matter the status of the father. Moreover, her child was the property of the slave owner. Adrienne Davis labels American slavery as a “sexual economy” in that “enslaved women were force to perform sexual and reproductive
labor to satisfy the economic, political, and personal interests of white men of the elite class.” Thus, slavery’s meaning was largely constructed on the black female body. While obviously racially supremacist, slavery was also fundamentally a system of gender supremacy. For Black women, their gender was constructed through their sexuality much like Sarah Baartman. Darlene Clark Hine notes “another aspect of black women under slavery took the form of the white master’s consciously constructed view of black female sexuality. This construct, which was designed to justify his own sexual passion toward her, also blamed the female slave for the sexual exploitation she experienced at the hands of her master.” Again we see how, like Baartman, slave women were objects of a desire that were both indulged and at the same time denied. They were constructed through their body parts. Seen as property and fragmented bodies, which the slave owner could use for his own benefit, slave women were colonial commodities. Following emancipation, Black women’s work remained in the domestic arena, and they continued to be defined through their physicality and usefulness of her body. Whether slave or free, Black women have been associated with arduous labor. For the nearly four hundred years of her presence in the new world, the Black woman’s work has been that of a domestic laborer. She has cleaned, cooked, nursed, as both paid and unpaid worker, in the homes of white families. She has also created a domestic sector of households and communities in the Black community for herself and her people, but it was her face put on a pancake box as an always serving Aunt Jemima that became the enduring emblem of her laboring life (see figure 2).
Furthermore, slavery left a legacy whereby physical differences were a major tool by which the dominant whites constructed and maintained social barriers and economic inequalities; that is, the white, male ruling class consciously sought to create social stratification based on these visible differences. Given both constructs of race and gender well after emancipation, white male bodies remained positioned on top of the hierarchy while black, female bodies were at the very bottom. In *American Anatomies*, Robyn Wiegman calls such a hierarchy “Western economies of visibility.” In describing how corporeal identity functions in modern citizenship, Wiegmen notes the “disproportionate system in which the universalism ascribe to certain bodies (white, male, propertied) is protected and subtended by the infinite particularity assigned to others (black, female, unpropertied).” She argues, furthermore, that this system is contingent on certain visual relations. Such visual relations have remained constant throughout American history, as evidenced in mainstream deleterious representations of the Black female body.

Contemporary developments of womanhood can be traced back to socially constructed differences of womanhood since the black woman’s status in permanent bondage. Race and gender placed black slave women outside of the tenets of womanhood, and thus they were constructed in binary opposition to white women. Slaver labor and domestic labor marked the black female body as unfeminine and inferior. These binary constructions created during slavery carried over after emancipation. For instance, the nineteenth century “cult of true womanhood” constructed a racialized gender ideology in American society. The tenants of “true
womanhood”—virtue, piety, submissive, purity—placed black women outside constructions of womanhood. Instead, they were constructed in binary opposition to “true womanhood” and as such, their black bodies were considered antithetical to notions of femininity underpinned by “true womanhood.” Evelyn Hammonds asserts that oppositional binaries “seemed to lock black women outside the ideology of womanhood so celebrated in the Victorian era.” A part of this ideology included a beauty aesthetic that privileged white, thin, and straight blonde hair. In short, failing to meet white European ideals of womanhood, black women were often represented in the dominant culture as masculine females lacking in femininity, grace, delicacy, and refinement.

**Representations of Black Womanhood**

In order for the exploitation of black women to seem common-sensical to the masses, they have to be represented in ways that denigrate their existence. Thus stereotypical images of Black womanhood are used to justify this inferior status and their continued placement on the lowest stratum tier in American society. Stuart Hall points out that “representation is an essential part of the process by which meaning is produced and exchanged between members of a culture.” How Black women are represented produces meaning about race and gender. In other words, producers use visual texts as a language system to communicate their ideas about the Black female form. In communicating these ideas, they construct meaning and thus make the world—race and gender—meaningful to others. Michel Foucault identifies this meaning as the production of knowledge through what he called discourse. He
contends that is more than just relations of meaning, but relations of power.\textsuperscript{33} Thus representation of Black womanhood is about representations of power, which is the subject of many Black feminists’ scholarship. Media theorist Ella Shohat cautions us we should constantly question representations:

Each filmic or academic utterance must be analyzed not only in terms of who represents but also of who is being represented for what purpose, at which historical moment, for which location, for which strategies, and in what tone of address.\textsuperscript{34}

Hence to better understand the production of meaning, we should question to what purpose is the person being represented and the historical moments during which various representations emerge. For instance, Patricia Hill-Collins observes that the dominant ideology of the slave era fostered the creation of several interrelated, socially constructed controlling images of Black womanhood, each reflecting the dominant group’s interest in maintaining Black women’s subordination.\textsuperscript{35} Hill-Collins uses the term “controlling images” to describe stereotypical representations of Black womanhood. She states that “the authority to define societal values is a major instrument of power, [and]elite groups, in exercising power, manipulate ideas about Black womanhood.”\textsuperscript{36} Some of these controlling images have included the mammy, jezebel (also the sapphire or hoochie), welfare queen, matriarch, and black lady. These images of Black womanhood in the public sphere have come to shape notions of race and gender in American culture. For instance, the jezebel image emerged during slavery to justify the sexual exploitation of Black women’s bodies. The image of the hoochie is the modern version of the jezebel. Both images serve to construct Black
women’s allegedly deviant sexuality. Like Hill-Collins, K. Sue. Jewell suggests that the
plethora of representations of Black woman, or their cultural images, belies actual Black
women’s limited access to societal resources and institutions. As a result, meanings of
race and gender constructed around the Black female body tell us that she is deviant,
abnormal, sexually promiscuous, wild, emasculating, ugly, not feminine, and not
worthy of protection nor resources.

Realizing that Black womanhood was constructed outside of the “cult of true
womanhood,” Black women understood the power of self-presentation and therefore,
employed the strategy of respectability to prove that they too were virtuous, pious, and
pure. The politics of race and respectability served as a strategy to combat negative
depictions of Black womanhood. In Righteous Discontent: The Women’s Movement in the
Black Baptist Church, 1880-1920, Evelyn Brooks Higginbotham first coined the term
“politics of respectability” to describe the work of the Women’s Convention of the Black
Baptist Church during the Progressive Era. Higginbotham’s examination provides a
useful background to the distinctive history of African American respectability. She
specifically referred to African American’s promotion of temperance, cleanliness of
person and property, thrift, polite manners, and sexual purity. The politics of
respectability entail “reform of individual behavior as a goal in itself and as a strategy
for reform.” Respectability was part of “uplift politics” and had two audiences: African
Americans, who were encouraged to be respectable, and white people, who needed to
be shown that African Americans could be respectable. 37Although African Americans
developed unique ideas about respectability in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries,
much of the historical work on respectability has focused on how Anglo-American society used this discourse. In general, two overlapping discourses of respectability have predominated in Anglo-American society. The first encompassed the values of hard work, thrift, piety, and sexual restraint—values that were, theoretically, accessible to all classes and races and therefore routes of social mobility. This definition was often used to differentiate the "rough" working class from the "respectable" working class in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries in the United States and Great Britain. The second discourse emerged with the rise of the bourgeoisie in the nineteenth century and denoted class status and privilege through dress, deportment, and organizational affiliation. These very broad definitions overlapped in different social contexts and periods, diverging and converging. At times, the "respectable" working class used respectability to point out the hypocrisy of upper-middle-class women and men who were not temperate, religious, or sexually restrained. At other times, cross-class coalitions were constructed around shared notions of respectability.

I draw from Higginbotham’s definition of respectability to examine how this discourse is used in representations of Black female sporting bodies. Not only am I concerned with dominant constructions of Black womanhood by mainstream media, I am also curious as to how African American women athletes presented themselves within the discursive confines. Higginbotham defines a "politics of respectability" through which middle-class and elite black women sought to earn their people a measure of esteem from white America by striving "to win the black lower class's psychological allegiance to temperance, industriousness, thrift, refined manners, and
Victorian sexual morals." This bourgeois respectability received a degree of support from the black working class that gave rise to numerous institutions of racial reform. However, asserts Higginbotham, it also led to class tensions as black elites "disavowed and opposed the culture of the 'folk'--the expressive culture of many poor, uneducated, and 'unassimilated' black men and women." Other historians of black women have built on Higginbotham's formulation in their studies of middle-class and elite black clubwomen and professionals. For instance, in Remaking Respectability: African American Women in Interwar Detroit, Victoria W. Wolcott builds on Higginbotham’s analysis. Clubwomen at the turn of the century used respectability as both a "collective strategy" to enhance the reputation of all African American women and a means to define class distinctions in the black community of Detroit. However, Wolcott’s gender analysis reveals a significant transformation in racial discourse from a focus on bourgeois respectability in the 1910s and 1920s to a more masculine ideology of self-determination during the Great Depression. She argues that when Black female Detroiter's invoked respectability in the 1930s, they most often referred to the respect that African American men demanded in order to protect and defend their homes and neighborhoods. I borrow from both Higginbotham and Wolcott to engage how this reconfiguration of the discourse of race and respectability applies to representations of Rudolph, Thomas, and Williams. Overall, I contend representations of Black female sporting bodies illustrate a shift from bourgeois respectability in the 60s, an American respectability in the 80s, and finally, a masculine respectability in the 90s and moving into the 21st century. For Rudolph, a bourgeois respectability shaped her desire to act as an unblemished
representative of the race and to reform the image of working-class Black women. However, the sociopolitical climate of the 1980s called for a reshaping of the politics of respectability as evidenced in the representations of Debi Thomas. Although there is much debate on when female respectability lost its salience as a reform strategy, by the 1990s as representations of Williams will show, respectability, as a viable strategy, took on the kind of masculine ideology similar to that used by Black women Detroiter.

While the scholarship on the discourse of race and respectability has focused on Black church women, Black club women, and Black women activists, there has been no study on how other Black women in the public sphere, specifically African American athletes, engaged the politics of respectability until now.

Most full length studies concerning representation and Black womanhood focus on television and film from the 1980s to the present. Scholarly research on Black representation emanates primarily from three realms (and combinations thereof): film and television criticism, mass communications theory, and/or as part of larger historical or sociological studies of African Americans. From situation comedies and music videos to television news and talk shows, Black women’s images emerge in virtually all genres, advertisements, and new technological manifestations on network and cable television. Given that the media have the most far-reaching cultural impact and generate the most revenue, it is no wonder that this is the case. The significance of this study is that it is the first study that analyzes how representations of African American athletes construct social identities for Black womanhood.
My analysis of the Black female body draws heavily from the work of Herman Gray who offers much in the examination of media and representation. The attention he gives to representation of African Americans in television greatly informed my study. Particularly helpful is in chapter “Reaganism and the Sign of Blackness.” Here Gray illustrates how the political climate of the Regan era played a critical factor in the constructions of blackness. He observes how television celebrities embodied the rhetoric of Reaganism. Although gender is not a major concern in his studies, he does provide useful information in understanding Black women and representation. He examines the representations of Blacks in mainstream television shows. Gray affirms that the creative vision of white producers predominated even if situations and themes they explored were drawn from African American culture. This was evidenced in Black shows such as the Jeffersons, Good Times, Amen, Sanford and Son, and 227 in the 1970s and early 80s. He contends that for many of the shows based on the situations and experiences of blacks the convention of television production serve to discipline, contain, and ultimately construct a point of view that privileges white middle-class audiences as the ideal viewers and subjects of television stories. Likewise, my study focuses on mainstream production of images of Black women athletes, so I question from whose point of view are these sporting bodies being represented? Although the subjects are African American women, are their identities constructed in ways that affirm a collective Black identity or, as in understanding Gray’s analysis do productions favor a point of view that privileges a white middle-class audience?
What many scholars share in examining African Americans and representations in mainstream media is their investment in representations as a route to African American membership in national identity/culture. Moreover, Gray’s inquiry gets to the heart of most studies on representations and African Americans:

How do we make sense of the proliferation of black images and representation in American commercial and popular culture, and the continued dissatisfaction with and calls for more images of black people in media and popular culture? Is the problem the images themselves or the racism of the cultural producers? And what of this desire for more images? More images of what, exactly? Of what we now have? More images that positively and satisfyingly represent blackness? Perhaps the problem is less with specific images than with the investment in a conception of cultural politics that continues to privilege representation itself as the primary site of hope and critique.43

Gray questions representations of African Americans in mainstream media, culture, and politics. He investigates the shape, shifts, and effects of black struggles over identity, recognition, and representation. My study builds on his investigation of black struggles over identity by exploring how images of African American athletes shape race and gender discourses. Furthermore, I examine how black struggles over identity shift constructions of Black womanhood from 1960 to the present.

The tension surrounding the Black female body---the fact that the body evokes a racialized, gendered, sexualized, and exploitative history—-is evident in twentieth and twenty-first century representations of the Black female body in American popular culture. bell hook’s use of the “oppositional gaze” in Black Looks: Race and Representation proved extremely helpful in articulating how contemporary representational issues are
very much in dialogue with historical issues within both racial and gendered representation. She affirms that “representations of black female bodies in contemporary popular culture rarely subvert and critique images of black female sexuality which were part of the cultural apparatus on nineteenth-century racism and which still shape perceptions today.” Given the fetishism of Sara Baartman, hooks argues that a similar white fascination with black female bodies continue, specifically in the embodied representations of Josephine Baker, Tina Turner, and Vanessa Williams. In her critique of representations of Black women in the fashion world via mainstream magazine and television advertisements, hooks asserts that the new black female model is “gaining greater notoriety as she assumes both the persona of sexually hot ‘savage’ and white-identified black girl.” Representations of Black women in contemporary film continue to place them in “two categories, mammy or slut, and occasionally a combination of the two.” Like Gray, hooks attributes these representations to a racist ideology that controls the production of the images. Hill-Collin’s critique of the “new racism” provides a critical understanding to contemporary representations of Black womanhood in popular culture as well. She employs the term “new racism” similarly to George Lisitz’s “contemporary racism.” Both scholars argue that racism gains its power by going unexamined. White supremacy did not end after colonization. Hill-Collins asserts that “power relations that administer the theater of race in America are now far more hidden.” One strategy of cultural hegemony is the manipulation of ideas within mass media and the use of new techniques that claim racism is over. These “new techniques” include old stereotypes with a new make over. These updated
controlling images are found in contemporary representations of Black female bodies such as the character of Claire Huxtable on The Cosby Show, Pam Grier, Oprah Winfrey, and other actresses on mainstream television shows. She explores a constellation of representations that she claims function as “ideology to justify the new social relations of hyper-ghettoization, unfinished racial desegregation, and efforts to shrink the social welfare state.”

Building on hooks’ critique of the Black woman’s body as a racial and sexual stereotype, in Ain’t I a Beauty Queen: Black Women, Beauty, and the Politics of Race, Maxine Leeds Craig examines Black women as symbols in the rearticulation of race during the 1960s. Craig’s observations about the first Miss Black America pageant in 1968 illuminate the role of representations of Black women in cultural reproduction. Craig points out that the 1968 pageant “challenged racial conventions, reinforced gender norms, and celebrated middle-class aspirations all at the same moment.” By intersecting race, gender, and class, Craig illustrates notions of competing identities as read on the black female body during the 1960s. While Omi and Winant emphasize the role of “intellectuals”, Craig extends the concept of rearticulation to include the remaking of racial meaning in day-to-day life. Craig suggests that “racial meaning is revised from the bottom up in the practice of day-to-day living as well as from the top downward through imagery and language used in mass media and the legal categories imposed by the state.” This process of rearticulation is significant in exploring the sporting bodies of Black women. According to Craig, representations of Black women play critical factors in the process of rearticulating race. Craig also furthers Omi and
Winant’s model by including gender in the process of rearticulating race. Specifically, Craig focuses on beauty and hair. Even though this is her concern, her observations apply to identity, representations, and black womanhood which provide valuable insights to my study on African American athletes:

Racial identities are defined through a continual interplay of individual practice and collective action. Each day of their lives, black women rearticulate the meaning of black racial identity as they position themselves in relation to culturally available images of black womanhood.

Likewise, I contend that mainstream representations of Rudolph, Thomas, and Williams provide culturally available images of black womanhood that influence this rearticulation of black racial identity. As a result, it would be fair to suppose that many African American women turned to these images to help them define their own identity and notions of belonging in U.S. society. Just how Black women were affected by images of Black female sporting bodies is the subject of another study. I’m concerned with how the media constructed their identities and the implications of these representations in understanding black identity. In an interview with Cornell West, bell hooks stresses the importance of discussing the black body:

One of the things we are in great need of is a discourse that deals with the representation of Black bodies. It is no accident that one of the major themes in Shadrazad Ali’s book is the body. By calling into question the way we confront our Black female bodies, Ali takes us back to those 19th century themes of White supremacy: the iconography of Black bodies as represented in the White supremacist imagination. We are doomed to silence and certain forms of sexual repression until we as a people
can speak more openly about our own bodies and our notions of the body in general.  

Hooks call for a discourse that deals with the representation of Black bodies has inspired me to recover Black female sporting bodies from their invisibility. African American athletes do not come into view because of the dominant narrative of sports, but it is the self-determination of these Black athletes that remains at the center of this study. Nonetheless, I question how mainstream media confronts the Black female form and its representation in the White supremacist imagination. I hope that such study will remind the reader of the vital role representations of African American athletes serve in cultural production of race and gender in U.S. society.

**Representations of the Black Female Sporting Body**

The lives of African American athletes are a part of a complex narrative of the relationship of African American women to the United States. By turning to the arena of sports, we can see how racial and gender ideologies are still a significant factor in the ways in which the image of sporting bodies are constructed, a construction that reflects not only athletes but black womanhood in general. How African American athletes are represented in the mainstream media tells us much about the place and space of Black womanhood in national identity. Hall reminds us that the production of critical histories and sociologies of sports has been part of a wider theoretical movement focusing on ‘culture’ and on the significance of ideology and consciousness within it. Jennifer Hargreaves observes this theoretical movement as an attempt “to understand the organic relationships between sports and other cultural formations, to examine
questions of agency and structure, and to look at the tension between change and 
continuity.\footnote{56} In other words, sport as a cultural institution is woven into the fabric of the 
nation. As a cultural institution, sport has the power to construct meaning and produce 
discourses on race, gender, class, and sexuality. Thus, to examine how sports produces 
culture is to examine American attitudes, beliefs, and ideologies in general. Simply put, 
sport is an expression of the sociocultural system in which it occurs; sports mirror the 
rituals and values of the societies in which they are developed. Sport influences our 
language, clothing styles, and concepts of heroes and heroines. Its athletes and teams 
are symbolic warriors and defend the honor of our schools, towns, or nation. Pamela J. 
Creedon asserts “sports become symbolic representations of personal and societal 
struggles for such things as property, fairness, honor and economic gain.”\footnote{57}

Sports studies and cultural studies scholars such as Stuart Hall, Jennifer 
Hargreaves, Cheryl L. Cole, Susan Cahn and others share an understanding of sport as 
a site through which questions related to social and political power, domination, 
ideology, agency, and transformative possibilities must be considered.

Therefore, it is here, in the cultural institution of sport, where I explore the Black 
female sporting body in American culture. Cole’s observations of sport and the body 
best encapsulate why this research project is long overdue:

The crisis of sport studies serves as the background for a 
project that attempts to begin rethinking the study of sport from a feminist standpoint that recognizes ‘sport’ 
as a discursive construct that organizes multiple practices (science, medicine, technology, governing institutions, 
and the media) that intersect with and produce multiple
bodies (raced, sexed, classed, heterosexualized, reproductive, prosthetic, cyborg, etc.) embedded in normalizing technologies (classification, hierarchization, identity production) and consumer culture. In addition, this standpoint recognizes that the knowledges and practices produced by sport in advanced capitalism cannot be and are no longer contained by institutional spaces but are dispersed and expressed in the everyday normalizing practices of remaking bodies, identities, and pleasures.58

By engaging feminist sports scholarship and Black feminist theory, this project is grounded in the idea that representations of Black female sporting bodies are connected to larger frameworks of race and gender. In their production of African American women athletes, mainstream media engages in the everyday normalizing practices of remaking social identities of Black womanhood. With their representations of African American athletes, the media has the power to produce and define raced, classed, and heterosexualized identities for Black womanhood, which is why the various images of sporting bodies must be examined.

Research on the black female body has only recently extended to the area of sports. Instead, contemporary scholarship focuses predominantly on black male sporting bodies, such as those of basketball star Michael Jordan and golf sensation Tiger Woods. David L. Andrews identifies Jordan as a key locus for critical contemporary cultural analysis because Jordan’s body as text offers a good deal of insight on notions of belonging for African Americans.59 In a similar vein, black female athletes tell us much about the ways in which black womanhood has been constructed in American culture and offers much about their place within U.S. society. The intersection of race
and gender represented by the black female body in sports has been granted but a small space in academic scholarship. In “Sport Feminism: The Contribution of Feminist Thought to Our Understandings of Gender and Sport,” sports studies scholars S. Scraton and A. Flintoff argue “there is little work that could be defined as offering a black feminist perspective on sport.”60 They note that “often the early work on gender, race and sport has tended to present a simplistic, additive, theoretical model of black women and sport where black women’s experience are simply ‘added on’ to an understanding of gender oppression.”61 This study is going to fill this void by looking at the intersection of gendered and racial identities to understand representations of Black women’s sporting bodies; in addition, I will critique the effects of these representations on the larger culture. In addition, Patricia Vertinsky notes that there has been a tendency to neglect serious study analyses of the black female since sport history has traditionally been gendered and until the last decade or so has focused upon masculinity and men’s history to the exclusion of serious attention to women.62 As Yevonne Smith notes, this neglect of black female athletes is a serious criticism that has been leveled at scholars in all fields, including scholars of sport history:

Critical questions have been asked concerning why the fugitive slave, fiery orator, political activist, or person of color in sport is always represented as a black man, or the woman in sport-and-gender studies as a white woman. These omissions and biases continue to reinforce historical patterns of silence and contribute to the invisibility of women of color.63
The experiences of Black women remain on the periphery of sport studies, not the central focus. Thus, a bringing together of these bodies of work—Black feminist theory and Sport studies—is needed so as to generate a more comprehensive understanding of the everyday experiences of African American women.

Furthermore, representations of African American women’s achievements in sports continue to reinforce disparaging stereotypes of black women as less womanly or feminine than white women. However, as more Black women entered sports that were dominated by white female bodies, such as tennis and figure skating, constructions of Black womanhood shifted to include feminine ideals. However, stereotypical images of Black women did not completely disappear in representations of African American athletes. For example, during my presentation on the place and space of Black womanhood in national identity at an Africana “womyn” conference, I showed an image, one I received via e-mail, of Serena Williams in what is now known as the “cat suit” (see figure 34). With the way the camera angle captured her body in this black form fitting suit, Beverly Guy-Sheftall commented “that’s the Hottentot.” This further prompted me to look at other images of Black female sporting bodies to examine how they were being constructed in the American public sphere. Reflecting back on the 19th century European imagination, I question whether there is there change or continuity in the ways in which the image of the black female body has been constructed.

While this study fills a void in sports scholarship by looking at the intersection of gendered and racial identities to understand representations of Black women’s sporting bodies, there are a few texts that address the various discourses of race, gender, class,
and sexuality which helped informed my analysis. For example, Susan Cahn’s *Coming On Strong: Gender and Sexuality in Twentieth-Century Women’s Sport* illuminating study is an interdisciplinary work that examines many areas in women’s sports such as racial politics, representation, history, and provides a lens through which to understand both the complicated gender dynamics of sport and the social experiences of women athletes. In Cahn’ chapter, “Cinderellas ‘of Sport: Black Women in Track and Field,” she examines the racial politics surrounding African American women track stars. Cahn argues that sporting bodies are under the scrutiny of racialized notions of sexual virtue and feminine beauty. Cahn writes that the silence surrounding black athletes reflects the power of these stereotypes to restrict African American Women to the margins of cultural life, occupying a status as distant ‘others.’

In *Built to Win: The Female Athlete as Cultural Icon*, Heywood and Dworkin build on Cahn’s analysis of race and gender discourses in women’s sports. Heywood and Dworkin focus on the rise of the female athlete as icon and they attempt to address ideologies of race, gender, nation, beauty, and athleticism, but fail to engage Black feminist theory; consequently, their discussion of Black female athlete as cultural icon falls short of its needed critical analysis. However, their engaging text offers important contributions to the limited literature on the female sporting body in American culture. Heywood and Dworkin draw on textual analysis, focus group interviews, and gender theory to examine cultural constructions of both male and female bodies, gender norms, the representation of women in sports, and how younger audiences read and interpret these representations in their own lives. They acknowledge the intersection of gender
and race and reveal that “many students offered that Marion Jones was ‘too serious,’ was ‘threatening,’ ‘scary,’ ‘shadowy,’ ‘angry,’ ‘mafia,’ ‘frightening,’ ‘had attitude,’ or ‘needed to lighten up,’”. Students offered these comments in response to an image of Marion Jones elegantly dressed in an evening gown posed on the front cover of Vogue magazine. Although the black female sporting body is not their focus, their discussion on Marion Jones reveals a continuum in the ways in which black women have been culturally constructed in America’s public sphere. Here descriptions of Jones fit stereotypical derogatory constructions of the black female body. In addition, Heywood and Dworkin’s methodology is quite useful, specifically how they examine various media such as magazines, advertisements, television commercials in their discussion of popular iconography of the female athlete. They suggest that “as representations and discourse surrounding high-profile African American female athletes continue to flourish, researchers can and should continue to consider critically what it means to champion athletes of color as inspirational representations for women’s sport.”

Although brief, their analysis black womanhood of how Jones was othered and is engaging. My research furthers this vein of discourse.

Reading Sport: Critical Essays on Power and Representation edited by Susan Birrell and Mary G. McDonald also examine the discourses of race, class, gender, and sexuality by focusing on the power relations of these categories within U.S. culture. Birrell and McDonald’s collection focuses on what they call a “new form of critical analysis” as articles conceptualize particular sporting bodies as “texts” and offer “readings” of these texts. For example, in “Reading Nancy Lopez: Decoding Representations of Race,
Class, and Sexuality,” Katerine M. Jamieson examines images and narratives of Lopez in three magazines: *Sports Illustrated, Nuestro* and *Hispanic* to reveal multiple, contradictory, and intersecting forms of oppression and privilege. Jameison demonstrates how Lopez’s ethnic identity and gender is constructed differently in these texts. In mainstream media, her Mexican American working class roots are often ignored or trivialized. Yet, the celebration of her public pregnancies and loyalty to her husband reaffirm heterosexuality as the unquestioned cultural norm while also allaying homophobic fears of a lesbian presence in sport and as such her image is embraced by mainstream publications. Also in this anthology, Abigail M. Feder-Kane and Sam Stoloff each examine how class and gender are constructed in women’s figure skating through the sporting bodies of Tonya Harding, Nancy Kerrigan, and other white female skaters. Feder-Kane and Stoloff Lastly, Susan Birrell and Cheryl L. Cole explore the constructions of difference in the reception of Renee Richards, a transsexual, in women’s tennis. Combined, these essays argue that the institution of sports remains instrumental in shaping as well as perpetuating particular gendered and raced ideologies in American culture.

Mary Jo Kane and Susan L. Greendorfer’s chapter, “The Media’s Role in Accommodating and Resisting Stereotypical Images of Women in Sport,” in *Women, Media, and Sport: Challenging Gender Values*, edited by Pamela J. Creedon, also offers valuable insights on gender ideologies in women’s sports. Kane and Greendorfer argue that the media’s coverage of the 1988 and 1992 Olympic Games “feminized” sportswomen and these “images represent a modernized attempt to reinforce
traditional stereotypical images of femininity and female sexuality.”70  They assert that feminized and sexualized mediated portrayals of sportswomen are used as a “product or tool of patriarchal oppression of women—and their bodies—through an institutionalized socially constructed system of gender roles and values.”71 Although their examination of gender ideologies does not address the differences within gender such as the social constructions of race, their essay provides an understanding of how traditional stereotypical images of femininity construct particular messages about the bodies of Black women athletes.

In Sport Stars: The Cultural Politics of Sporting Celebrities David Andrews and Steven Jackson extend their analysis to a celebrity culture created by the institution of sport. They contend that images of sports stars help construct ideas about race, gender, class, and sexuality in U.S. society. They focus on media images of black sporting celebrities such as Michael Jordan, Tiger Woods, Dennis Rodman, and Venus Williams. Even though essays on males fill most of the anthology, these scholarly analyses on black bodies illuminate how athletes’ bodies are read as texts in the public sphere. Writers illustrate how black bodies contribute to reinforcing dominant racial discourses and they excavate the often submerged politics of sport celebrity that contribute to the normalization of particular meanings, identities, and experiences within American culture. McDonald and Andrews’ discussion of Michael Jordan and Nancy Spencer’s analysis of Venus Williams offer strong analysis of the discourse of race in sports. Spencer’s entry is the only one on an African American female athlete. Spencer argues that narratives of Venus Williams reveals discursively constructed evidence of racism in
professional women’s tennis. Spencer adds that Serena’s success should be explored for further research.72 Another work by Spencer entitled “Sister Act VI: Venus and Serena Williams at Indian Wells: ‘Sincere Fictions and White Racism’” in the Journal of Sport and Social Issues examines how the sisters are constructed in the world of Tennis. She briefly discusses mediated images of the sisters as well. Spencer’s research on the Williams’ sisters makes a valuable contribution to discourses of race and gender, otherwise known as intersectionality.

Christine Anne Hollmlund’s article in Women, Sport, and Culture edited by Susan Birrell and Cheryl L. Cole entitled “Visible Difference and Flex Appeal: The Body, Sex, Sexuality, and Race in the Pumping Iron Films” offers one of the most compelling analysis of race and gender. Holmlund questions what kind of body, or what kinds of bodies, are needed and/or tolerated by current societies and explores how the apparatus of body and power functions in popular culture today through an examination of the Pumping Iron films. In discussing the black female sporting body of bodybuilder Carla Dunlap, Holmlund points out that her public self-presentation in Pumping Iron “might easily be reabsorbed within the framework of racist images and attitudes that permeate mass media representations of blacks.”73 Similar to Sports Stars, Hollmlund critically analyzes the production of bodies, the regulation of bodies, and how we relate to sporting bodies in advanced capitalism through her discussion of Carla Dunlap. This production and regulation of bodies in late capitalist USA figures strongly in my examination of Serena William’s sporting body.
Lastly, African Americans’ involvement in the sporting system—sports, sports management, media, athletic corporations, etc.—has always been marked by controversy. Today’s relationship between race, gender and sports is a part of a long history in notions of belonging for African Americans. By virtue of their visual difference, Black women were the targets of ideological warfare that had visual consequences whereby deviance, sexuality, and inferiority were equated with their bodies. Still, in the 21st century Black athletes have been used—through their symbolic collective representation—as a litmus test to national belonging. Public attention to black female athletes raises issues in U.S. society concerning cultural representations whereby some representations are simultaneously, and ambivalently both embraced and rejected.

Moreover, in considering Hill-Collins’ notion of controlling images, I turn to athletes to question their agency in their representations. I also turn to athletes because of the power of representation. Like Hill-Collins, Peggy Phelan acknowledges the power of representation. In *Unmasked: The Politics of Performance*, Phelan offers an analysis of the fraught relation between the political and representational visibility in contemporary culture. She affirms “the relationship between representation and identity is linear and smoothly mimetic. What one sees is who one is.”73 Hence, because of the visibility of these athletes, their representation has the power to construct not only an identity for themselves but also a collective identity of Black womanhood which in turn affects individual African American women. Many African American women inadvertently internalize the negative stereotypes of Black womanhood produced in
American culture; differing from these images, athletes might possibly offer alternatives whereby Black women mimic a positive subjective agent.

Since Baartman and slavery, throughout reconstruction and into the present, denigrating stereotypes have consumed Black womanhood. As a result of this history, I question what happens when black female athletes enter the public sphere? Do Rudolph, Thomas, and Williams change the ways in which African American women have been constructed within the nation’s imagery, thereby offering a transformative notion of black womanhood? Do they provide a continuum of derogatory images of black womanhood that has existed since slavery of Africans in North America? Or as Hargreaves inquires, is there continuity or change? Evelyn Hammonds posits that “Black feminist theorists are themselves engaged in a process of fighting to reclaim the body—which can be and is still being used by others to discredit them as producers of knowledge and as speaking subjects.” Since my focus is on mainstream production of images, I’m concerned with how these athletes reclaim the Black female body. Or does their representation, as hooks observes, give way to a racist ideology that problematizes any sense of agency? I realize it is complex task for Black women to define their own images in a holistic way that necessarily both incorporates and subverts the stereotypes, myths, facts, and fantasies that precede them.

The fetishism of black sporting bodies in American culture has been well documented by scholars such as Hall, Hooks, Cahn, and Hill-Collins. Now, given the public attention to Black female athletes, my study is long overdue. By interrogating representations of the Black female body in American sports, I hope to gain a deeper
understanding of the re-theorization of gender and race systems as a semiotics of corporeality as well as a symbolic system that constitutes identities and self-representations in U.S. society. As a result, I hope this project reveals an understanding of ideology and its mechanisms, race and gender constructs, the construction of black female subjectivities and identities, and the politics of everyday lived experiences for Black women in American culture.
“In 1964, I believed I was fighting hard in the middle of an enormous argument about America and anybody’s right to be here, specific and nondissoluble. I perceived myself to be surrounded and outnumbered by enemies. I accepted media notions of my ‘minority’ status in a ‘naturally’ white America.”

June Jordan, Civil Wars

Published in the New York Times and in the State Department’s public relations pamphlets, this image of Wilma Rudolph sitting next to President John F. Kennedy was a rare sight in America’s public sphere in the 1960s. Because mainstream media—newspapers, television, magazines, film—lacked positive images of Black womanhood, an elegantly dressed Olympic track star photographed with the U.S. President represents a battle won for the social status of Black women. The visibility of Rudolph’s
body in what appears to be a pleasant visit to the White House in 1961 stands in stark contrast to the images on television and newspapers seen daily around the world of Black citizens being sprayed with fire hoses and beaten by U.S. officials during civil rights protests. Below this image, I have included a quote from June Jordan from the introduction to her political essays, Civil Wars. Jordan, a Black feminist scholar, acknowledges the authority of the media to construct her place in a “naturally white America.” Jordan’s reflections and Rudolph’s image remind us of the power the media has to construct meanings about Black women through representation. What meanings did images of Rudolph’s Black female sporting body signify about race, gender, class, and nation? How she was represented in mainstream media defined social identities of Black womanhood. Given the power of the media to construct social identities for Black women, feminist scholars have questioned the space for a subjective agent within these discursive confines. Another question is how did Rudolph (re) present herself within these cultural forces? Meaning is not fixed; thus, images of Rudolph signify how Black woman have constantly negotiated identities.

Moreover, the representations of her sporting body signified a dilemma of competing identities. Because of the intersecting categories of race, gender, and class, and nation, social identities for Black women have not always been easy to define. First, Rudolph had to compete against a historicized Black female body that was constructed as masculine, animalistic, and not-human. At the same time, given the 1960s “Black is beautiful” slogan’s aim at transforming the word word black, Rudolph offered alternative visions of womanhood. Secondly, Rudolph competed against a working-
poor class identity. She comes from a working poor family, and subsequently, Black women were generalized as to belonging to a working-poor class. Rudolph’s response to this generalization was to create an identity within the structural forces shaping the social identities of Black womanhood. This identity centered on the discourse of race and respectability that dates back to the 19th century. Members of the Black Women’s Club movement understood the importance of class and presentation of self. Because they knew that “middle-class members of these clubs were more closely linked to poor black women, than their white counterparts were to poor white women,” black club women mobilized to uplift the entire race through the politics of respectability. This was done by introducing “bourgeois customs to poor black women and to persuade whites of black women’s ability to adopt these customs.” Finally, as a successful Olympian, Rudolph’s image was constructed in ways that competed against negative imagery of female athletes. While Rudolph represented a marginalized group in American society, her Olympic success affirmed the dignity and capabilities of African American women as productive citizens.

In this chapter, I contend that representations of Rudolph were instrumental in shaping the discourse of race and respectability, and therefore her image was appropriated by the dominant group who mythologized the place and space of Black women in the 1960s. I begin with an overview of Rudolph’s accomplishments and situate her in the U.S. public sphere through a discussion of Black identity in the 1960s and move to an examination of her predecessors Alice Coachman and tennis great Althea Gibson. Next, I discuss the politics of respectability and how Rudolph’s images
fit into this discourse by interrogating her representations in newspapers, magazines, and public relations texts. Then I examine how these representations were used in constructing a national discourse. Finally, I conclude the chapter with a juxtaposition of her mediated images along side her experiences as an African American female citizen.

**Rudolph’s Road to Success and Entrance into the Public Sphere**

Rudolph’s athleticism, along with her story of overcoming poverty and illness to become an Olympic champion, is the subject of many juvenile literature books; in fact, most publications on Rudolph have been limited to this genre. People are fascinated with Rudolph’s life for many reasons. Her story of achieving against all odds is a classic American favorite. Like other sporting narratives of prominent Black athletes such as Jackie Robinson and Althea Gibson, Rudolph’s success symbolizes an American concept that if one works hard—pulls herself up by the bootstraps—success will come, no matter one’s racial or economic background.

Born the twentieth of twenty-two children in St. Bethlehem, Tennessee, Rudolph comes from a family who battled poverty. Her mother, Blanche Rudolph, worked as a domestic for wealthy white families, and Ed Blanche, Wilma’s father, worked as a railroad porter and handyman. Rudolph’s childhood environment at home, like other poor black families in Clarksville, Tennessee in the 1940s, included no electricity and no indoor plumbing. The Rudolphs were resourceful; for example, they made the girls’ dresses out of flour sacks. The Rudolphs’ resourcefulness is what enabled them to survive their impoverished situation.
Throughout most of her childhood Rudolph battled illnesses: measles, double pneumonia, scarlet fever, and chicken pox. When she was diagnosed with polio at the age of four and faced with possibility of not being able to walk, Rudolph’s mother took Wilma on a Greyhound bus 90 miles roundtrip for treatment once a week to Meharry Hospital, the Black medical college of Fisk University in Nashville. Rudolph could not be treated in the local hospital in Clarksville because of segregation. With medical therapy and the help of her brothers and sisters, who took turns massaging her crippled leg every day, Rudolph, by the age of twelve as rehabilitated and went on to play basketball and track in high school.

When Rudolph’s track team, at Burt High, competed in a meet hosted by Tuskegee Institute in Tuskegee, Alabama, a historically Black university, (HBCU), this marked the beginning of her track career. At this meet, Ed Temple, the track coach at Tennessee State University in Nashville was scouting for his team and invited Rudolph to attend his summer track program at Tennessee State. Temple’s summer programs not only trained young women for college track but also provided them with opportunities to compete in the Olympics. These programs included competing in the National Amateur Union, AAU. At the age of fifteen in 1955, Rudolph competed in her first AAU championship. Although she did not win any of her races in the Junior division, the Senior division The Tennessee State University’s Tigerbelle team won their first AAU title, and for a brief moment captured national attention. One year later in 1956, competing again at the AAU championship, Rudolph won all her races and both the Junior and Senior division Tigerbelle teams took the nationals.
Commenting on press coverage, Rudolph states, “none of us even thought about looking in the sports page the next day for writings because we knew automatically that nobody would bother to write us up. It was like, oh well, girls track, that’s not really a sports event.”

Later the press attention Rudolph would receive would be much different. In the same year at the age of sixteen Rudolph competed in the 1956 Olympic Games in Melbourne, Australia. While a junior in high school, she became an Olympic champion. Though she lost her individual races, Rudolph captured a bronze medal in the 400 meter relay with the Tigerbelle team, which included Mae Faggs, Margaret Matthews, and Isabelle Daniels. Two years later Rudolph graduated from Burt High School, received a full scholarship to Tennessee State, and became an official Tigerbelle. Eventually, in 1963, she earned a Bachelor's degree in education.

It was her performance in the 1960 Olympics that garnered the most attention. She won the 100 and 200-meter races and anchored the U.S. team to victory in the 400 meter relay as she became the first American woman ever to win three gold medals in the history of the games. At home, in the U.S., she was overwhelmingly recognized for her success. In the same year, she was the second African American awarded the Associated Press Female Athlete of the Year award (tennis player Althea Gibson had been the first). She finished second for the James E. Sullivan award, given to the top American amateur athlete. She received the Los Angeles Times Award for women’s track and field. Mademoiselle, the fashion magazine, selected her to receive one of their ten awards for outstanding achievements; she was also chosen as one of ten most
outstanding women in the United States by the New York Times. She received the Sports Magazine Award for top performer in track and field and the Betty Crocker Award for outstanding achievement; and was selected by the Nashville Banner as its outstanding athlete. Rudolph received the National Newspaper Publishers Association’s Russwurm Award and the Babe Didrikson Zaharias Award in 1960 as the outstanding female athlete in the United States. She received a personal citation from the governor of Tennessee for outstanding achievement in 1960. In 1963, she was selected to represent the U.S. State Department at the Games of Friendship in Dakar, Senegal. With these national accolades, Rudolph only solidified the significance of her presence as an American citizen.

She also became an international sensation. She was the first American to win Italy’s Christopher Columbus award in 1961, which was given each year to the most outstanding international sports personality. She was awarded the 1960 Helms World Trophy for North America, which was created by Paul W. Helms and awarded to honor the best athlete on each continent. She was voted the most outstanding athlete of the year by the European Sportswriters Association. In addition to her awards, she made over one hundred appearances in the months after her Olympic triumphs. She made an appearance on the “Ed Sullivan Show,” one of the most popular television shows in the 1960s. In 1977, Bud Greenspan wrote and directed a made for television movie production (NBC), Wilma, based on Rudolph’s book, Wilma: The Story of Wilma Rudolph (1977), and Rudolph was a consultant for the movie.
Even after her death in 1994, the honors continued. Rudolph died of a brain tumor at the age of fifty-four. Nine months after Wilma’s death, Tennessee State University, on August 11, 1995, dedicated a six-story dormitory as the Wilma G. Rudolph Residence Center. In 1997, Representative Carolyn Kilpatrick introduced a bill to the 105th Congress to authorize the president to award a gold medal honoring Wilma G. Rudolph “in recognition of her enduring contributions to humanity and women’s athletics in the United States and the world.” Soon after, Rudolph was indeed awarded a congressional gold medal. In 2000, *Sports Illustrated* magazine ranked Rudolph as number one in its listing of the top fifty greatest sports figures in twentieth-century Tennessee. In 2004, the United States Postal Service issued a 23 cent postage stamp in recognition of her accomplishments (see figure 3). In Tennessee, there are several buildings as well as many streets and tracks named in honor of Rudolph.

Rudolph’s visual presence represents a group who for too long have been excluded from national imagery. Her popularity as an Olympic athlete made her Black female body visible at a time when Black women were invisible. For example, in *Straight No Chaser: How I became a Grown-up Black women*, Jill Nelson shares that growing up in the 1960s, she absorbed suggestions from television, books, and the culture around her about who she is supposed to be, what she was supposed to be like, but there were no images who resembled her:

> In westerns I was always the Indian, never the cowboy. In Tarzan movies I identified with the Africans or the apes, not Tarzan. I wanted to be Sheena, Queen of the Jungle not because she was white but because she was female and pretty, one of the only women on television
who existed independently of men. I used to watch ‘Father Knows Best’ and ‘Leave It to Beaver’ and ‘The Donna Reed Show’ and ‘The Patty Duke Show,’ but never thought of them as real, or role models, or people to emulate.87

Eventually she “no longer looked to television for reflection and inspiration” because it only confused her sense of belonging in the world.88 Jill Nelson states that she writes to “fight the invisibility and erasure that too often defines being black and female in America.”89 The lack of visual, positive portrayals of Black women on television makes visual images of Rudolph all the more important. Stuart Hall argues that the meanings we place on images “give us a sense of our own identity, of who we are and with whom we ‘belong’”.90 Rudolph embodied success, independence, and beauty, all the attributes Nelson searched for in someone who looked liked her—black and female. Nelson is among the many young Black women coming of age in the 1960s who questioned identity and Black womanhood. Therefore, women turned to Rudolph to better understand the place and space of Black womanhood and where they belonged. Black women had to define and articulate their social, economic, and political realities in their own terms as a part of an ongoing movement to show how structural forces shaped their lives and how they acted on their own behalf within the context of such forces. Also, representations of Rudolph affected the ways in which Black women were perceived; as a result, these representations influenced social, economic and political realities for African American womanhood. Now as a public figure, Rudolph was someone others turned to understand social identities for Black womanhood, and her
sporting body was a site around which ideas of race, gender, class, and nation were constructed.

What makes Rudolph distinct is the time in which she emerged in the public sphere. She entered the public sphere at time when various oppositional movements, which gained prominence in the late 1960s, attacked stereotypes and biased images of their groups in what many refer to as the politics of representation. Omi and Winant observe that social shifts such as the Civil Rights Movement redefined the meaning of racial identity and consequently race itself. Omi and Winant use the term “rearticulation” to describe the process by which racial social identities are redefined. Historically, Black citizens were excluded from an American identity; however, protesters in the Black movement insisted that they no longer be treated as second class citizens and insisted on equality and inclusion. Their demand for justice and democracy for all forged a rethinking of Black identity. To determine just exactly how this new Black identity looked, many turned to African Americans in the public sphere. Leaders, entertainers, and athletes were sites around which blackness was rearticulated. Black public figures, either willingly or not, served as representatives of a group of people. Yet, the majority of these public figures were men. In rearticulating a black identity, where were the representations of African American women in the mainstream to challenge (historical) socially constructed ideologies of race and gender?

At a time when the emphasis was on race in defining a black identity, images of Rudolph were reminders that race is not the only category to consider. Her images formulated ideas about black identity at the intersections of race, class, gender, and
nation. Thus, she (re)articulated social identities for Black womanhood and images of
her in the mainstream represented America’s national consciousness in (re)imaging race
and gender in the 1960s.

Mainstream representations of Rudolph helped stabilize the raging tensions over
Black identity. Images of Rudolph became enbroiled in identity politics. How could
disgruntled Black masses question the production of representation when the subject
was a Black woman? In other words, the use of cultural images was one way for the
dominant group to maintain control. Antonio Gramsci describes such strategy as
hegemony. In his analysis of why socialist revolutions had not occurred where they
were most expected, Gramsci formulated the concept of hegemony. With the rise of
industrial capitalism, Gramsci suggested that capitalists maintained control not just
through violence and political and economic coercion, but also ideologically, through
hegemonic culture in which the values of the bourgeoisie become the “common sense”
values of all. Thus a consensus culture developed in which people in the working-class
identified their own good with the good of the bourgeoisie, and helped to maintain the
status quo rather than revolting.93 Thus, cultural hegemony is when a ruling class forms
and maintains its control in civil society by creating cultural and political consensus
through unions, political parties, schools, media, the church, sports and other
associations where power is exercised by a ruling class over oppressed groups. In
short, cultural hegemony is the systematic negation of one culture by another. In the
media, hegemony works by valuing the dominant group and making invisible or
demonizing groups of color to the point where it seems common-sensical. Rudolph
helped maintain the status quo through her participation in the discourse of race and respectability, a discourse in which working-class Black women identify their own good with the good of the bourgeoisie.

As a popular sports figure, Rudolph understood “the burden of representation” even though she seldom publicly expressed support of the Black movement. I use the word burden to discern the differences in how Black figures publicly embodied representation. Postcolonial theorist Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak acknowledges the various forms of representation. For instance, she makes a distinction between Vertretung and Darstellung. The former she defines as “stepping in someone’s place…to tread in someone’s shoes.” Representation in this sense is “political representation,” or speaking for the needs and desires of somebody or something. For example, Black club women prior to the ‘60s and political figures in the ‘60s such as Angela Davis, sought to speak for the needs of oppressed African American women. On the other hand, Spivak points out that Darstellung is representation as re-presentation, “placing there.” Representing is thus “proxy and portrait,” according to Spivak. The complex distinction between “speaking for” and “portraying” must be kept in mind. Through visual images, Rudolph was a portrayal of Black womanhood; she represented race and gender. The interesting thing about the 1960s is that it didn’t matter whether or not Rudolph “spoke for” African American women; by virtue of her existence in the pubic sphere, people saw her as a model of Black womanhood, thus the term “burden of representation.” The representation of the individual had vast implications for the entire group due to old stereotypes which did not easily disappear. Also, Rudolph
represented a collective identity that by the end of the ‘60s was threatened by class
fractions and the rise of neoconservatism. Representations of Rudolph only
foreshadowed what was to come by the late 1960s.

Rudolph’s Predecessors: Coachman and Gibson

To better understand Rudolph’s entrance, we must turn to two of her sporting
predecessors: 1940s track star Alice Coachman and 1950s tennis great Althea Gibson.
Alice Coachman was the first African American woman to win a gold medal (the high
jump—see figure 4) at the Olympic Games in 1948. Despite her success, Coachman was
not embraced by the white press. Jennifer Lansbury notes that, “when the Times
wrapped up its reporting, it granted Alice Coachman—the only American to win an
individual medal in track that year, the first African American, and a new Olympic
record holder—just one sentence.” 96

Lansbury and Cahn agree that for the most part black women athletes were
simply ignored by the white media and the athletic establishment. Lansbury attributes
Coachman’s lack of coverage to her participation in a “male-gendered sport.” 97 Both
scholars concur that in addition to lack of coverage, there were seldom printed
photographs of African American women athletes. Figures like Coachman and Mildred
McDaniel, the only American woman to win an individual gold medal in the 1956
Olympic track-and-field competition, did not become national celebrities, household
names, or even the subject of magazine feature stories. Cahn summarizes that “the
most striking feature of the historical record on black women athletes is neglect.” 98
To this point, lack of attention can be attributed to how track and field was constructed during Coachman’s career; the sport remained a decidedly masculine endeavor. While women first began competing in the 1920s and initially enjoyed popularity, physical education leaders soon began criticizing female participation in the sport, positing that the jarring movements required by track events put too much strain on the female anatomy. Furthermore, experts also expressed concern that the “masculinizing effects” of such activity would make women unfit for their feminine roles, particularly that of motherhood. As a result, participation by white women declined, and many talented African American female track athletes emerged to take advantage of the exodus. Some white women continued to flock to the sport in the 1930s and 1940s, such as Babe Didrickson, Helen Stephens, and Stella Walsh. However, their working class backgrounds and so-called “mannish” appearances upset the middle-class sensibilities of physical education instructors, pushing women’s track and field even further to the margins of white society. Nonetheless, Cahn states that due to their “second-class athletic status” both black and white female athletes had to “bridge the gulf between societal images of ‘mannish’ athletes and their own positive experience of sport and its compatibility with womanhood.” Still, for African American women athletes the challenge is even greater, as they already remain outside traditional constructs of womanhood. In fact, it seemed common-sensical that white women would exit the sport while more black women entered. Track-and-field fit racist ideologies of black women as natural athletes and their athletic accomplishments as
inevitably stemming from a perceived masculine prowess. Thus, the sport only served to confirm pre-existing racist ideologies of black womanhood.

The idea of black women being natural athletes rests comfortably in racist discourse. In *Race in North America: Origins of a Worldview*, anthropologist Audrey Smedley affirms that America’s notions of race, adopted from English ideology towards human differences, is based on a folk concept that Blacks and Whites are biologically different. Race as a human invention, argues Hall, reduces the cultures of black people to ‘Nature’, or naturalizes ‘difference.’ Thus to believe, as slave-holders did, that there is a natural, biological difference between black and white people means that racial ‘difference’ is permanent and fixed. Hall emphasizes that ‘Naturalization’ is a “representational strategy designed to fix ‘difference’, and thus validate it forever. It is an attempt to halt the inevitable ‘slide’ of meaning, to secure discursive or ideological ‘closure.’” In other words, discourses surrounding track and field, particularly constructions of black female track athletes, was one way to secure racial ideology that black women were different from white women. Meanings placed on this socially constructed difference positioned the black woman as inferior, less than, and animalistic.

For the most part, this racial ideology employed in media reports on track athletes was not as prevalent in reports on women tennis athletes. Unlike Coachman, Gibson participated in a more socially-acceptable sport for women and therefore, feminine descriptors were more easily applied to her sporting body; however, due to race, she did not completely escape racist discourse. For instance, Lansbury
acknowledges, Gibson still had to “contend with the attention given her for the ‘unladylike’ way in which she played the game.”\textsuperscript{105} In sum, both Coachman and Gibson were often noticed in the white press as having a masculine presence in their respective sport due to their race; however, due to gender and the sport of tennis, the white press constructed Gibson somewhat differently than Coachman.

Before Rudolph’s gold wins at the Olympics, Althea Gibson brought attention to the black female sporting body as she became the first African American to break the color barrier in professional tennis in the late 1950s (see figure 5). She was the first African American (male or female) to win a tennis championship at Wimbledon in 1957. The following year she became the first African American woman to appear on the cover of \textit{Sports Illustrated}. At the time of Gibson’s popularity, the press began to grapple with how they reported on female athletes. Thus, representations of Gibson mark the earliest moments of attributing feminine characteristics to the black female sporting body.

Cahn suggests that around the 1950s journalists were more conscious about how they described women athletes. To reconcile traditional notions of femininity and the “masculine” ideas placed on woman athletes, journalists used several narrative strategies. One was a motif that focused on the tomboy athlete who trades her boyish ways for feminine charm. Cahn argues that this narrative was used in the \textit{Saturday Evening Post} to describe Gibson’s rise to stardom. The newspaper writes that Gibson transformed from a “‘streetsmart tomboy’” to a “‘little lady.’” They emphasize that through the efforts of African American educators, tennis coaches, and society leaders,
the "'Harlem urchin’" had become "'America’s new Gibson Girl,’” the esteemed champion of a "’game for ladies and gentleman.‘’\textsuperscript{106} Such comments were usually reserved for white women and also functioned to reinscribe white patriarchy. In the early 1900s, the Gibson Girl was white, male illustrator Dana Gibson’s ideal for the new woman. Due to the sport of tennis and her success, Gibson received favor from the white press. Cahn posits that reporters sought to restore femininity to the successful athlete, searching for any evidence of feminine activity and interest that might offset her “masculine” sporting achievements and stature.\textsuperscript{107} Despite Gibson’s popularity in the media, photographs of Gibson seldom appeared in mainstream magazines and newspapers. Gibson’s popularity was eventually eclipsed by Rudolph’s, perhaps due to the growing consciousness of the media in their descriptions of women athletes and their efforts to restore femininity to successful athletes, including women of color.

**Rudolph’s Popularity: Black Womanhood and the Politics of Respectability**

Not long after the success of her predecessors and unlike their careers, Rudolph’s black sporting body received unprecedented attention in the American public. Although Gibson can be credited as the first to break the silence surrounding the black female athlete and to challenge stereotypical images of black womanhood, the attention Rudolph received in the white press surpassed that of her sporting predecessors. Much of this attention can be attributed to several factors. For one, the invention of television introduced Rudolph to the world. The Olympic Games were broadcasted all over the world for the first time in 1960 and with her wins, Rudolph became one of the most visible African American women in the world.\textsuperscript{108} As a result, she not only represented
Black womanhood, but she now represented America. More Americans had television sets in their homes than ever before and the Olympics were quickly becoming the largest international sport competition. The Games were televised in more than 100 countries. Having the Games televised allowed the American public the opportunity to witness the athletic feats of their American athletes in a way that helped connect the public to the sporting competition. Unlike having to wait to read about an American victory in the next morning's newspaper or see the event on a movie reel months later, the televised coverage helped promote the sporting activities of both American male and female athletes. For many Americans, as well as people around the world, it was their first time seeing women compete in sport on television. Now that the Olympics spotlighted American citizenry all around the world via television, the American press understood the consequences of negative publicity. Even though Rudolph competed in a “mannish” sport, she was still was embraced by the white press. After all, she was an American! Another factor can be attributed to Rudolph’s charismatic personality and her willingness to present Black womanhood to the world. This presentation, as mentioned earlier, is based on the politics of respectability. Unlike Gibson, who retired early and retreated from the public sphere because of the pressure to represent blacks collectively, Rudolph utilized the weapon of grooming and appeared everywhere in America. Reporter Jim Murray observed that Rudolph “made herself gracefully available for interviews, and Los Angeles welcomed her from city council to movie set. Los Angeles fans stormed the sports arena in such numbers that a sellout was posted one hour before opening ceremonies, and the shutouts were offering $6 for $2 seats,
with no takers.” Rudolph made sure her hair was styled, makeup applied, and dressed in lady-like attire.

Most significantly, it was Rudolph’s mastery of the politics of race and respectability that helped her solidify a place of endearment in America’s public sphere. The press was enamored with the way Rudolph looked. Press coverage of Rudolph’s accomplishments largely focused on her appearance, mainly her femininity and skin color. Sports biographer, Maureen M. Smith notes that the “American press described her as a ‘café au lait runner’ because of her light brown skin color.” It was her light brown skin and straightened hair that was more palatable for white European beauty standards. From 1960 through 1963, Rudolph’s image and stories of her success abundantly appeared in magazines, newspapers, and public relations photographs, making her, in what as I contend, the first widely-photographed African American woman athlete. That fact that Rudolph was an Olympian, unlike Gibson, only added to her appeal. While the Italian press nicknamed her the “Black Gazelle,” the American press refrained from such animalistic imagery. To the opposite, sources like Newsweek magazine described her beauty as a bonus and commented that “unlike most American female sprinters, she wins; and, unlike many American female athletes, she looks feminine.” In the Newsweek interview, Rudolph emphasized her femininity when she admitted that as much as she liked basketball, she was not a tomboy, and pointed to her skirt as proof positive, and stated that “a girl wants to be liked for herself, not just because she can run fast.” A Sports Illustrated writer commented that “everyone in the massive sports arena, possibly excepting the girls she defeated, was quite in love with
Wilma Rudolph.” The discourse around Rudolph’s sporting body centered on conventional gendered descriptions such as femininity, poise, charm, and dignity. For instance, in 1960, Time magazine declared “In a field of female endeavor in which the greatest stars have often been characterized by overdeveloped muscles and underdeveloped glands Wilma (Skeeter) Rudolph has long lissome legs, and a pert charm.” In their September 9, 1960 article “World Speed Queen,” The New York Times describes Rudolph as a “5-foot-11-inch young lady of charm and poise” below an image of Rudolph crossing the finish line at the end of the 400-meter relay race and next to a smiling headshot of Rudolph (see figures 7 & 8). Even while running, Rudolph is described as a “young lady of charm and poise.” In January of 1961, Rudolph adorns her feminine best in the New York Times as she is named female athlete of the year in the 1960 Associated Press poll. She is pictured in a floral-pattern skirt that flows across the page and a conservatively low rounded collar that rests just below her shoulders (see figure 6). With straightened hair, perfectly applied make up, and smiling beautifully at the camera, Rudolph radiates dignity and refinement according to conventional ideals. Reflecting on Rudolph’s last competition in 1962, Maule, writing for Sports Illustrated, wrote that the race:

not only was the best track meet of the year, it also was the prettiest. Soviet women athletes have always seemed more attractive than Soviet women clerks or housewives, and now the Americans are catching up in this new respect as well as in the event on the field. But it is difficult to be beautiful under the strain of competition…But in action or repose, red or red-white-and-blue, black or white, male or female, no one in Palo
Alto could match the incomparable Wilma Rudolph Ward for effortless grace and poise.”

Certainly the attention Rudolph received for her “poise”, “dignity,” and “beauty” was an exception in mainstream constructions of black womanhood. The other exceptions at this time included a few entertainers like Diahann Carroll, Eartha Kitt, and Dorthy Dandridge, all light-skinned Black women. What differentiated Rudolph from these women is that she was a track runner, from removed from the life of glitz and glamour.

Prior to the 1960s there were no images of black women in Mademoiselle magazine; however, in January of 1961 that changed when Wilma Rudolph managed to grace the inside pages. As Mademoiselle celebrated ten young women of the year, Rudolph was praised for “dignity and poise and fine sportsmanship” which “earned her world-wide affection and respect” both domestically and internationally during the 1960s. Pictured in her Olympic uniform with “USA” written across her shirt and in her white shorts, Rudolph appears to be desperately running towards the finish line in a photograph that covers nearly half the page (see figure 9). In fact, during the 1960s, she was one of the most widely-recognized African American women in the world. Rudolph’s appearance in Mademoiselle symbolized the pinnacle of visibility for black womanhood. A magazine with a white readership and known for setting stylish trends for its middle to upper class readers, Rudolph had made it in this exclusive space of the gaze.

Representations of Rudolph in the white press were similar to the ways in which African American womanhood have been historically represented in the black press. As
editor of the *Crisis*, W. E. B. Du Bois in 1910, like Black club women earlier, understood the power of images and the politics of race and respectability. To this point, Rudolph’s appearance in *Mademoiselle* is reminiscent of how black women were depicted in *The Crisis*. The most popular and influential black periodical in early 20th century, *The Crisis* featured photographs of black women on its front pages. Founded by the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People, NAACP, *The Crisis* “vision of its imagery was not only a middle-class one but also a white one.”¹²⁰ These women represented the “new Negro woman” who was well-dressed and, for the most part light skinned. Carolyn Kitch notes that “the covers of the *Crisis* offered a unique view of womanhood by providing the first major forum of positive representations of African Americans.”¹²¹ Photographs of black women who were light-skinned and possessed European facial features offered proof that there were indeed real African American women who looked just like the era’s ideal types of white women. Such images as Martha Patterson notes, were a “rebuttal to all of the popular racist images of black buffoons, coons, mammys, lascivious wenches, and happy darkies” of the era’s mainstream media at the turn of the century.¹²² This still puts images of Black women in a complex position. On the one hand, they are only positive images when they reinforce white European beauty ideals. On the other hand, outside of these beauty standards, Black women are left with racist images that reject Afrocentric notions of beauty. Cultural hegemony maintains its power when oppressed groups internalize the dominant ideology. What is even more unfortunate is the self-alienation Black women experience as a result of this internalized oppression. One aim of the *Crisis* was to show
that Black women were just as beautiful as White women. In other words, the black women on the Crisis covers were the black version of the Gibson and Christy Girls. However, what was problematic about the images in The Crisis is that they adopted white European standards of beauty. Given the opportunity to create their own images, Black producers resorted to Gibson-look-alikes, which speaks to the very depth of the power of cultural hegemony; it absorbs the very lives it seeks to control and negates anything that does not accept the vision of white supremacy.

Like the Crisis representation of Black womanhood, Rudolph’s image in Mademoiselle reinforces a politics of respectability of Black womanhood. Rudolph’s photograph in Mademoiselle illustrates the power of mainstream media to integrate images of African American women into the nation’s consciousness. Even before Naomi Sims, who made history as the first black woman to appear on the covers of Ladies’ Home Journal in 1968, and Life in 1969, Rudolph had already appeared in a white magazine publication. It was in the white press where Black women could show that the ‘other’ was not a jezebel, mammy, nor any other of the other controlling images of projected black womanhood. Paradoxically, it was in the white media where such images of black womanhood were created. Stuart Hall reminds us that once an image is circulated in the public sphere, the subject nor the producer is no longer in control as to how that image is read. There are no studies to date that analyze how Mademoiselle’s readers responded to Rudolph’s image. Yet Hall suggests that the producer often has an intended message. I can only speculate that given Rudolph’s presentation of middle-
class respectability, this rested well with *Mademoiselle’s* audience. In the end, both *The Crisis* and *Mademoiselle* construct a beauty ideology that is in response to a racist gaze.

Rudolph’s sporting body served as racial uplift, which was the goal of the politics of respectability. In other words, as a track athlete and as a Black woman, Rudolph understood the importance of self-presentation. How she presented herself was a reflection on all Black women, thus the burden of representation. Like Black church and club women before her, Rudolph felt certain that “respectable” behavior in public would earn Black people a measure of esteem from white America. Writing in 1963, A. S. “Doc” Young, a popular Black sports journalist, pointed out that Rudolph “captivated world attention and applause,” and she had “glamorized a sport” which had been “frowned upon by many Americans and she is the first Negro athlete to be generally praised as ‘beautiful.’”125 Young also posited that such recognition was proof that “things are getting better’ for Negroes!”126 Young’s comments reflect the symbolic function of Rudolph’s sporting body. For Young it was Rudolph’s acceptance as “beautiful” and “feminine” in the white media that represented Blacks collectively. The sporting body offered proof that life in America was indeed improving for its citizens of color. This symbolic function of Rudolph’s image is an example of what Roland Barthes calls “myth.” Rudolph’s black female sporting body signifies a respectable image not just of track, but for the black community as well; as a result, her constructed gendered identity was embraced by the American public – black and white.

The politics of respectability was more than a visual representation of Black womanhood, but was also a strategy used to justify access to resources on various
levels: economic, social and political. Craig points out that the ways in which black women were seen in the public sphere during the 1960s greatly impacted social meanings of black identity. Craig contends that the gendered discourse of race and respectability developed in the context of the poverty, demeaning work, and vulnerability to sexual victimization that characterized most black women’s lives, while historian Darlene Clark Hine traces the discourse of race and respectability to the 19th century when black club women emphasized self-presentation. For example, the National Association of Colored Women (NACW) was aware of the role that appearance had in the struggle to win respect. Mary Church Terrell, the first president of the NACW, aware of the gaze of the white racist, stressed the importance of what could and could not be seen. In an 1898 speech she notes that “even the white people who think they know all about colored people and are perfectly just in their estimate of them are surprised when they have an ocular demonstration of the rapidity with which a large number of colored women has advanced.” Terrell was commenting on the startled reactions of white women who witnessed the dignified bearing and tasteful attire of black women at NACW conventions. Terrell like other clubwomen, thought it was their responsibility to help black women of the lower classes by speaking for them and representing their needs to the larger public. Therefore, it was imperative that they carry themselves with the utmost respectability and subscribe to middle-class virtues of womanhood. This form of representation surfaced in what Hazel Carby calls the “policing of the Black women’s body.” At the top of their agenda, the clubwoman sought to control the public image of Black womanhood. Many scholars have noted
how clubwomen made use of both spectacle and representation to accomplish their goals.

Craig reminds us that this “ocular demonstration” was a “racial project in which all black women could and must participate” and continued into the 1960s. In an interview with Craig, Barbara Christian reveals the social pressure she felt to maintain her dignity as a black woman by conforming to conventional standards of grooming:

> When I came to Marquette University, I didn’t get my hair straightened regularly. And a group of girls, African Americans, came to me and said, ‘You can’t do that here. People will think of us as country.’ There was this sense of good hair and bad hair and looking groomed.”

Christian’s experience in 1959 reflects many of those black women attending predominately white colleges. Craig illuminates this experience:

> ‘Country’ connoted the rural poverty and lack of sophistication that her fellow students had escaped by attending a predominantly white Midwestern university, and [Christian] was expected to maintain that distinction in her appearance. Straightened hair represented access to hair products, sanitation, leisure, and relative prosperity. A woman who put time and money into her appearance was dignified, and her dignity spoke well of the race. Grooming was a weapon in the battle to defeat racist depictions of blacks.

Likewise, Rudolph’s public image demonstrated self-presentation not only as a black woman, but a black woman competing in a “mannish” sport.

Representations of Rudolph in the white media are consistent with the ways in which Rudolph’s public imaged was groomed. The word “charm” as used in many of the news stories is a fitting description of how Rudolph was complicit in the ways in
which black female athletes were socialized to be ladies first, as evidenced in mainstream representations. Rudolph once commented that “I love playing in games and I love being a lady after the games.” One reporter noted that Rudolph’s first response after a race and before an interview was to ask for a mirror and a comb. Similar to Christian’s experience at a predominately white college, Rudolph too encountered certain “grooming” expectations at Tennessee State, a historically Black college, (HBCU). As a Tennessee State Tigerbelle, her Coach, Edward Temple, instituted a dress code and prohibited photographers from taking post-race pictures until after his athletes had retreated to the locker room to touch up their hair and wash their faces. He reminded his track athletes that they were “young ladies first, track girls second.” Cindy Himes Gissendanner points out that in order for these athletes to maintain their track and field scholarships they had to “recast their value system, dress, manners, and relationships in a mold of middle class respectability and restraint.” The idea that Black women had to recast their value system implies, in a stereotypical way, that it was lacking in some way and only a bourgeois respectability could save them. In other words, Tennessee State like other black colleges, gave Rudolph the demeanor and appearance of a “charm school” graduate. Thus, the idea that the Tigerbelles were ladies first groomed Rudolph for a life in the public that would make her image a prime target for hegemonic appropriation and thus give the appearance that she was the ideal assimilated black female body.

Still, in order to achieve this middle class respectability in the mainstream, the white media managed to downplay her race, her pregnancy, and her working-class
background. In most stories, race was not mentioned at all. Other aspects of Rudolph’s life were absent as well. For example, in mainstream media, news reports following visual images of Rudolph did not reveal her pregnancy nor the birth of her first child Yolanda in 1958. Later, there was still no mention of her daughter in the constructions of Rudolph’s mediated identity. Even when her marriage to high school boyfriend, Robert Eldridge, made headlines, there was still no mention of their having had a child together. Hence, we see how various identities compete so that a particular social identity remains in tact. On the one hand, revealing her child in news reports would draw attention to her motherhood, which would only gender Rudolph, confirming her feminine role. Yet such news could only racialize her and confirm stereotypical notions of a sexualized, deviant black female body, due to her having a child out of wedlock. Thus, motherhood for Rudolph’s sporting body can signify various meanings. For one, this may be an example of Rudolph participating at the time in what historian Darlene Clark Hines refers to as “a culture of dissemblance,” whereby African American women “developed and adhered to a cult of secrecy…to protect the sanctity of inner aspects of their lives.” Nonetheless, the public silence regarding Rudolph’s first pregnancy during her rise to stardom suggests that Rudolph and those who had a stake in her public image viewed unmarried black mothers as potential detriments to the cause of racial advancement.
Rudolph the Hero, Nationalism, and Myth in America

In a photographed published in the *New York Times* in 1961, Rudolph is sitting next to President Kennedy at the White House. She is wrapped in an elegant black fur-trimmed coat that signifies class (see figure 10). Her dress coat rests just at the knees, showing Rudolph’s legs, an appearance that signifies her identity as a lady. Her relaxed-looking hair fits comfortably with Eurocentric beauty ideals. Her head is turned to Kennedy as they face each other in what appears to be a friendly conversation. As the leader of the nation, Kennedy’s body functions symbolically as well. Thomas Borstelmann contends that in order for the U.S. president to win the war against communism and the Cold War, he must lead as a multiracial model in a world arching toward greater racial justice.\textsuperscript{138} Pictured next to Rudolph at the White House, John F. Kennedy signifies such a model. To this point, Rudolph served as an important symbolic gesture of racial justice in the U.S. In fact, she was a symbol to a variety of groups seeking to alter or defend American ideas about race, gender, and ultimately black identity. The headlines in the *New York Times* reads, “Rudolph Visits the White House.” Borstelmann points out that “Kennedy understood the politics of symbolism and made highly visible gestures to diminish the nation’s association with white supremacy: appointing dozens of blacks to important posts in the administration, desegregating the Coast Guard Academy, and hosting many more people of color at the White House than all of his predecessors combined.”\textsuperscript{139} This photograph is just one of several publicity photographs of Rudolph taken with President John F. Kennedy at the White House.
Furthermore, the gendered discourse of race and respectability as constructed around Rudolph’s sporting body is tied largely to nation building. Rudolph emerged at an historical moment when ideas about race were being rearticulated as America grappled with improving the lives of citizens of color. What better way to show the world this improvement than through images of Rudolph: patriotic, dignified, ladylike—constructed all on a black, female body. Around the time of Rudolph’s public debut, significant changes were made in women’s track and field in the 1950s, when U.S. politicians, sports leaders, and a patriotic public became concerned with a dominant Soviet women’s team whose power threatened to dethrone the American women’s team and their chances of winning Olympic gold. As a result of this threat, U.S. sporting advocates, unlike before, campaigned to generate an interest in track and field, a campaign that included recruiting black women. In recruiting black women, sport administrators also tried to create “more respectable images of the sport.” This strategy consisted of cultivating the feminine image of black women athletes, presupposing a standard of femininity based on Eurocentric ideals.

Rudolph’s athletic success couldn’t have come at a better time for Kennedy’s administration, for they appropriated her image for political gain at home and abroad. For example, Rudolph’s service as a Goodwill Ambassador under Kennedy’s administration was part of a grand strategy in making over the nation’s image of racial unrest and in turn, improving their foreign relations, particularly with Africa. Michael D. Davis notes that “some 5,000 publicity pictures of Wilma had been distributed by the U.S. embassy all over Dakar, and a least a thousand Dakarois presented the
photographs to her to be autographed.” Therefore, Rudolph’s presence at the Goodwill games in Africa as well as her image on publicity photos, represented the face of America where people of color, particularly black women, were the quintessential citizens who proved that U.S. democracy worked. Commenting on the State Department Goodwill Tours, Damion Lamar Thomas situates these tours in a historical epoch where crucial issues surrounding integrated sports, race, anticolonialism, Civil Rights and the Cold War coalesced. He points out that “the United States employed athletics in their propaganda campaign because of the international appeal of athletics and because after Jackie Robinson broke the color line in Major League baseball in 1947, sports were the most publicly visible expression of American efforts to integrate African Americans into the national mainstream.” What is missing from his analysis is the role of African American female athletes in these campaigns. Rudolph and Gibson before her, illustrates the State Department’s efforts to integrate not only African American men, but also African American women into the national mainstream. The use of Black female athletes, because of their public visibility, served as a symbol of this integration.

At the same time, the 1960s marked the decade of increased white brutality that rained down with particular viciousness on the civil rights campaign. Reporters and photographers from all over the country and the world poured into Alabama, capturing appalling scenes of police violence for a national and international audience. 1963 marked the year in which Dr. Martin Luther King made his famous march on Washington where he made his well-known “I Have a Dream” speech. The march was
a peaceful demonstration petitioning the U.S. government for change through the improvement of the lives of African American citizens. Furthermore, Borstelmann notes that all U.S. ambassadors abroad were instructed to undertake the task of countering the “extreme negative reactions that racial incidents at home had elicited from all parts of the [the] world.” Thus, for the Kennedy administration, “people of color abroad had great symbolic value.”

While television was instrumental in bringing images of racial strife to national and international audiences, the use of film also was used to construct Rudolph’s image to various audiences in similar ways. In other words, like newspapers, film was another medium used to construct Rudolph’s image. The State Department produced a film entitled “Wilma Rudolph: Olympic Champion” (1961), which was directed by Walter de Hogg, who was an employee of Hearst Newsreel Service while under contract for the United States Information Agency (USIA). Authored by the Foreign Relations Committee, the U.S. government distributed this film for international viewing to promote Rudolph as emblematic of democracy at work. Like Rudolph, Althea Gibson in 1956 was also the subject of a USIA film, “Althea Gibson: Tennis Champion” and represented the State Department on a Good Will Tour overseas, specifically throughout Southeast Asia. These propaganda missions were to intended to explain U.S. foreign policy and to present the best face of American life and culture to the rest of the world. The rationale for the Agency’s efforts was that this nation was in both a military and cultural war against communism and the allegiance of over half the world to the principles of democracy.
The State Department’s production of *Wilma* uses the “Horatio Alger” narrative story line to tell of her life in the U.S. Like other USIA’s films, *Wilma* engages three presentational strategies. First, she is shown demonstrating her talent or achievement, offering undeniable evidence of mastery which all people, American or not, could agree upon. Second, narrative information links Rudolph to an American society ready and willing to embrace the qualities exhibited by her star athleticism. Finally, the film visually demonstrates American democracy in a good light through images of Rudolph’s social and economic conditions only after achieving fame. Even though Rudolph, born into an extremely poor family and raised in a deeply segregated town Clarksville, Tennessee, these facts are omitted from the film. On the contrary, the film deemphasizes segregation and doesn’t show the oppression under which Rudolph had to live. Nor does it show the racial problems Rudolph faced while growing up. The film shows Rudolph flourishing at an all-Black college; yet, it doesn’t explain the tradition of segregated institutions and the inequalities in education in American society that have led to African Americans occupying an inferior status. A black identity is shown as predicated on middle-class standards based on education, dignity, and respectability, all due to American democracy at its best.

Domestically, Rudolph’s popular black female sporting body was also used in similar ways. Her publicity photos with white politicians were symbolic gestures of their commitment to people of color by local and state political pundits. In fact, the connection between black Olympians and politicians has been a phenomenal thread in the fabric of American culture. From the U.S. President to municipal mayors,
politicians capitalized on these kinds of contrived and manipulated publicity photos. For example, on September 27, 1960 Rudolph appeared with Mayor Wagner of New York in the *New York Times*. The text below the photograph reads “Mayor Wagner admires medal shown by Wilma Rudolph and Ralph Boston during the ceremonies at city hall.” White officials in Clarksville, Tennessee also appeared with Rudolph in publicity photos of the town’s parade honoring her Olympic success. Yet, behind the cameras, the commitment to racial equality espoused by these white politicians was nothing more than rhetoric. For example, the *Clarksville Daily* captured Mayor Jackson and Rudolph at this historical moment as the parade marked the first integrated event in Clarksville. However, the city still remained highly segregated. Also, Rudolph made many publicity tours as she traveled across the nation and took photographs with city leaders as they honored her Olympic success. Susan K. Cahn notes that “when white officials or journalists did occasionally take note of black female athletic accomplishments, their praise represented momentary triumphs in the long struggle against racial oppression.” Cahn’s observations reflect Rudolph’s experiences both as an Olympic champion and as a black female U.S. citizen. On the one hand, white officials were quick to praise her athletic accomplishments, but on the other hand, were silent to the realities of her lived experience as an African American woman.
Rudolph’s Re-presenting and Realities of African American Women

Rudolph’s visibility in the public sphere can be attributed to her success as an Olympic heroine. Hence, her black female body comes to reflect ideas of nation whereby she symbolizes American ideals of upward mobility, freedom, and democracy. Unfortunately, these American values have been incongruent with the reality of the lived experiences of most people of color—even Rudolph. In her book *Wilma: The Story of Wilma Rudolph* (1977), Rudolph states “I was besieged with money problems; people were always expecting me to be the star, but I wasn’t making the money to live like one. I felt exploited both as a woman and as a black person.”¹⁴⁹ Such a statement of Rudolph’s double-burden reflects many of her experiences, yet it is this side of her life that has been given too little public attention. For many in African American communities, Rudolph represented a sense of belonging for black Americans to the nation; they were productive citizens who only added to the success of the nation despite their second-class citizen status. However, for others, particularly white America, Rudolph symbolized the denial of this second-class treatment; instead, she represented to the world that America was the land of liberty and justice for all.

While the USIA film portrays Rudolph living a life not much different from white people, Rudolph writes that white people “belonged to a world that was nothing like the world we black people lived in.”¹⁵⁰ Rudolph’s observations of her life tell a different story than the publicity photos, revealing the reality behind her identity as constructed by the State department. At the end of her narrative, she tells the story of waiting to board the bus in her home town when a “white fellow came by and [spat] at
Rudolph comments that she was “ready to fight him on the spot.”

The dissonance between Rudolph’ constructed image and her lived reality speaks to Barthe’s notion of myth. The state and the media colluded together to construct the idea that racism is not a problem in America. This myth is maintained through a metanarrative about America in which the voices of oppressed peoples remain in the margins or left out completely.

In fact, Rudolph’s life before and after her Olympic success offers a glimpse of life behind the curtains of national imagery, revealing realities of the lived experiences of African American women. After her retirement from sports and when Rudolph left America to find work abroad, one Italian newspaper reporter wanted Rudolph to “speak out against America and capitalism,” but she refused because she stated that “this Italian newspaper publisher was exploiting [her] too.” Rudolph would continue to feel “betrayed” and “exploited” as she searched for work in America and abroad. When she did get a job for Mayor Daley’s Youth Foundation Program in Chicago, she never did receive the pay she was promised and felt “used” by the administration there, the same administration who, not much earlier, had given her the keys to the city for her Olympic success. From California to West Virginia, Rudolph would continue to search for work until she found herself in debt, so she returned home to Tennessee where she would eventually make a living as a teacher and sports commentator, retire, and raise a family.

While powerful images of Rudolph were disseminated both domestically and internationally, these images did not reflect what she had experienced throughout most
of her life. Growing up a poor black female from the South, Rudolph faced poverty, racism, and discrimination even as an Olympic star. For example, she comments that “I never thought that I would run into racial prejudice in such a beautiful place as Hawaii, but I did, and that made me sad for the rest of that day. We all felt sad, because here we were, as members of the United States Olympic team, and that didn’t really matter at all because we were still black, no matter what we did.” While Rudolph was heralded as the democratic symbol of success for African Americans, on the other side, black women—from Ella Baker to Fannie Lou Hammer and many others—were fighting to turn the State Department’s myth into a reality for black Americans. Still, like Baker and Hammer, Rudolph, on occasion, acknowledged the insidiousness of racism and white supremacy. At times, she used her celebrity to do something about it. For example, she refused to be in a Clarksville’s parade honoring her unless it was integrated. As a result, a celebratory parade and banquet honoring Rudolph’s Olympic success was the first integrated event in the history of her hometown. Even though this integration was short-lived, it raises the question of how Rudolph used her athletic success for activism. This is important to address because activism can provide new ways of interpreting Rudolph’s images, or what Hall notes as inter-textuality: seeing her as an activist can affect how her images are read. Did Rudolph use the attention received in the public sphere to voice the struggles of black women in America? If she had done so, her image may not have been so easily co-opted by the State Department in the ways that it was.
Overall, it was Rudolph’s athleticism that captured public attention and as such, her black female sporting body was intended to signify black progress. Behind this cultural construct, the Bakers and the Hammers reminded the nation that America was far from the State Department’s version of black womanhood, even for African American female athletes. In fact, the attention given to such athletes by white America is a diversion from racism, discrimination, and hatred. John Hobberman puts it another way. He observes this attention as a “sports fixation” that is the “result of a long collaboration between blacks seeking respect and expanded opportunity and whites seeking entertainment, profit, and forms of racial reconciliation that do not challenge fundamental assumptions about racial difference.” Therefore, Rudolph’s signification of a middle class respectability was an attempt to seek “respect,” as Hoberman indicates in a society where Black women were constructed as jezebels, sapphires, and through other derogatory images. African American communities rallied behind Wilma Rudolph as she proved to the world that people of color deserved a rightful place in the space of American culture. The Olympics particularly carved out such possibilities of belonging. However, outside of sports, these possibilities seem to disappear as the daily lives of African Americans were gripped by debilitating and often life-threatening racism. Still, the question remains: did images of Rudolph really “lift up the race” and improve the lives of people of color? For many Blacks, the reality of race in the U.S. meant that employment was hard to find and other opportunities were limited; for African American women, their race and gender increased these limitations. After her Olympic success, Rudolph faced these realities of black
womanhood. Therefore, Rudolph’s public presence brought pride to African American communities, but beyond that, her images in mainstream America did very little to uplift their economic, political, and social status.

Indeed, the mediated cultural construction of Rudolph as an icon was an anomaly of black womanhood. During her short-lived success, Rudolph’s athleticism made it possible for her to escape many of the pitfalls to which black womanhood has been subjected. It is no secret that in the 1960s, Black women faced many struggles. For instance, in 1966, 75.5% of all black women workers were employed in service jobs, farms and factory work. Most of their opportunities came from unskilled and service jobs, such as domestic work. They got paid less than working class white women, worked under terrible conditions, and advanced less rapidly and were more likely to be poor. For the State Department, Rudolph’s black female body did not represent the struggles of black womanhood; instead, she was symbolic of an America that was supposedly moving forward despite the fact that many black women and men were left behind, in the economic, political, and social arenas.

Analyzing Rudolph’s representation in mainstream media in the 1960s helps cultural critics understand the conflicts about self-presentation of Black womanhood and its place in nation building at this time period. By embracing Rudolph, mainstream media had made their choice of the kind of Black woman that would best fit the desired national imagery. Rudolph was a non-threatening Black woman groomed by the politics of race and respectability, and therefore fit well with white America. Moreover, she illustrated how gender and class shaped black identity. Rudolph’s
images rested between a Black community who embraced the politics of race and respectability as a form of resistance and a Black community who rejected such middle class sensibilities as conforming to white supremacy. Most scholars would agree that while the politics of race and respectability was an effort to resist controlling images of poor black women, another controlling image was created, that of the black lady. Therefore, the politics of race and respectability fall short as a form of resistance. As noted earlier, Gramsci’s notion of cultural hegemony illustrates the difficulty of any form of resistance. Furthermore, the height of Rudolph’s popularity, from 1960-1963, occurred right before the Black power movement was in full swing. Activists in the Black power movement viewed notions of race and respectability as giving in to white supremacy. Craig notes that the words “middle class” and “bourgeois” became signposts that allowed individuals to position themselves along a spectrum in which white, middle class, effeminate, and conventional were on one end and black, poor, masculine and fearless were on the other.

Craig affirms that “this formulation did not bode well for black women “and her observations illuminate the predicament of Rudolph’s representation:

Within black communities, women were central figures in class-coded conflicts about presentation-of-self. Structurally located as the keepers of traditions as mothers, grandmothers, teachers, and hairdressers, women are often the most resistant to change. In the ways they presented themselves and the values that they held dear, one can see the presence of embedded agency. Their choices were embedded in the constraints of their social locations as black women, and formed in relation to culturally available representations of Black female dignity. Socialized to maintain appearances in the name
of femininity, dignity, and race, conventional black women became central targets in attacks against conformity. Many black women had responded to calls from within their own communities to be upstanding representatives of the race by conforming to middle-class standards of behavior and appearance.157

Thus, Rudolph’s representation was a struggle over black identity. She was a woman who responded to the call to be an upstanding representative of the race through her adherence to middle-class standards of behavior and appearance.

To conclude this chapter, I want to briefly mention the various cultural transformations taking place in the wane of Rudolph’s popularity and before the emergence of Debi Thomas in the late 1980s, in order to illuminate the connections between these two Black female athletes. By the end of Rudolph’s popularity in the late ‘60s, the struggle over black identity would intensify. This intensity was exemplified in the debate of whether Black women should continue to wear a straightened hairstyle like Rudolph or wear their hair natural. For instance, the perceived differences between militants and the black middle class was that the militant was one to wear an “Afro, combat boots, a dashiki, and (carry) a big gun,” an image Rudolph certainly did not represent.158

How Blacks presented themselves was symbolic of deeper issues. Embracing natural hairstyles expressed black racial pride and symbolized the defiance against the dominance of white culture. The Afro and other outward appearances symbolized a new black identity and “Black is beautiful” was the mantra. The phrase, however, is not so new, as Marcus Garvey urged in the 1920s for Black people to “take down the
pictures of white women from your walls” and honor the greater beauty of black women. Nonetheless, Angela Davis most memorably embodied this mantra as images of her Afro appeared everywhere in the U.S. by the late 1960s. Juxtaposed with Rudolph’s sporting body, images of Davis offered alternative visions of Black womanhood. Angela Davis was often associated with the Black Panthers and with the black power politics of the late 1960s and early 1970s and therefore, her image, unlike Rudolph, did not embody a bourgeois respectability.

Both Rudolph and Davis represent the conversation that was taking place about black identity in the 1960s. Rudolph’s images symbolized social progress and signified a perceived success that integration would bring for black folk. However, Craig points out that “by the mid-1960s, after a decade of protest left the majority of African Americans mired in poverty and despite countless success stories of achievements of a new black elite, enthusiasm for celebrating individual success waned.” Therefore, some Blacks became disillusioned with the integrationist strategy that Rudolph represented because it “only resulted in winning places for a privileged few.” In an era of heightened black consciousness, many young black women increasingly questioned the politics of race and respectability. In wearing the Afro, young black women rejected white middle class sensibilities of their womanhood and the Afro represented a quest for self definition and a new vision of race and respectability. The Afro, so identified with Davis, was associated with women in the Black Panther Party and thus it also personified a militant blackness. Therefore, social identities for Black womanhood were expressed in various ways. One the one hand, Rudolph’s images
signified the politics of race and respectability, a dignified form of self-presentation.

One the other hand, the politics of race and respectability as a form of resistance were challenged by those who sought out new strategies of resistance: racial pride. Rudolph’s representations emerged during a time when black racial pride, which for many years had been privately expressed, became public, visible. The Afro, or natural hairstyle, symbolized a black identity constructed from within Black communities. Simply put, in the 1960s many Blacks publicly ceased striving for white approval, a rejection which was a major tenant of the Black power movement. In fact, many Blacks believed that the concept of a respectable self-presentation did not signal an acceptance of “white values” but rather was an extension of the lessons they had learned from their families, churches, and teachers.

The 1960s was a decade of ambivalence. By the end of the 1960s, Blacks not only rejected white presentations of blackness, they also rejected racist treatment. Hines points out that “black anger exploded everywhere” in response to racial violence aimed against Blacks, poverty, and injustice. Such tension culminated in race riots from 1965-1970 that took place in major cities across the nation. At the same time, the 1960s Civil Rights movement overturned segregation laws, opened voting booths, created new job opportunities, and brought hope to Black Americans. As long as it could be said that conditions were improving, the future looked promising for Black citizens. The promises of the 1960s faded, however, as the income gap between whites and Blacks widened. In the 1970s, the Black underclass expanded rather than contracted.
Eventually, the Black power movement was threatened by class fractions, sexism, and the rise of neoconservatism in the late 1960s. Omi and Winant point out that after the moderate demands of the civil rights movement were met in 1964 with the passage of the Civil Rights Act, and in 1965 with the enactment of voting rights legislation, many black activists saw their underlying ideals as unfulfilled. Not only had they failed to create a ‘beloved community’ but they had failed to achieve significant change in the social conditions faced by blacks.165

Yet the myth of progress dominated the media, and thus notions of hope remained. Despite the disillusionment, African Americans continued to forge a group identity to celebrate their ethnicity and to resist white domination. Still working against a positive collective black identity, mainstream media would continue to formulate ideas about black social identity and race. Omi and Winant remark that by the late 1960s, the new right “advanced their own vision of race.”166 This vision came to fruition during the 1970s and 1980s through mainstream media. In the ‘70s the politics of blackness was co-opted by turning racial pride into a spectacle in what is called “blaxploitation.” Historians Emma Werner and Gary Nash observe that by the early 1970s, black power militancy was no longer a significant political force; instead, of “Black Panthers with guns, popular films turned black militancy into entertainment.”167 Here my notion of shapeshifting is relevant. While images of the 1970s were different from those of previous decades, often enough old stereotypes resurfaced, as Donald Bogle notes “simply dressed in new garb to look modern, hip, provocative, and politically ‘relevant’.”168 Shapeshifting speaks to the cunningness of cultural hegemony to disguise
itself to convince people of color that mainstream productions of blackness empower them. The media gave African Americans perceived power, while real power had yet to be gained. bell hooks states that “despite the civil rights struggle, the 1960s power movement and the power of slogans like “black is beautiful,” masses of black people continued to be socialized via mass media and non-progressive educational systems to internalize white supremacist thoughts and values.”169 The transition from the activism of the 1960s to the conservatism of the Reagan-Bush era was challenging for many African Americans. Moving into the 1980s, mediated images of Black womanhood remained formidable in constructing their social identities.
Debi Thomas became one the most popular female sports stars of the 1980s when she won the bronze medal in the Olympic Winter Games in 1988. She was the first Black female Olympic skater to medal at the Olympic Games.170 However, her appearance on the cover of *Time* magazine in February, 1988 was not a common site in America’s visual iconography for primarily two reasons (see figure 11). For one, rarely did African American women appear on the front covers of national magazines, and secondly, figure skating was dominated by white female bodies. Representations of Thomas’s sporting body illustrated the continued currency of race and gender ideologies being (re)produced in U.S. society during the 1980s. The intersecting
discourses around Debi Thomas were culturally significant in defining social identities of Black womanhood. Contextualizing Thomas’s images in the 1980s sociopolitical climate offers particular readings of her sporting body that differ from the discourse of Black womanhood as represented around Rudolph’s sporting body in the 1960s. Whereas Rudolph’s image signified the respectability of race, Thomas’s image was appropriated in ways that supported the declining significance of race, and thus Thomas represented an American respectability. Due to the rearticulation of race and gender in the 1980s, the concept of respectability was reconfigured around Thomas’s sporting body. The competing discourses of nation, race, and gender that are embedded on this front cover of *Time*, in addition to other mediated narratives of Thomas, make for a complex read of her body. Images of Thomas in various mainstream magazines and newspapers such as *Time, Seventeen, Rolling Stone, Newsweek, Sports Illustrated, USA Today,* and *The New York Times,* as well as the articles accompanying her images, constructed meanings about Black womanhood. As a cultural construct, Thomas’s mediated social identity is neither stable, essential, nor consistent; it is dynamic, complex, and contradictory. Prior to Thomas’s visibility, the 1970s offered not one black female athlete in the public sphere. Not since Wilma Rudolph in the 1960s had America embraced an African American female athlete.\(^{171}\)

The purpose of this chapter is to excavate Thomas’s intersectionality to better understand how race and gender are constructed around her sporting body. Ultimately, I contend that representations of Thomas helped justify and shape the new racism of a desegregated, color-blind America. Underpinning Thomas’s narrative is a
persistent racist ideology. Similar to Rudolph, Thomas’s self-presentation was easily co-opted to fit a national imagery wherein whiteness remains the norm. The social climate of the 1980s as given to cultural consumers in the media elevated an American ethos of rugged individualism, a myth of racial equality, and the rhetoric of multiculturalism. I start with a brief overview of Debi Thomas’s subject-position, her professional skating career, and her accomplishments as well as a discussion of the sport of figure skating. Next, I discuss specific realms of culture and politics of the 1980s to examine Thomas’s sporting body as sign and the racial and gendered signified possibilities as constructed in various mainstream representations. Here I situate her in what Herman Grays posits as Reagan’s sign of Blackness and Hill-Collins’s discussion of modern day controlling images of Black womanhood. Then I examine how Thomas is constructed in the mediated narrative of the battle for Olympic gold between her and Katarina Witt, or what the media referred to as the “battle of the Carmens,” because they both skated their free programs to the music of Bizet’s *Carmen*. This section includes an analysis of the various representational strategies employed by the media, sports commentary, and the Olympic committee to comprehend the meaning produced around the sporting bodies of Thomas and Witt. In constructing Thomas as different from Witt, the media produces particular messages about womanhood. According to structuralist linguistic/semiotic theory based on the work of Swiss linguist Ferdinand de Saussure, meaning derives from difference or distinction with a system of signification. Lastly, I close with a brief look at how these points come together to better understand hegemonic descriptions of black identity and notions of belonging that render the complexity of
competing identities for black female athletes.

**The Making of an Ice Princess**

Thomas first emerged onto the figure skating scene in 1984 during her freshman year at Stanford University and became the first African American to win the World Figure Skating Championship that year and again in 1988. In two years, from 1983-1985, she moved from 13th to 2nd place in the U.S. figure skating finals. She also ranked 5th in the world. Her win against 1985 reigning champion Katarina Witt for the national title in 1986 boosted Thomas’s popularity. However, it was Thomas’s performance in the 1988 Olympics that garnered the most attention when she won the bronze medal. In addition, Thomas has many accolades. She was the 1985 Figure Skater of the Year, the 1986 Amateur Female Athlete of the Year, and ABC’s *Wide World of Sports* Athlete of the Year, also in 1986. That same year, she won the Women’s Sports Foundation Amateur Sportswoman of the Year. In November of 1998, Thomas was inducted into the San Jose sports Hall of Fame in San Jose, California. During the 2000 U.S. Figure Skating Championships in Cleveland, Ohio, Thomas was inducted into the U.S. Figure Skating Hall of Fame, certainly one of her most cherished honors. Until the 2002 Salt Lake City Winter Olympics, Thomas was the first and only Black athlete to win an Olympic medal at the Winter games.

Despite the demands of training and competing, Thomas stayed the course in academics. In fact, during her freshman year at Stanford, she won both the U.S. and World championship titles. After graduating from Stanford University with a degree in engineering in 1991, she attended Northwestern University Medical School, graduating

Thomas’s popular sporting personality, along with her research interests has enabled her to achieve an array of success in a variety of pursuits. In 1994, she was the expert television analyst for CBS affiliate WBBM-Chicago for the women’s skating competition at the Lillehammer Winter Olympics. The U.S. Olympic Committee also asked Thomas to be their on-site celebrity representative at the 2002 Salt Lake Olympic Games. In 2003, Thomas was featured in a public service announcement for Health and Human Services in Washington, D.C. to stress the importance of seeking a doctor’s advice regularly for common medial concerns that can become serious if left untreated. She appeared in a Minute Maid orange juice consumer promotion in 1998. She also has appeared on various television and talk shows and news programs. After visiting the NASA Space Center in Houston and the Huntsville, Alabama, Space and Rocket Center, she was appointed to the “Mission HOME” (Harvesting Opportunities for Mother Earth) Advisory Board by former astronaut Jim Lovell in 1996. In 2006, Laura Bush appointed Thomas to the U.S. Olympic Delegation; The delegation traveled to Europe in an effort to promote global diplomacy (figures 12 & 13). Moreover, Thomas’s personal life received much attention in 1988 when she married a White man, Brian Vanden Hogen, a fellow college student. They later divorced in 1991. She has been
married to Chris Bequette, a White male sports attorney, since 1996. They have one son, Christopher “Luc” Jules, who was born in 1997. Thomas retired from professional skating in 1992. With her success, Thomas has gained a large fan following and the media continues to spotlight her medical career as well as her personal life.

A discussion of Thomas’s subject position, her family and her relationship to professional figure skating is needed to unpack the multilayered discourses that have fashioned Thomas’s sporting body as sign. Coming of age in San Jose, California in the 1970s in a high-middle class Black family living in a predominantly white neighborhood has shaped Thomas’s identity as a skater. Before the age of five, her family moved from Poughkeepsie, New York to San Jose, California where her father and mother, McKinley and Janice, worked as computer analysts at one of the new-technology companies that helped create what would become Silicon Valley. In the 1970s, Silicon Valley was 83% white. The Thomases were one of the few African American families in their neighborhood. After her parents divorced in 1974, Janice Thomas managed to raise both Debi and her brother and fund Debi’s $25,000-a-year sport. Still, there were difficulties. When Thomas progressed up the competitive level, the financial strain became greater. Her coach of nine years, Alex McGowan “gave her a break on rates and let her slide when money was tight.” McGowan’s assistant recalled “I can remember her wearing old, worn out skates, her feet squished up inside. There was no money to pay for new boots.” With the help of other family members, Debi’s father, and her stepbrother Richard Taylor, an astrophysicist and rock singer, they all shared the expense of her figure skating. The Olympian version of Thomas’s
narrative reads almost like a Hortio Alger’s story—from rags to riches, only I wouldn’t say that Thomas was coming from rags, considering her class background.

Other than a nominal mention of Thomas as a Black skater, it would seem as though race is not a part of her mediated identity. The New York Times begins its article by pointing out that Thomas was the first black star in a sport traditionally dominated by white athletes, and her unusual (my emphasis) blend of strength and grace captivated audiences.”¹⁷⁸ However, to state that “Thomas has no Black women predecessors to follow” as the article continues, distorts the history of African American involvement in professional figure skating. In 1972, Michelle McCladdie was the first African American woman, along with her African American male partner Richard Ewell, to win the National Junior Championship in pairs.¹⁷⁹ In another interview in Time, Thomas told journalist T. Callahan that “I never felt I had to have a role model. I didn’t think I had to see a black woman do this to believe it’s possible.”¹⁸⁰ In a cavalier tone, Callahan remarks “By the way, Thomas is black.” He adds, “But she seems to regard her race as the merest coincidence. When she hears the term role model, she cringes.”¹⁸¹ When questioned about “the media attention to the racial aspects as being the first in the sport on national and international levels,” in the Olympian, Thomas commented that she doesn’t see “black or white…I look on myself as a skater going through the same thing skaters ahead of me have gone through. Nothing else. That’s all.”¹⁸² When Sports Illustrated questioned her about being “a black champion in a lily-white sport,” sports journalist E. M. Swift remarks that “the truth is, Thomas never
thought much about it until the media began asking her all the time.”\textsuperscript{183} The interview addresses issues of a black identity:

More to the point, Thomas has never felt, or been made to feel, like an outsider or part of a minority. ‘I never had anybody talk to me in a way that made me feel I was any different from anyone else,’ she says, ‘so why on earth would I want to become the first black champion?’\textsuperscript{184}

In response to Thomas’s position and also referring to the segregated environment in Wichita, Kansas in which Debi’s mother Janice Thomas grew up in, Swift summarizes “that’s wonderful news, of course, testimony to how much has changed in a generation”.\textsuperscript{185} Although referred to as a Black skater, Thomas’s social identity does not represent a collective black identity. Perhaps in not seeing herself as “a black woman,” Thomas rejected socially constructed notions of blackness in attempts to carve out her own space in the world. Furthermore, the fact that Thomas does not see race as a determining factor in her life’s experiences fits well with a color-blind America.

However, at the same time, interviews in several magazines indicate Thomas’s struggle with identity. For instance, in \textit{Time} magazine, Thomas and her mother explain that very early in Debi’s career, she learned what it meant being an African American woman in a predominately white sport. During her “dues-paying years, peachie opponents without even a double axel (two and half rotations in midair) were outscoring her triple jumps.”\textsuperscript{186} When Thomas expressed her disappointment to her mother, she said of Thomas’s competitor, “Well, that one’s got blonde hair, and you don’t.”\textsuperscript{187} On another occasion, they returned home from competition to find a cross
burning on their lawn. Despite these incidents of blatant racism, Thomas maintains that she “has never felt like part of a minority.” In a photograph in *Time*, Thomas is comfortably resting her head on her mother’s shoulder (see figure 14). The caption below reads “Janice Thomas endured discrimination, but Debi has never felt like part of a minority.” Even though Thomas’s self-representation appears to be indifferent about race, what fellow skater Scott Hamilton observed of her reveals that perhaps Thomas did struggle with her identity as a Black skater. Scott Hamilton does not speak for Thomas, but his observations of her make sense in a world of figure skating that is dominated by whiteness. In an article, he shares conversations that he had with Thomas while they toured together in 1989 with “Stars on Ice.” Scott Hamilton states that “Debi was extremely unhappy.” He felt that

the pressure of being the first African American to win a national and world title was too much of a burden for her to shoulder. The expectations placed on her may have been unreasonable. She was an unique symbol of hope, a role model, and seemed to have the world at her fingertips.

In the world of professional figure skating in which Thomas was largely socialized, where most of the bodies are white, it is not surprising that she did perhaps struggle with issues of identity.

The constructed meaning of figure skating only heightens Thomas’s race-neutral position as represented in the media. In *Culture on Ice: Figure Skating and Cultural Meaning*, Ellyn Kestnbaum posits that “figure skating’s meanings have been shaped by
the social practices and values of its founders, that is, primarily northern Europeans and North Americans of European ancestry from upper-and upper-middle social/financial strata.”

Hence, Thomas’s image was coveted in the media primarily because of its reassuring affinity with the investments associated with America’s white-dominated sport. Although the media could not escape the fact that Thomas is of African American descent, her identity has been shrewdly severed from any vestiges of African American culture. On the whole, skating is widely perceived as a “white” sport because of its greater proportion and longer history of European and Euro-American exponents. The traditional movement vocabulary and body imagery employed in international-style freeskating has largely drawn on European genteel traditions, primarily the ballet along with such social dance forms, such as the waltz and the march. Thomas is represented in the media as a skater who conforms to traditions in figure skating and not as one who disrupts them. Thomas’s class status, as well as her internalization of color-blind society, allows for her image to fit neatly in the sport of figure skating. Sports scholar David Andrews posits that “the compulsion for African Americans to disavow their blackness in order to successfully harness rather than alienate popular opinion is indicative of the ingrained hegemonic racism within American society. American culture simple does not tolerate individuals who are, to put it plainly, too black.”

Thus, Thomas is tolerated, and even valued as long as she abdicates her race and is seen to successfully assimilate into the practices, value system, and hence identity, of white America.
Whereas the politics of race and respectability were significant in Rudolph’s self-presentation, Thomas’s self-presentation offers something else. Historically, socially constructed identities of Black womanhood drew from stereotypical depictions of the working poor. With a few exceptions, derogatory imagery of Black womanhood continued to saturate the mainstream in the 1970s and 1980s. It’s possible that Thomas was subject to these depictions in the media and could not identify with them due to her class socialization and perhaps rejected them due to race. Wilma Rudolph, coming from a working poor family, embraced the politics of race and respectability because she understood the value of self-presentation in a public sphere that deemed her blackness as inferior. As popular track athlete in the 1960s, racial up-lift was a part of her public as well as personal identity. Because of the lack of positive representations of Black womanhood, she knew the importance of her presence in U.S. society. Unlike Rudolph, Thomas’s narrative reflects the perspective that there is no race to uplift, or if there is, Thomas herself is not part of it.

Their divergent positionalities can be attributed to changes in American culture. As discussed earlier, contested meanings of a black identity emerged in the public discourse as activists in Black social movements of the ’60s expressed their discontent with negative imagery of blackness because it did not represent the various experiences of African American life. Discontent arose again in the 1970s when many Black people protested the depiction of Black life in Blaxploitation film. For the most part, mainstream media’s view of Black life stereotypically focused on the inner city poor. With the rise of the Black middle class, representations of African Americans in the
media began to slowly change. Within this emerging class, which gained prominence in the 1980s, notions of a Black identity within communities of color were even more heavily contested. To understand what social identities for Black womanhood looked liked in the 1980s, in the next section I turn to the contestation over the signs of blackness.

**Enter the Lady: Thomas Signifying American Respectability**

In this section I discuss the discourse of race and gender in the 1980s to analyze representations of Thomas’s Black female sporting body in several mainstream magazines. She emerged in a social and political climate wherein the signs of blackness were being contested within Black communities and being (re)produced in the mainstream media. Put another way, African American cultural discourses, together with neoconservative assaults and claims on blackness, helped to establish the symbolic landmarks with which cultural critics can to begin to make sense of mainstream media’s representations of Thomas’s Black female sporting body.

Representations of Thomas’s sporting body are situated within the struggle over the signs of blackness in the 1980s. On one front, there are African American cultural struggles over the signs of blackness which centered on tensions between unity and difference. Black intellectuals and cultural workers sought ways to embrace the differences within blackness while at the same time rearticulating a collective identity, one that unified Black peoples. I see this tension of unity and difference as an issue of strategic essentialism, a term coined by the Indian literary critic and theorist Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak. It refers to a strategy that nationalities, ethnic groups or minority
groups can use to present themselves. While strong differences may exist between members of these groups and they engage in continuous debates amongst themselves, it is sometimes advantageous for them to temporarily 'essentialize' themselves and bring forward their group identity in a simplified way to achieve certain goals. Nonetheless, strategic essentialism has not come easy in African American culture. Herman Gray’s analysis of the signs of blackness in the 1980s in *Watching Race: Television on the Struggle for Blackness*, he illuminates the questions that African Americans grappled with:

Could African Americans especially critical intellectuals and cultural workers, represent the complex and wide-ranging differences of class, color coding, sexuality, gender, region, and political ideology without compromising the necessity for a public stance of unity? Does the desire—indeed, necessity—for a unified Antiracist position base solely on a racial identity and identification with ‘blackness’ come at the cost of repression and containment of deep and growing internal differences? Would representing these complex differences amount to dirty laundry, in effect fueling stereotypes and eroding black political power, social legitimacy, and cultural visibility? And could—indeed, should the already burdened sign of ‘blackness’ continue to perform the discursive labors necessary to balance these implicit tensions?^{196}

Gray’s complex social and cultural questions were debated and enacted in such public cultural arenas as commercial network television, films, novels, popular music, sports, and cultural criticism. Gray observes the emergence of blackness as site of contested struggle over the very question of identity and difference in the material and cultural climate of the 1980s. Scholars such as Cornel West, E. Francis White, and Kimberle Crenshaw emphasized the differences within blackness.^{197} E. Francis White contends that Africa American sare structured in dominance by class, gender, sexuality
and more; as a result of this “fragmentation, we often struggle over who gets to define the race, who is in the race, and what the meaning of blackness is.” As result of this fragmentation, parts of identities for Black women are in continuous competition as each part vies for the top tier of some hierarchical order of being in the world. White also asks “Where is class in black feminist analysis?” Similarly, in critiquing Black feminist scholarship in 1987, Hazel Carby argued that the “assertion of the existence of an essential black female experience and an exclusive black female language in which this experience is embodied,” is problematic. Representations of Thomas offer a critique that works to examine differences within blackness. In addition to her subject-position—her self-presentation—images of Thomas’s sporting body in mainstream media challenged a collective black identity. In short, representations of Thomas cause critical viewers to question identity and difference over the signs of blackness for women as debated in the 1980s. Moreover, her location—growing in the Silicon Valley in the 1980s—, her standpoint from a upper-middle class status, and race offer a narrative about Black womanhood that has not been give much scholarly attention up to this point.

On the other front, there was the tension coming from the new right. While Blacks were trying to salvage a collective identity — lost somewhere between the ‘60s and ‘70s — for political grounding, a formidable neoconservatist attack continued to reassert a white identity by appropriating class differences within African American culture and stereotyping the Black underclass. In other words, class was constructed and used to whiten blackness. Just as the white elite planters during Bacon’s rebellion
used white skin to privilege the white poor, the white political elite in the ’80s used
class to privilege Blacks. Strategically, the new right’s rearticulation of racial ideology
was deployed through the politics of representation. Just as brute images were used to
justify the re-enslavement of black peoples after emancipation, new images during the
’70s and ’80s appeared to justify the tightening up of social programs under the new
right. On the one hand, the media selectively portrayed African Americans in poverty,
an act which perpetuated racial stereotypes and cultural assumptions about African
Americans. These images were used to demonize blackness and serve as a backlash
against the social movements of the 1960s and a prompt return to the good old days of
white supremacy, not that it ever was eliminated. On the other hand, images of middle-
and upper middle-class Black culture were used to justify that social programs were no
longer needed because the playing field is had been leveled. After all, look at the
prosperity gained by Black Americans. Images of Thomas fit the latter discourse. Omi
and Winant note that “by the 1980s, the right-wing reaction had captured the popular
political imagination.”201 There were Blacks who saw themselves as part of this
“imagined community.”202 Here again is an example of shape-shifting.
Gray’s comments describe the cunningness of white supremacists to shift racial
ideology in their favor:

The very presence of this class faction of black America
enabled Republicans to disguise their politics of
resentment, based on racial fears, in personal rather than
structural terms while appealing to the virtues of
individual merit, strong moral character, and hard
work.203
Herman Gray posits that the discursive production of blackness in the 1980s was an essential element of the political and cultural realignments that helped stage and install the neoconservative hegemony referred to as Reaganism. Many scholars have well documented how Reaganism served as the major discursive formation within which conservative political, social, and cultural alliances, debates, policies, and claims were framed about the United States in the 1980s. Omi and Winant affirm that “President Reagan, more than any other President in recent memory, had cultivated an image as ‘the white people’s President’”. Central to Reaganism was the strategic use of an often-repeated story that in effect linked and then demonized the welfare state and poor Black women. Omi and Winant capture the administrative stance quite clearly:

Under [Reagan’s] leadership, the federal government reversed itself and switched sides on racial policy. This was accomplished by rewriting recent history to suggest that discrimination against racial minorities had been drastically curbed and by radically transforming the state institutions which were previously mandated to ‘protect’ racial minority interests.

Consequently, instead of “protecting” racial minority interest efforts under Reagan and later Bush, the Reagan/Bush regime sought to demonize blackness in an attempt to justify that African Americans no longer needed government protection. Put another way, the Reagan/Bush regime reflects the ideology of the nation’s founding fathers, whose vision for America was more of a plutocracy than a democracy. In short, the 1980s saw the elevation of new policies and practices that suggested that gender and
racial politics assaulted the basic American notion of “liberty for all,” just as the tenets of affirmative action were rolled back with the emergence of the new right.

Before I turn to images of Thomas in mainstream media, a brief discussion of *The Cosby Show* will explain the cultural politics of difference in which Thomas emerged. This term—cultural politics of difference—speaks to the issues around which the signs of blackness are engaged: gender (femininity and masculinity), social class, and sexuality. Patricia Hill-Collins takes on these issues in *Black Sexual Politics: African Americans, Gender, and the New Racism*. Her analysis of representations of Black womanhood, particularly the character of Claire Huxtable, is useful for a better understanding of Debi Thomas’s sporting body.

The conflict over the signs of blackness was evidence in viewer responses to *The Cosby Show* in the 1980s. *The Cosby Show* was a television hit on the NBC television network in the 1980s. Bill Cosby produced the show and also starred as one of the leading characters, Heathcliff "Cliff" Huxtable, who was an obstetrician. *The Cosby Show* focused on the day-to-day situations faced by Cliff, his wife, Claire Huxtable (Phylicia Ayers-Allen, later Phylicia Rashad) and their five children. The family was unlike other black families previously seen on television in that it was solidly upper-middle-class—the Huxtables lived in a fashionable Flatbush brownstone in Brooklyn, New York. Cliff was a respected obstetrician, and Claire was a very eloquent, elegant, and assertive attorney. *The Cosby Show* signified the confluence of race and class in (re)configuring social identities of African Americans, particular for Black women. Along with Gray,
other scholars have commented on how *The Cosby Show* was critical to the development of contemporary representations of blacks. Michael Eric Dyson perceptively notes:

> *The Cosby Show* reflects the increasing diversity of African American life, including continuous upward social mobility by blacks, which provides access to new employment opportunities and expands the black middle class. Such mobility and expansion insures the development of new styles for blacks that radically alter and impact African American culture. *The Cosby Show* is one legitimate expression of one aspect of that diversity.206

While *The Cosby Show* did spotlight the diversity of African American life, it also received its share of negative criticism. Gray remains ambivalent about the show. On the one hand, Gray admits the show has some positive elements; on the other hand, he criticizes it for “the idealization of the middle class and is failure to address issues that confront a large number of African Americans.”207 For others, though, the show may have been too positive. In their 1992 book, *Enlightened Racism: The Cosby Show, Audiences and the Myth of the American Dream,* Sut Jhally and Justin Lewis concluded that the show's representation of successful blacks was so effective, it distorted white America's beliefs about African-American progress.208 It allowed whites to feel "a sense of self-satisfaction" about race relations. White America could look at the Huxtables, watch a black family, and not feel guilty. Jhally and Lewis observe that *The Cosby Show* cultivates a curious contradiction for white viewers in that the “Huxtables’ presence of TV finally proves that ‘anyone can make it’; yet most people know that the vast majority of black people are not like the Huxtables.”209 Jhally and Lewis explain that
this contradiction leads to an illiberal conclusion: “The only way to explain the failure of most black people to achieve what the Huxtables have achieved is to see most black people as intrinsically lazy or stupid.”

The Cosby Show, by demonstrating the opportunity for African Americans to be successful, implies the majority of black people who have, by the Huxtable criterion, failed. They add that the show’s emphasis of education, with its good intentions, simply compounds this impression. They state “As Bill Cosby says of the Huxtables, ‘This is an American family—an American family—and if you want to live like they do, and you’re willing to work, the opportunity is there.’”

Unlike the fictional Huxtables, Thomas’s upper-middle class identity is real. Her early memories of “symphonies, operas, ballets, and ice shows” were not typical memories of most Blacks growing up in the ’70s. While in high school, she was offered scholarships from Harvard, Princeton, and Stanford. We must keep in mind that due to institutional discrimination and racism, Black people have not always have access to these places. In Thomas’s mediated narrative, there is no discussion of the racial discrimination that African Americans endured in regards to figure skating. In other words, like The Cosby Show, the story of racism is left out. For instance, in the 1930s, figure skater Mabel Fairbanks was denied access to a local ice rink in Harlem, so instead she taught herself to skate with the pair of ice skates her parents purchased in a pawn shop. Later, she was granted permission to skate after the rink had closed. By the 1940s, when her skating advanced, she could not compete because she did not belong to a skating club. Fairbanks ultimately became a respected teacher and coach. For her
groundbreaking works as a skater, she was elected to the United States Hall of Fame in 1997. Nonetheless, representations of Thomas’s sporting body signified similar meanings as The Cosby Show. To this point, visual representations of Thomas signify Cosby’s statement regarding the Huxtables being an “American family,” as she became the image of American respectability in mainstream media. For one, they both signified the golden result of the civil rights movement and the fight for racial equality. By focusing on her education and her interracial marriage, two overwhelming tropes in Thomas’s mediated identity emerge: meritocratic mythology and multiculturalism. Like The Cosby Show, representations of Thomas emphasize her education. For example, next to an image of Thomas in Sports Illustrated, the text reads, “Stanford student Debi Thomas took a break from her late-hour studies to win the U.S. figure skating title.”

The first lines of the article read:

An ordinary ice princess she isn’t. It’s not just that Debi Thomas of San Jose, Calif. is not the first black national champion in U.S. figure skating history — novice, juniors, seniors, men’s, women’s, you name it. Thomas is different on the inside. Start with the fact that she’s a freshman premed student at Stanford.

It is not clear as to why the writer why the writer chose to emphasize that Thomas is “different on the inside.” What the writer does make clear is that Thomas is different, but different from whom? Is Thomas different from other skaters or different from other Blacks, or both? It could be inferred that Thomas is not ordinary — in a world of mostly
white skaters—in that she is a Black champion figure skater. Thomas is also different because she’s a freshman pre-med student at Stanford. Race and education mark her as different. Patricia Hill-Collins posits that racial desegregation in the post-civil rights era needed new images of racial difference for a color-blind ideology. Images of Thomas in mainstream media give us just that.

Still, the image of Thomas pictured in her dorm room makes it appear that she is just another student at college, no different than other students at Stanford; at least that is what the Olympian would like us to believe. Underneath an image of Thomas in the Olympian, it reads “Debi pulled off her World Championship while also carrying a pre-med class load at Stanford (see figure 15).” The first line in the article, “Pedaling her bicycle across the Stanford University Campus, she looks like any other student,” indicates that Thomas is no different then other students as Stanford. Similar to the upper middle class Huxtables who lacked an “authentic ‘black’ culture and were virtually indistinguishable from their White middle-class counterparts, assimilated, propertied Black people [who] were shown as being ready for racial integration” so too does Thomas as she “looks like any other student” on the Stanford campus. What makes her look like other students is her hard work:

She is taking 14 credits in biology, organic chemistry, math plus a course in writing and another in drama, and has recently moved into a local co-ed fraternity and is going through ‘initiation rights.’ At the same time, she is training four to six hours a day on the ice and another one to two hours off the ice in a program of aerobics and weight training that she developed herself (of course).
In addition, *Rolling Stone* notes that “Thomas is an outsider” in the world of skating, and points out that “Thomas is the first female champion in thirty years to balance full-time university studies with competition (she is a junior in premed at Stanford, having turned down Harvard and Princeton).” In addition, *The New York Times* writes

> At the age of 17, Thomas became the first African American to win a medal in a national figure skating championship. She exemplified what can be accomplished with dedication and a tenacious single mindedness. For the next 15 years, she charged forward like a ram, taking full loads in high school and at Stanford while moving to the top as a skater.

By focusing on her academic life, as many articles do, Thomas comes to represent that educational achievement for Black people is not only possible, but if pursued with hard work and diligence like Thomas, success is inevitable. This is the American rugged individualism that is seen in the Huxables—the American creed, as Bill Cosby puts it, “if you’re willing to work, the opportunity is there.” Thus, Thomas sets the example for other Blacks to follow with her “dedication” and “tenacious single mindedness.” Jhally and Lewis claim that a representation such as this “provides the viewer with an explanation for the comparative failure of most other black people: if they had only tried harder in school, maybe they would have succeeded.” Furthermore, Thomas’s dichotomous construction marks her as both different and alike, similar to the ways in which white people “saw the Huxtable family as simultaneously black and white.” For instance, these various articles first point to Thomas’s race and immediately to her education in ways that articulate she is different. Perhaps her status as a pre-med
student at Stanford and her pursuit to become a doctor is not like other representations of Black people in the media. In this respect, Thomas could be a member of the Huxtable family. White respondents to *The Cosby Show* commented that the Huxtables aren’t the “typical Black family, they’re just like us,” or as Henry Louis Gates said of *The Cosby Show*, the Huxtables are “just like white people.” Thomas is not just the typical Black woman; instead, she is just like the white students at Stanford. To this end, because of her class status, she is also like other figure skaters. Overall, the one message that is clear through all of these articles is Thomas’s virtues of individual merit, strong moral character, and hard work.

Next, in keeping with a color-blind ideology where a multicultural America means that race no longer matters, the use of amalgamation in representations of Thomas adds to the construction of a multicultural nation. Amalgamation, or more popularly known as miscegenation, is linked to the metaphor the melting pot, which describes the cultural assimilation or intermarriage of whites and non-whites. Until 1967, such marriages were banned in many US states through so-called anti-miscegenation laws. Ironically, the media used Thomas’s interracial marriage to produce a message of racial unity. However, it is more complex than that. It is not that Thomas’s marriage is used to show racial unity; instead, it is used in ways that deracialize Thomas, or construct her as not Black. Hill-Collins points out that “all women engage an ideology that deems middle-class, heterosexual, White femininity as normative.” Included in Thomas’s mediated narrative are images that construct hegemonic femininity. While Thomas’s educational pursuits construct a white identity,
her marriage to a white man only further solidifies her black whiteness and confirms a heteronormative femininity. When asked about her interracial marriage, Thomas commented that “A lot of people see us and say, ‘Debi Thomas!’ They don’t even notice Brian.” ²²⁶ It’s not so much that he goes unnoticed, but more that her blackness remains unseen. A story entitled “Debi Thomas’ Love Story: She’s Back at Stanford and Wild About Her Man” in the San Francisco Chronicle reminds us of her heterosexuality. On the front page is an image of Thomas holding books on what appears to be the Stanford’s campus (see figure 16). Below is another image of Thomas and her husband, Brian Vanden Hogen who is “finishing his senior year at the University of Colorado” (see figure 17). ²²⁷ Time magazine writes that Thomas “had fallen yet again—this time in Love.” ²²⁸ Next to the story is an image of Thomas and Vanden Hogen, who both appear to be happy newlyweds as they are “getting on with things” (see figure 19). ²²⁹ In Sports Illustrated, Thomas is shown putting on make-up, and in a different photograph, she is shown cooking in the kitchen (see figure 18). ²³⁰ Next to the photo, S.I. writes that “Thomas sends some pizza dough spinning, to the admiration of her boyfriend, Brian VandeHogan [sic].” ²³¹ Thomas’s sporting body as pictured in these images exemplifies how the convergence of race and class sparked changes in the treatment of gender and sexuality for Black womanhood. Collins notes that under the new color-blind racism that erases the color line, racism itself seems to have disappeared. By including images of Thomas and Vanden Hogen in all their martial bliss, it appears as though America has come along way regarding attitudes towards interracial couples; as a result, America can claim to be a color-blind society. To this
point, representations of Thomas pictured with her husband and the focus on education rearticulated race in the 1980s, as well as contributed to the shaping of new racism. Hill-Collins posits that racial desegregation in the post-civil rights era needed new images of racial difference for a color-blind ideology; Thomas’s sporting body is this new image. A Hill-Collins observation of controlling images of Black womanhood illuminates what Thomas signifies:

This media constructed Blackness took class-specific forms that mirrored changes in actual social class formations among African Americans. The arrival of middle-class ‘Black’ respectability, as evidenced by the strictures of the Black lady and the modern mammy, helped shape a discourse about racial integration and African American women’s place in it.232

However, due to Thomas’s subjectivity and the production of her mediated identity, she does not quite fit Hill-Collins descriptions of the Black lady and the modern mammy. Instead, Thomas offers a new variation of a racialized image. She symbolizes American respectability. Being that Thomas’s public image is indifferent to the concept of a Black identity, to use Black respectability to describe her self-presentation would not be accurate, due to its historical connotations. In other words, representations of Thomas remake the politics of race and respectability. Keeping with the social and political symbolic use of her sporting body in the 1980s, my usage of American respectability refers to the rearticulation of race and gender under cooptation of the new right.
American respectability has been illustrated in Thomas’s subject position of not seeing herself as a “black skater,” in addition to the ways in which the media has used education and her marriage to construct rugged individualism and a color-blind society—an American narrative. Nowhere is this more evident in the media’s construction of Thomas as the cute little girl next door. In S.I., Thomas is portrayed as such as she is described as “just another enthusiastic kid,” below an image of her happily jumping up in the air (see figure 21). Another image shows her as a cute bubbly teenager in photograph in which she appears to blow a bubble (see figure 22). The ultimate image of the girl-next-door is illustrated on the front cover of Time.

Thomas’s appearance on the front cover of Time communicates several different, conflated messages. Roy Paul Nelson comments that no feature is so important to a magazine as its cover. Magazine editors realize that the editorial decision of what to put on the magazine’s cover will create “the all-important first impression,” and suggest that as historical benchmarks magazine covers show relationships of cultural power and influence. To represent Thomas as the cute little girl-next-door works well in producing a color-blind society. The media’s production of Thomas’s representation is an example of cultural power. In fact, the images discussed throughout this section are used as representational strategies to construct various myths about America and African American women’s place in it.

Roland Barthes’s theory of myth helps explain how these images of Thomas’s images work within her narrative. For Barthes, myth works through connotation and
denotation. The denotative is the literal sense of meaning – this is the picture of the ice skating rink and the figure in front is Debi Thomas smiling. We see the words “Olympic preview” and the caption “America’s Sweetheart” next to Thomas. The second level of connotation is no longer a descriptive level of obvious interpretation. Barthes argues that through connotation, a system of signification, meanings are generated by connecting signifiers to wider cultural concerns: the beliefs, attitudes, frameworks and ideologies of a social formation. Meaning becomes a matter of the association of signs with other cultural codes of meaning. Where connotations have become naturalized as hegemonic, or accepted a “normal” and “natural,” they act as conceptual maps of meaning through which to make sense of the world. Although an image is polysemic, has more than one meaning, Hall emphasizes that we ask which “meanings of this image does the magazine mean to privilege?”235 In other words, there is a preferred meaning that works by way of myth. Taken together, Thomas’s photograph and the text next to the image proclaiming her “America’s Sweetheart,” gives us a specific read of her sporting body.

To this point, Thomas’s image on the cover of Time exemplifies Barthes notion of signification, myth, and ideology. The meaning of Thomas’s photograph constructs a myth. She is smiling on a mainstream magazine with a caption that reads “America’s Sweetheart.” For one, the sign of an Olympic athlete enables Debi Thomas to connect to wider cultural concerns in that she represents the nation. The Olympics allow a basis for identification, for in the public sphere, as Benedict Anderson notes, “citizens” see themselves as somehow related to other citizens, most of whom they will never meet.
Thus, mapped onto Thomas’s Olympic sporting body is an imagined community—via sports—wherein the black female body is included as part of the of U.S. nationalism. Secondly, by gendering her body as America’s “sweetheart,” patriarchy is reified. Given these signs on the cover of *Time*, the preferred image is that America is a multi-cultural nation where all bodies are embraced and in which racial problems have been resolved; thus Thomas happily serves her nation through Olympic competition and through patriarchal notions of the cute little girl-next-door—she is America’s “sweetheart.”

Given the fact that Olympic figures have always challenged the national community to imagine itself, this particular reading seems quite applicable. The likeness of Thomas’s performance captured here on the cover of *Time* is part of a representational effort to include black Americans because after all, race no longer matters in the imagined white fiction of national identity. Because of this myth, Thomas’s sporting body, as represented on the cover of *Time* and other images discussed in this section, best served the interests of the new right.

**Don’t Judge a Book by Its Cover: Thomas and the Reality of Race**

While representations of Thomas’s sporting body in mainstream media attempted to produce a color-blind society, the subtlety of racism returned to its obvious and blatant form in the narrative of the 1988 Olympic competition between Debi Thomas and Katarina Witt, her main competitor for the gold. Thomas’s extended battle with East Germany’s Katarina Witt in the 1988 Olympics is well-documented in sports journalism, but has not been given scholarly attention. In fact, the *New York Times*
reported that “more than 60 million people—the largest Saturday night television audience since the broadcast of ‘Roots’ in 1977—watched Katarina Witt and Debi Thomas duel for the Olympic gold medal in figure skating.” The competition between Thomas and Witt is referred to as “the battle of the Carmens” because they both skated their freestyle program, the last segment of the 1988 Olympic figure skating competition, to Bizet’s opera “Carmen.”

The contradiction of Thomas’s signification lay in the ways in which, on the one hand, she was embraced as America’s sweetheart, while on the other hand, she was constructed as not the ideal American woman. The ideas of America as a color-blind society and a multicultural place where black female bodies are included in concepts of beauty are thus revealed as myths. To the opposite, viewers are reminded that old habits die hard, as obvious racist ideology emerges in Thomas’s mediated identity. Moreover, as “America’s Sweetheart,” in the competition against Witt, who represented the communist block of East Germany, Thomas’s identity is reconfigured to include concepts of race. For one, in constructing Thomas as “black” signifies America as a racially unified nation during the cold war. However, problematic with this strategy is that America’s racism was still exposed, as evidenced in the media coverage during the 1988 Olympics. Additionally, the majority of Thomas’s tenure in the media spotlight has been characterized by her portrayal as a figure whose singular virtuosity differentiates her from the socially constructed demonized, working poor black women. Consequently, her once racially neutered identity becomes racialized much like the derogatory images of black womanhood. Behind the mythical cover of Thomas being
embraced as “America’s Sweetheart,” *Time* reminds us that the “blond Norwegian starlet of Sun Valley Serenade is still the ideal” female figure skater. Since aesthetics is one of the most important criteria in figure skating, this bias went against Thomas.

The representational strategy of binary opposition was used to construct Thomas as different from Witt, and thus Thomas’s identity rested on stereotypical constructions of the Black female body. References to their looks, performances, and style were key areas in which Thomas was constructed as different from Witt. In constructing Thomas as Other, the media served to remind us of the reality of race in America. Sports Journalist Katherine Martin points out the reality of racism in Thomas’s skating career:

> Cutting her way through the competitive ranks wasn’t easy for Thomas in the beginning. At times, the judges seemed blind to her talent, and more than once, she nearly quit. Some insiders believe she was held back because she is black. Prejudice can’t win out against a stopwatch, but in this highly subjective sport, it can fester.

Martin’s article is one of the few that acknowledges the racist treatment of Thomas. In fact, the racism and classism in figure skating are due to the ideals of the sport itself. Figure skating has long been associated with specific types of body images. Skaters are judged by a panel of individuals who evaluate the skater’s presentation and technique. Thomas’s mediated narrative illustrates that having a correct image plays more of a role in judges’ decisions than objective evaluation. In other words, there are ideological considerations underlying evaluations of skaters’ presentations. Simply put, ideologies of racism underlay the discourse of Thomas’s sporting body in the 1988
competition. In “A Radiant Smile from the Lovely Lady: Overdetermined Femininity in ‘Ladies’ Figure Skating,” Abigail M. Feber’s observations help explain how racist ideology works within the sport of figure skating:

There is always an emphasis on the women’s skaters’ physical beauty (and a corresponding denigration of the sport), which is related to their exchange value and the commodification which is the ultimate reward of Olympic victory. An insidious duality is established by labeling some women as athletic and others as artistic, with the artistry associated with physical beauty.\(^{239}\)

These images of the ideal figure skater have evoked associations with certain forms of off-ice femininity, as evidenced in the discourse of the Thomas/Witt duel. Ellyn Kestnbaum notes that “emphasizing artistry or beauty accorded well with traditional notions of femininity, whereas an emphasis on athleticism carried connotations of masculinity and so proved contentious when applied to female skaters.”\(^{240}\)

Thus the question of athleticism versus artistry carried value-laden meanings about gender ideology. Mainstream media and figure skating critics positioned Witt on the side of femininity and artistry and Thomas on the side of athleticism. As such, Thomas’s sporting body was constructed outside of the feminine ideal much like other Black female bodies in American culture. Many articles refer to Witt and Thomas as “the artistic beauty of the East and the athletic fighter of the West” respectively.\(^{241}\) Thomas is praised for “athleticism” and Witt for “beauty and sex appeal.” Images of Thomas and Witt in *Sports Illustrated* visually depict how these two bodies are placed in binary opposition. Each image occupies half the page. In one image, Witt appears to be
in a ballerina-like turn and is described as “graceful and artistic” (see figure 25). On the opposite page, in Thomas’s image, the skater appears as if she is about to fall. Her body is off the ice, legs spread open in the air, exposing what’s underneath her skirt as if the viewer has access to her covered genitalia, much like Sarah Baartman, the “Hottentot Venus” (see figure 26). The article accompanying the images states that “looking pretty, of course, is not what Thomas’s skating is about. The music, like it or not, was right for her: unconventional, driving, slightly rough around the edges.” The music the article refers to is the rock rhythms of “In My House” by Dead or Alive. In another example, in USA Today article entitled “Figure Skaters Meld Skill with Pizazz,” ABC sports commentator Dick Button describes Katarina Witt as “lovely, a beauty who is fresh, charming and unspoiled,” while he states “The USA’s Debi Thomas is a magnificent contrast to Witt: strong, majestic and combative.” Note that here Thomas is described “in contrast” to lovely, a fresh beauty, charming, and unspoiled nature and appearance of her opponent. Another possible reading is that this description implies that Thomas is by contrast not lovely, not a fresh beauty, and not unspoiled. Moreover, Time describes Thomas as “fiery” while Witt is “radiant.” Thomas captures the audience with her “daring combination of back-to-back-triple toe loops” while Witt “captures the audience with her megawatt smile.” Even Thomas’s skating team is referred to as a “heavyweight-fighter size entourage.” Seventeen magazine sees “Thomas as a muscular twenty-year old who can zip through one triple jump after another and make it look easy.” The magazine states that “lucky spectators could see one of the greatest duels ever between the feisty Thomas and the elegant East German skater Katrina
Therefore, the socially constructed differences between Thomas and Witt produced by the media and sporting commentators, places Thomas’s sporting body outside traditional ideals of femininity.

Furthermore, instead of being compared to other female skaters, Thomas is often compared to men. *Rolling Stone* writes that Thomas’s skating is “fiery, and her jumps—the most challenging as high as some men’s” and comments that “Thomas looks gigantic on ice, with thighs as sturdy as a male ballet dancer’s.” For *Rolling Stone*, like many other articles, Thomas’s athletic abilities come naturally, while she has to “work hard to strengthen her artistic side of her skating.” Sports journalist Axthelm discusses Thomas’s sporting body in terms of marriage possibilities. Thomas once commented that “people seem to think that if you can jump, you can’t be artistic.” In response to Thomas’s statement, sports journalists P. Axthelm remarked

No one really thought that. On the other hand no journalist proposed marriage to Thomas at the drop of a press conference—as one did at a mobbed session saluting Witt’s arrival… Witt wore the mantle of superstar grace. Thomas, 20 is a well-rounded young woman.

Likewise, former figure skater and sports commentator, Peggy Fleming said of Katarina Witt, “If she were an American, her face would be everywhere, I mean look at her.”

In terms of her skating performance, Thomas was racialized as well. Sports journalists David Brand and Thomas Callahan write that

Thomas, a formidable jumper, has often emphasized sheer power at the expense of artistry and grace. Witt, on
the other hand, is cool under pressure, while still exuding a special joy that seems to float across the ice and into the crowd.\textsuperscript{254}

In describing Thomas’s skating her short program, \textit{Newsweek} writes, “she didn’t simply skate, either. She attacked. She seemed to flaunt her superior athleticism and prove once and for all that her sport was more than a beauty contest.”\textsuperscript{255} For the short program, Thomas received very low scores for artistry. News journalists as well as sports commentators speculated as to why Thomas received low marks by the judges for artistic impression in her short program. Fleming suggested that Thomas’s music “In My House,” by Dead or Alive might have been “unappealing” to some judges, while Witt’s performance to segments of Broadway tunes may have been more appealing.\textsuperscript{256} One medal contender, U.S.A.’s Jill Trenary stated that for some judges Thomas’s “subdued black body suit with silver sequins” may have been “too showy.”\textsuperscript{257} She added that “overall her look might have not been pleasing to the judges.”\textsuperscript{258} Here, sexy on Thomas is constructed as unappealing, even deviant, yet sexy on Witt is appealing, even flattering. McGowan “hinted that Witt’s dashing appearance—a royal blue costume accented with strings of silver sequins, a sequined tiara and feathers—might have swayed the judges.”\textsuperscript{259} Kestnbaum points out that Witt’s characterization represented a reversal in terms of the depiction of East and West, departing from earlier Cold War depictions of East Germans women athletes as “grim, unerotic, and masculine.”\textsuperscript{260} For artistic impression, Witt received “eight 5.9’s and one 5.8’s from the United States judge,” and Thomas’s scores were “curiously low, from one 5.6 to four 5.8’s.”\textsuperscript{261} McGowan “waved his hand in disgust” towards Thomas’s scores for artistic
impression, and commented that he was “worried” Thomas might “not get what she deserves.” The New York Times encapsulates the racist position found in most articles in its description of Thomas’s short program as “more technically sound than aesthetically pleasing.” Kestnbaum sums up Thomas’s performance as “powerful athleticism” that presents “images of adult power” which rely on “meanings other than grace, beauty, or seductiveness and feminine charm.” She adds that by the end of her amateur career, “Debi Thomas had achieved a fair measure of graceful refinement to her movement.” In keeping with a racist discourse, Kestnbaum like other critics, placed Thomas’s sporting body outside of feminine ideals. She also states that Thomas’s performance “evoked images of contemporary urban dance derived from African American culture, congruent with Thomas’s own racial heritage if not her personal experience.” In essentializing African American culture, Kestnbaum mistakenly assumes that Thomas’s personal experience is predicated on the notion of some authentic African American identity, an identity, which for the most part, Thomas has distanced herself from. Moreover, Kestnbaum cites anthropologist Mary Douglas in describing Thomas’s image as a type “associated with lower social strata.” In short, Thomas’s sporting body and performance was constructed at odds with the highly controlled and refined images derived from the elite form of classical ballet and from the upper-class body styles in general, which skating had traditionally promoted. Earlier constructions of Thomas’s sporting body appear to conform to traditional constructions of figure skating, but it is not until her performance against Katarina Witt in the 1988 Olympics where Thomas’s sporting body is social constructed as different, a
difference that stereotypically can be read as deviance. Thus, the signifying message of Thomas’s sporting body as sign works through, what Saussure noted as the relations of difference. When placed in opposition to Witt’s sporting body, Thomas’s images can be interpreted in different ways. In short, the meanings of Thomas’s sporting body are never fixed.

Finally, the new dress code implemented the summer following the 1988 Olympics illustrates how institutional policies are used to maintain white hegemonic femininity in women’s figure skating. Shortly after the 1988 Olympics, The International Skating Union (ISU) Congress passed a ruling, colloquially known as the “Katarina rule,” clarifying that clothing for skating should not be excessively theatrical (see figure 23). This ruling deemed that women must wear skirts and that unitards, like the one worn by Thomas, and bare midriffs are not acceptable. The rule also discouraged excessive decoration such as sequins, again like the sequins on Thomas’s unitard (see figure 24). A few months later, USFSA president Hugh Graham argued that steps be taken to “improve the image of figure skating.” Although it may appear that the ruling was in response to both Thomas’s and Witt’s costumes worn during their short program, the ruling’s description of what is acceptable applies more directly to the outfit worn by Thomas. Such a ruling is what sports writer William C. Hoden calls the “Jockey Syndrome.” Bohen explains the Jockey Syndrome as “changing the rules to fit a need—the need to maintain control in the face of a perceived challenge to white supremacy.” In wearing a black, sequin unitard, which had not be done before by a woman in Olympic competition, Thomas expressed an autonomous womanhood and
not one imposed by a racist, heteronormative gaze. As a result, Thomas was a threat to the status quo of traditional women’s figure skating. Thus, the “Jockey Syndrome” rule in women’s figure skating was implemented so that the sport could maintain a gender ideology that adhered to traditional feminine ideals of white womanhood.

Overall, Thomas’s sporting body not only signified various controlling images but also added new dimensions to existing ones. For example, in commenting on Thomas’s bronze medal in 1988, President Reagan said to Thomas, “I wonder if your name should be Debi or Superwoman.” Such a comment is laden with racist ideology. Maxine Leeds Craig stresses that “black womanhood cannot and should not be reduced to the strong black woman celebrated in the image of Sojourner Truth.” Craig points out that the “image of the strong black woman is usually presented in a sympathetic light,” and is “limiting.” Most importantly, this discourse, “at its core is a racialized construction of gender that excludes black women from more generally accepted ideals of womanhood.” In short, racialized representations of femininity that lingered well beyond the end of legal segregation were still alive and well into the late 1980s, to which Thomas’s sporting body attests. However, these marks are indicative of a not so unfamiliar situation for Thomas. She once commented that “Just because I can do triple jumps doesn’t mean that I’m not artistic. My whole skating career I’ve known I had to skate way, way better to get what I deserve.” Such a comment only illustrates the contentious discourse surrounding Thomas’s sporting body. On the one hand, Thomas distances herself from socially constructed ideals of race, while on the other hand the contradictory element of her comment disproves her
race-neutral position. Once again, such a comment only solidifies Thomas’s struggle
with her identity as a Black woman in America. In a indirect way she testifies to the
racism in America, yet she also comments that she has never felt like a minority.

The rivalry between Thomas and Witt illustrates how black women have had to
compete with representations of the female body in the larger social framework of race.
Katie Conboy, Nadia Median, and Sarah Standbury assert that “historically, women
have been determined by their bodies: their individual awakenings, actions, their
pleasure and their pain compete with representations of the female body in larger social
frameworks.” Hill-Collin’s explanation of how the mass media produces images that
make the “new racism appear to be natural, normal, and inevitable” illustrates how
Thomas’s upper-class black female body served white interests:

In essence, the mass media has generated class-specific
images of Black women that help justify and shape the
new racism of desegregated, colorblind America. Because
presenting African American culture as being
indistinguishable from other cultures is not necessarily
entertaining, newsworthy, or marketable, depictions of
Black culture needed to be different from White norms,
yet still supportive of them.

Representations of Thomas conveyed the message that White America was
supportive of her. She was non-threatening and adhered to the traditions of figure
skating. She didn’t disrupt the status quo; yet, her style of skating and her performance,
including the way she looks, were constructed as different from other white skaters,
particularly Katrina Witt. Therefore, Thomas was different from White norms of
femininity, but still supportive of them. Nonetheless, Thomas’s representations in
mainstream media signify how blackness continues to be mobilized by African Americans in opposition to conservative claims about race and blacks, as a place of cultural affirmation, and as a contested space of difference. Finally, Thomas’s representations in mainstream media engaged both Blacks and Whites over questions of African American presence in the United States. Her image represented a debate within African American communities over the meanings of blackness as these meanings became structured by the growing struggles over such issues as nationalism, gender, femininity, sexuality and social class. These struggles are clearly seen in the lived experiences of African Americans; the story of Debi Thomas attests to the truth behind the myth of a color-blind America.

Moreover, like Rudolph, Thomas’s sporting body symbolized American ideals of upward mobility and rugged individualism, yet Thomas’s sporting body symbolized differences as well. Given the social and political environment of the different time periods—Rudolph in the ‘60s and Thomas in the late ‘80s—the bodies of these Black female athletes do not signify the same meaning. In other words, social identities for Black womanhood are not, and have never been stable. Rudolph’s constructed racial difference was key to her iconic status, whereas Thomas’s constructed racial indifference was equally key to hers. Because Rudolph represented the politics of race and respectability, she symbolized racial progress and America’s commitment to Civil Rights struggles. Her Blackness was necessary in the constructed imagery of the nation to reflect that race relations were getting better. Unlike Rudolph, Thomas was deracialized, or race was displaced, to signify that America had moved beyond race and
that it no longer mattered. Thus, Thomas’s sporting body represents a distinctly American respectability. In the public sphere, gaining respectability was no longer about uplifting race; one gained respectability by denying that race matters in the lived experiences of Black womanhood. However, during the 1988 Olympic figure skating duel between Thomas and Witt, race was shown to be a reality in the lived experiences of African American women. In this sense, Thomas had no control over the ways in which her sporting body was constructed. The shifting social identity for Thomas swayed along the lines between docile and deviant; either way the various representations of Thomas best served white interests.

With her popularity, Thomas was able to “cash in on her reputation.” In 1986, the United States Figure Skating Association (USFSA) made a new rule allowing figure skaters to endorse products as long as proceeds were placed in a trust fund to be administered by the USFSA. When Thomas signed with an agent at the International Management Group in New York, in the fall of 1986, “she became the first skater to take advantage of the new rules.” She skated in commercials for Campbell’s and Raytheon, and endorsed Revlon. As a result, Thomas’s Black female body became a highly marketable commodity. Therefore, the increased visibility of the Black female body in American culture is not only due to the rise of women’s sports in the 1980s, but in large part through commercial endorsements by African American athletes. Following Thomas, other athletes such as WNBA’s Lisa Leslie, Women’s wrestling champion Lala Ali, Olympic gymnast Dominique Dawes, and tennis champion Venus Williams, to name a few, were propelled into celebrityhood through their athleticism.
and popularity, which landed them lucrative endorsement deals. Nowhere is this stardom more evident than in the successful career of tennis champion Serena Williams. What distinguishes Williams from Rudolph and Thomas is that she has achieved a celebrity status like no other Black female athlete before her. The difference within Black womanhood has much to do with the social and political culture in the 1990s and the early 21st century. In the next chapter, I examine how Williams’s Black female body signifies in different ways in the 1990s and early 21st century.
CHAPTER FOUR

DROPPIN’ IT LIKE IT’S HOT: THE SPORTING BODY OF SERENA WILLIAMS

From tennis championships, endorsements deals to entertainment endeavors, Serena Williams’ image has become the site of a highly lucrative celebrityhood. As such her sporting body signifies a newly commodified Black womanhood. Under the Clinton administration, the signs of blackness functioned in similar ways as it did in the 1980s. In other words, a neoliberal democracy is not so far removed from the new right. The ways in which Black bodies were used to advance political agendas continues in the late 20th and early 21st centuries. Now it’s the celebrity athlete of color — that can be blamed for the ills of America as she/he represents a racialized group. African American athletes have served as symbolically nationalizing bodies that have been identified as either positive or negative signifiers of national popular existence: their individual identities and actions have been constructed into a celebrityhood that either uplifts the nation or the cause of its decline.282 The complexity of Williams is that her sporting body can identify with both positive and negative signifiers of national
popular existence. For example, her sporting body has been variously used as a means to signify racial difference (otherness), and to provide the evidential material out of which meritocratic success can be proven. At the same time, her body is brought into racist discourse to either prove that all black people are physical creatures, that their vast black mass essentially connects them to primitive impulses, excessive desire and ‘mindless’ behaviour (all body and no brain); or to herald the athletic power of the body so that all Americans can be proud of ‘it’.

In this chapter, I turn to representations of Williams in mainstream advertisements to examine the constructions of race and gender as produced around her image. The construction of Williams’ sporting body is contingent on a sociopolitical climate informed by neoliberal democracy and consumer capitalism. I ultimately offer a contradictory reading of Williams’ circulation: it is marked by a racist ideology and, to borrow from Stuart Hall, a racialized regime of representation, while it also dramatizes a counter-hegemonic subjectivity that struggles for agency and autonomy. I first chart her rise to fame in tennis and place her narrative in the larger framework of the sport of tennis in American culture. Here I also contextualize William’s sporting body in what Hill-Collins observes about the 1990s “that Black popular culture become a hot commodity.” Hill-Collins posits that is in this context representations of African American women become increasingly sites of struggle. A political climate of neoliberal democracy also informs how William’s sporting body is read. Next, I interrogate her representations in three mainstream advertisements, McDonalds, Wrigleys, and Close-up. This sets up an explanation of how Williams’ female sporting
body occupies a commodified place in the fetishised desire for blackness. Then I close with a discussion of William’s subject position, the politics of race and respectability, and agency.

**The Rising Star: Williams’ Entrance into the Public Sphere**

Serena Williams’ entrance into super stardom began when she emerged from the shadow of her older sister, Venus Williams, to become a professional tennis player in 1995 - one year after her older sibling. By 1998, Serena was ranked number 21 by the World Tennis Association (WTA). Sharing the spotlight with her sister in 1998 at the Australian Open, Serena Williams shocked the tennis world when she defeated second seed Lindsay Davenport. At the time, Davenport was ranked number nine. By July 2002, Williams’ superb athleticism catapulted her to number one in the world, and her victory titles are many. In 1999 at the age of 17, she upset number one Martina Hingis to capture her first Grand Slam single, and at the 2000 Olympics, Serena and Venus won the gold medal for the doubles. Serena Williams then held all four grand slam titles at once - the 2002 French Open, Wimbledon and the US Open (both 2002), and the Australian Open (2003) - and her wins became known as the ‘Serena Slam’. She also won the doubles at the Australian Open in 2003. The Women’s Tennis Association (WTA) 2008 rankings place Williams at number six (6) in the world (her sister, Venus, is ranked number nine (9).)

She has many accolades for her tennis success. In 2002, she was named the Associated Press “Female Athlete of the Year,” “Best Sportswoman of the World,” by EFE News Agency of Spain, one of BBC’s “Sports Personalities of the Year” and
nominated for Sports Illustrated’s “Sportsman of the Year.” She also won two ESPY Awards: “Female Athlete of the Year,” and “Female Tennis Player of the Year.” Her 2005 Australian Open victory finals match earned ESPN2 their highest highest-rated and most-watched tennis telecast ever. After injuries forced her to compete in only 4 tournaments in 2006, Serena came back triumphantly winning the 2007 Australian Open and the Sony Ericsson Open, proving that she is still on top of the tennis world.

Her off the court passions add to her success. She was selected as one of People Magazine's “25 Most Intriguing People” (October 21, 2002) and one of the top 10 celebrities in Biography's top 100 biographies of 2003. Serena was honored as one of Essence magazine's “50 Most Inspiring African-Americans.” Her latest TV credit is her reality show with sister titled “Venus and Serena For Real.” The show which had cameras follow Serena and Venus on and off the tennis courts debuted July 20th on ABC Family to high ratings and good reviews. Serena's other acting credits include an appearance on the hit NBC Drama “ER”, the ABC sitcom, “My Wife and Kids”; a role as an ex-gangster on Showtime's “Street Time”; and a leading role on an episode of Lifetime's “The Division.” She has also appeared in films like Black Knight and in several rap videos. In terms of magazines, her fashion photo spreads, featured articles, and front cover appearances are numerous, including publications ESPN Magazine, Jet, Black Woman, Essence, and Vogue, and Sports Illustrated: Special Swim Suit Edition in 2003 and 2004( see figure 36). Serena has also lent her voice talents to “The Simpsons” and Disney's “Higgleytown Heroes.” She was also featured among 10 individuals named “Fashion Trendsetters” by Vogue Magazine on a VH1/Vogue Television Special. In
2003, Serena launched her own line of designer fashion called ‘Aneres’ (Serena spelt backwards). The endorsement deals have also been both numerous and lucrative, including contracts with Avon cosmetics, McDonalds, Puma, Nike, Wrigley’s, Close-up toothpaste and the ‘Got Milk’ campaign. At 22, she reportedly signed a record-breaking contract with Nike that was worth at least $60 million over the next eight years.

There is no doubt that her rise to public visibility is in part to her hard work on the tennis courts, but also her popularity looms from her presence in a historically white dominated sport. Constructions of Williams sporting body hinges largely on the historical development of tennis. Different sports—track, figure skating, tennis—with their different reputations, have organized and given prominence to different standards of womanhood. Tennis, historically recognized as an elitist practice, developed as an institution emphasizing exclusion based on class and race: upper class women were allowed to participate because it was regarded as an acceptable activity for women, one which did not compromise their (heterosexual) femininity. Thus, tennis played its part in producing particular ideological versions of femininity, which influenced women’s professional tennis towards its racial and class homogeneity. From the turn of the century when it was introduced to the United States until the 1950s, tennis was a segregated sport. In 1916, The American Tennis Association was formed as the black equivalent to the United States Tennis Association, which was formed in 1881. Tennis was also exclusive sport among Blacks. As discussed earlier, Althea Gibson was the first Black person to break the color barrier in tennis. Gibson and Williams have been constructed in similar ways by white media. Both their style of play and physicality
construct them as mannish tennis players. Their mastery of skill is described in ways that undermine their femininity. In both instances, media representations have constructed them as not feminine in order to legitimate the power and privilege of white heterosexual femininity. Therefore, we see how the rise of tennis as an institution developed in accordance with particular sensibilities regarding race, gender, class and sexuality.

These vary traditional sensibilities which the sport of tennis prides itself was questioned with the arrival of the Williams’ family. For instance, when Serena and her sister Venus challenged conventional paths into professional tennis, they met with much attention and scrutiny. Their different path was at the guidance of the father, Richard Williams. Unlike the father—a loving supportive man—presented to us by his daughters, Mr. Williams was demonized by the media, and was the focus of many stories about the Williams’ sisters. His way of preparing his daughters for professional tennis was on occasion scrutinized by critics. Some even accused Mr. Williams of fixing her daughters’ tennis matches and pointed fingers at Serena and Venus as well. Because the Williams’ family did not fit the image of the white dominated sport, the family was raced and classed in ways that placed their values, such as parental concern for his daughters, outside the social constructed norms of tennis.

As an unranked African American tennis player, Williams’ dedication on the courts soon became a media sensation as she began beating top ranked players in a white dominated sport making her a symbol of neoliberal democracy. Early media narratives presented Williams as young Black girl from Compton where she trained on
the inner-city’s dilapidated courts. Emerging in a political climate of neoliberal democracy, William’s sporting body as sign constructs Blackness in ways that promote the new right’s agenda. The City of University New York Professor and Anthropologist David Harvey sums up neoliberalism as a global capitalist class power restoration project. Neoliberalism, he explains, is a theory of political-economic practices that dedicates the state to championing private property rights, free markets, and free trade, while deregulating business and privatizing collective assets. Ideologically, neoliberals promote entrepreneurialism as the normative source of human happiness. Although a complicated term, he concludes that neoliberalism looks a lot like the triumph of the ruling class; thus, neoliberalism is linked to neoconservatism. The idea of entrepreneurialism being the source of human happiness translates that with hard work, dedication, and personal responsibility the individual will be rewarded. In other words, Williams is proof that the American dream, albeit contingent on capitalism, is still working. As Andrews and Jackson assert, sport is one of the cultural arenas which still pivots on meritocratic ideologies of fame:

In true neo-liberal fashion, the ascent to sport celebrityhood is habitually reduced to individual qualities such as innate talent, dedication, and good fortune, thus positioning the sport star as a deserved benefactor of his/her devotion to succeed within the popular imaginary.

She was instantly positioned as a deserved benefactor as mediated narratives focused on her unconventional training on the dilapidated courts of Compton, California. This nascent representation of Williams succeeding despite an impoverished background
can clearly be understood in terms of neoliberal democracy, most notably through the currency of the success myth which suggests that “American society is sufficiently open for anyone to get to the top, regardless of rank.”

According to the mythology here, Williams has been blessed with natural talent and specialness and it is these essential qualities that enable her to succeed in America where individual merit is rewarded regardless of class, race or gender background. Furthermore in this neoliberal climate with its emphasis on capital accumulation, Black culture is a hot commodity. Hill-Collins notes that beginning in the 1990s, “Black popular culture became a hot commodity “and this is evidenced in Williams’ sporting body. William’s sporting body represents a “new commodified Black culture” that is “highly marketable” and one “that draws heavily from the cultural production and styles of urban Black youth.”

Some would say that she is ‘droppin’ it like it’s hot’, a popular phrase in hip-hop vernacular that delineates anyone who has a ‘hot’ property to promote, trade, circulate and sell.

**The Commodification of Williams**

Black women, once literal commodities during the Atlantic slave trade, have been transformed into commodity-signs to be bought and sold throughout the globalized media market. The commodification of Williams and her circulation within the wider commercial framework of advertising texts and product promotion comes at a time when multi-national consumer and service-driven corporations are recognizing new markets to address. These include so-called ‘brown America’, and the buying power of independent female consumers. As a result, black female stars and celebrities
have a premium value in the marketplace so that a talented and attractive black female athlete such as Serena Williams becomes a highly marketable capitalist brand. An area once dominated by Black male athletes, now Black women athletes are cashing in as well. Hazel Carby notes “in this day of what is referred to as ‘global culture’, the Nike corporation produces racialized images for the world by elevating the “lift up race” bodies of Michael Jordan and Tiger Woods to the status of international icons.”

Likewise, Serena Williams has reached the status of an international icon. In *Sports & the Popular*, Aaron Baker’s description of media representations focuses on two kinds: As commercial entertainment to sell products and as cultural text in tension with dominant culture (e.g. competing discourses about class, race, and gender). Representations of Williams’ sporting body reflect each of these, but the later speaks directly to constructions of race and gender in the commodification of her sporting body. In fact, contemporary commodification of the black female sporting body is eerily reminiscent of descriptions of black female slaves on the auction block, bought and sold on the basis of their size, weight, strength and beauty. For example, when voted the most marketable athlete in the USA, those in the sports marketing system intriguingly described the branding of Serena Williams thus:

> The Bonham Group Chair ... added of Serena, ‘Sexy, sassy, strong. If she stays healthy, she has marketing legs. Extra Points for her ability to appeal to multicultural audiences.’ Drotman Communications Founder Doug Drotman said Serena has ‘the ability to reach different target audiences — black, white, young, old, rich and poor.’ ESPN’s Michele Tafoya added, ‘Serena continues to dominate a sport that gets plenty of exposure. Add to that her smile, good looks, flare for fashion and her
Bonham’s description of Williams as ‘sexy, sassy, strong’, along with the suggestion that ‘if she stays healthy, she has marketing legs’, indeed sounds as if Williams is on the (endorsement) auction block. Lisa Collins contends that the histories of various markets for black female bodies, or what she calls ‘economies of the flesh’, have affected the creation and reception of images of black women in Western Europe and America.

In analyzing commercial advertising images of athletes such as Ben Johnson, Florence Griffith-Joyner and Jackie Joyner-Kersee, Stuart Hall illustrates how little has changed in terms of the representation of racial, ethnic, and gender difference in popular culture. For Hall, black athletes are fetishized and sexualized in these adverts. The same can be said for the way the Williams’ sisters are used to endorse and promote products. For instance, in a Wrigley’s Doublemint advert in the 1990s, the Williams sisters became the up-dated version of the Doublemint twins (see figure 27). The Williams’ sisters are depicted as fully engulfed by green spearmint leaves that reveal only small headshots of each. While positioned in the centre of the advert, Serena Williams’ lips appear to be in a pucker - as if blowing a kiss to the camera. Williams’ lips are heavily sexualized (vulva-like), and given the tag line of ‘double your pleasure’ that accompanies the advert, the impression is that Williams’ is implicated in this giving of immense pleasure. In commenting on the three-year, $7 million contract to endorse Wrigley’s Doublemint Gum, Spencer acknowledges the complexity of African American women athletes and the imagery of advertising:
On the one hand, the accompanying tag line may be a double entendre in suggesting that consumers ‘double [their]… pleasure’. On the other hand, the ad could be read as a reflection of progress, given that African American female athletes once faced double jeopardy in the marketing arena by virtue of being female and Black.297

The McDonalds’ adverts similarly offer racially loaded representation of Williams. In November 2002, the Williams sisters joined McDonalds in an unprecedented three-year advertising agreement beginning with the introduction of McDonald’s National Dollar Menu. In their first televised commercial in America, Venus and Serena negotiate a dramatic rooftop liaison with the Hamburglar (who informs the sisters that he will be selling the Big N' Tasty Sandwich for only one dollar (see figure 28). The Williams sisters are first introduced to the viewer from inside a platinum E-class Mercedes Benz Sudan. When the tinted window rolls down, we see Serena William’s long, straight, blonde glam-diva-like criminal character sitting in the car. Next we see her colluding with the hamburglar to promote McDonalds’ dollar menu. In the McDonalds press release, the ‘Big N’ Tasty Sandwich’ commercial is described as a ‘mysterious adventure’.298 Once again, then, Williams’ has been placed in an advert that locates her as deviant, criminal, sexually dangerous and ‘mysterious’. Her blonde hair works to ‘sully’ white identity and essentially connect blackness to leaky borders and boundaries (the advert allows Williams to try on whiteness, and as such re-enacts white culture’s great ‘racial’ fear of becoming, of having one’s racial identity taken over by the Other). Carole Vance describes this framework as ‘simultaneously a domain of restriction,
repression and danger as well as a domain of exploration, pleasure, and agency. bell hooks expands on this in terms of the commodification of black female sexuality in the advertising arena:

> It is within the commercial realm of advertising that the drama of Otherness finds expression. Encounters with Otherness are clearly marked as more exciting, more intense, and more threatening. The lure is the combination of pleasure and danger. In the cultural marketplace the Other is coded as having the capacity to be more alive, as holding the secret that will allow those who venture to be dare to break with cultural anhedonia.

While the McDonalds’ commercial may appear to be harmless, a ‘bit of fun’, the advert seamlessly grafts the combination of pleasure and danger onto the body of the black celebrity. The commercial also resonates with wider stereotypes of class and gender in the inner-city context, as two glamorously dressed black females mysteriously search for a ‘good deal’, almost as if they are getting black market ‘Big N’ Tasty’ sandwiches from the infamous Hamburglar (with whom they collude). The Williams’ sisters become ghetto hoes, badass girls with nothing to lose, and are therefore connected to racist discourses that have all urban black people as coming from the delinquency of the ‘hood’.

However, at the same time it is important to note that there are also advertisements which seem to work against the grain of racist ideology where Williams is concerned. For instance, in the Close-Up toothpaste advert a de-sexualized Williams appears as the ‘light’ that lights up America. Photographed sitting at a table,
with one hand resting comfortably on her tennis racket and the other hand raised up close to her face, she holds a tube of Close-up toothpaste next to her smiling face. At the center of the advert, then, is Williams’ beaming and magnetic smile, a smile that is meant to connect with all Americans. In this advert Williams is represented as something of the girl next door, and a black body that is confident and empowered – a black body that comes to stand for a multi-racial, inclusive American society. In fact, Serena Williams was featured in a national Close-up campaign that included three collectible boxes - each with a different picture of Williams on the front. While these images can be argued to de-race and pacify Williams’s (so that she becomes the cute little girl next door), the residues and echoes of her unruly and independent celebrity status electrify this advert, upsetting the usual binaries that black stars find themselves in. In a sense, Williams’ appearance in such domestic and everyday adverts invites blackness into the American household, where, given the evidence of demographic profiling, it is increasingly welcomed.

Susan Birrell and Mary G. McDonald argue that the critical analysis of sporting celebrities ‘offer unique points of access to the constitutive meanings and power relations to the larger worlds we inhabit.’ Furthermore, Marshall suggests that ideas about individualism, social identity and difference, consumption and success are wrapped up in commodification of the celebrity. The economic and ideological machinery of late capitalism is dependent on the celebrity turn – this is not a space for representational freedom but of greater social control and manipulation. In this sense, Serena Williams has very little control over the meanings ascribed to her, or the goods
that are bought and sold on her name. She is product, brand, caught in the belly of capitalism, its slave rather than its Kingpin. While Williams’ celebrity persona displays moments of resistance and opposition, and while it is possible that she can be read against the grain of racist culture, William’s power to be free from racist discourse is finally limited.

**Williams’ Belonging and Black Womanhood**

On the eve of the 2001 US Open, *Time* Magazine released an issue with Serena and Venus on the cover bearing the title “the Sisters Against the World.” In light of the pervasiveness of representations that seek to frame Williams as an intruder who compromises the integrity of the sport as will be discussed in this section, this title makes explicit that which is often coded through language and symbols that emphasize racial difference. They are not simply competing against other women; they are competing against the rest of the world. The unmistakable message here is that they do not belong.

Williams’ Black female sporting body is a part of a complex cultural narrative when it comes to the relationship between athleticism, gender identity and national belonging. As Hall explains, “racism…operates by…its typically binary system of representation [which] constantly marks and tries to fix and naturalize the difference between belongingness and otherness.” Similar to Thomas’ narrative, Williams’ career is also plague with a binary system of representation that aims to naturalize her difference and thereby construct a kind of racial imagery that places her outside of traditional notions of womanhood. For example, when white tennis player Maria
Sharapova from Russia beat Serena Williams in the Wimbledon finals in 2004 to capture the championship, Sharapova was described as a “Tennis princess” who is “talented, beautiful, and well-spoken at a time when women’s tennis is looking for a new hero.” While dismissing Williams, marketing strategist Michael Berg added that Sharapova “is poised to be the next big thing, the kind of sports celeb that comes along only once in a decade,” and “although she’s Russian, she has all-American looks, along with real talent and a very feminine beauty.” Comments such as these reflect the position that for some seeing a Black female tennis champion such as Williams just does not make sense. On the contrary, a white female body as champion/celebrity is the norm, a common sensical way of viewing the social world particularly in a historically white dominated sport.

Although third wave feminists search for new ways to theorize difference and relations between Black and White women, a binary system of representation is still very much a part of American culture. In their 2003 study which employs third wave feminism to critique representations of female athletes, Heywood and Dworkin admit that such a binary still exists in American culture. Heywood and Dworkin emphasize that black female bodies are still constructed outside the norms of white, middle class beauty ideals. For them, the black female body is still constructed as ‘threatening,’ ‘scary,’ ‘angry’ and ‘frightening.’ On one level, it is clear that Williams’ sporting black body signifies in this way. Williams’ athletic, muscled body enters into a cultural space that immediately defines her as *black body* that is excessive, overtly masculine, and yet at the same time overly female. Williams’ is imaged as hard bodied *and* all-butt, as
both ‘bad-buck’ and ‘Jezebel’. Williams’, then, is excessively racially marked: her Uber black body is doubly abnormal, and as such needs to be fetishized to render it/her safe.

Take for instance the response to Williams when she wore a form-fitting black lycra cat suit at the 2002 US Open. Some called her choice of attire “out of place,” while others carped that her outfit was “wrong” for the sport and responded with disdain (see figure 34). The attention given to Williams’ cat suit is rooted in the wider historical imaginary of the black female body in the American public consciousness. The cat suit accentuates every curve in Williams’ body, and images of her in such form fitting gear often draw attention to both her breasts and her butt. In fact, many of the images of Williams’ body that have circulated via magazines and Internet sites have focused on her extremely fit, curvaceous physique. The cat suit, with connotations of the feline huntress, the repetition of sexualized and racialized iconography, works to draw attention to, and then displace, the fascination with Williams’ hyper-encoded sexuality.

As Hall writes:

> Fetishism, then, is a strategy for having-it-both-ways: for both representing and not-representing the tabooed, dangerous or forbidden object of pleasure and desire. It provides us with what Mercer calls an ‘alibi’. We have seen how, in the case of ‘The Hottentot Venus’, not only is the gaze displaced from the genitalia to the buttocks; but also, this allows the observers to go on looking while disavowing the sexual nature of the gaze.\(^{307}\)

Unlike the responses to representations displaying the bodies of Anna Kournikova and Sharapova, the attention given to Williams in this respect becomes marked by a more contradictory ambivalence, even deviance. Williams’ body becomes the site for currents
of fascination, celebration, the grotesque and desire. Moreover, talk of Williams’ cat suit is indicative of the ways in which her clothes, hair, jewelry and body have been discussed in ways that escape her white counterparts. Indeed, various websites contain discussions about Williams’ physique – and particularly her butt. In fact, I remember receiving an image of Williams in her black cat suit via e-mail, and the way the camera angle captured her body position mirrored the sexualization of Saartjie Bartman (figure 33). As discussed in the introduction, Sander Gilman documents the plight of Saartjie Bartman, an African woman who was publicly displayed like an exotic animal, so that whites could observe her buttocks and genitalia. Gilman observes that in the nineteenth century ‘the black female was widely perceived as not only [exhibiting] a “primitive” sexual appetite but also [as displaying] the external signs of this temperament — “primitive” genitalia’.308 Thus, for 19th century sensibilities, the black female body became a signifier of deviant sexuality, and the discursive traces of this are still clear in the representation of Williams’ Hottentot body.

The media concentration on Williams’ buttocks seems to confirm the way that race, gender and sexual deviancy and desire are aligned. Williams’ sporting prowess is encoded as a form of sexual excess: she doesn’t just play sport she is sport. The representation of Williams’ black sporting body is loaded with carnal connotations so that she becomes a compliant whore for the white imagination that she is centrally packaged for. bell hooks suggests that this is a recurring trope in the racist imagination:

Although contemporary thinking about black female bodies does not attempt to read the body as a sign of ‘natural’ racial inferiority, the fascination with black
‘butts’ continues. In the sexual iconography of the traditional black pornographic imagination, the protruding butt is seen as an indication of a heightened sexuality. Nonetheless, as hooks also points out, ‘black butts’ can function as ‘unruly and outrageous’ signifiers, or as overly empowered motifs that resist the dominant reading that accompanies them. Black female butts revel in their flesh while white women simply cannot, or dare not. In this respect, Williams’ body is “not a silenced body”, but one that loudly resists the racialized grammar that seeks to define it in negative terms. This argument gathers force when one considers the way that Williams’ seems to consciously celebrate her body: her flamboyant play, her ‘risky’ attire, and her confidence in fielding questions about her identity. For instance, when asked if she ever gets tired of being Black tennis player instead of just a tennis player, Williams emphatically responded, “No. I am a Black tennis player and I’m proud to be a Black tennis player.”

Additionally, her presence, disposition, and style of play have been described as an intrusion, which reveals the power of the white gaze to determine the boundaries of cultural “belonging and otherness”. Throughout her career, critics continue to make comments about her hair, her clothing, and her so-called attitude off the court in ways that construct her presence as problematic and deviant. In addition to being described as masculine and aggressive, she and her sister have been called “predator one and predator two.” Currently, critics debate on the aesthetics of a Black woman with
blonde hair as Williams dawns occasionally (figure 35). Donna Daniels comments on the criticism Williams have received.

Unlike their white counterparts, their beauty is not imagined, let alone admired or commented upon—think Anna Kournikova. there’s Venus and Serena’s hair. Commentators continue to remark upon it with curiosity and fascination. ‘Why do they wear their hair that way?’ they wonder. In narrating the sisters’ competitive court play, the sportscasters debate whether their hair is noisy and disruptive.”

Difference as inscribed around her sporting body illustrates a racist ideology that continues to plague African American women athletes. The discourse of Williams sporting body constructs her visibility in terms of racial difference which then becomes the explanation for behavior deemed inappropriate, or in violation of gender norms. For example, Williams’ demeanor is described as “cocky,” “haughty” and “aloof.” John McEnroe called the sisters “cold as ice” and asked “if it would kill them” to acknowledge the other players in the locker room?317 On September 5, 2007, a leading article on Yahoo news read “Media turns on ‘classless’ Serena Williams.” The article is in reference to the media’s response to Williams after her loss to Justine Henin. Disappointed with her loss, Williams was described as “classless” and “graceless.” A confident Williams expressed that she “made a lot of errors” and her opponent “made a lot of lucky shots.319 New York Times ran a headline “Williams needs a lesson in etiquette.”320 Other players such as McEnroe and Martina Hingis have displayed similar positions like Williams, but unlike Williams, their behavior is not regarded as detrimental to her popularity. Instead, criticism was leveled at Williams which
portrayed her confidence as hostile, a construction that is inextricably linked to wider narratives about black incivility. The dominant framing of Williams reveals the ways in which the complex meanings of her identity have been reconfigured to advance a narrative of white racial supremacy.

Representations of Williams simultaneously occupy a space of body-subject and body-object. The intertextuality of her images offers more complex readings beyond this binary of representation. The Williams, although mediated, on the courts—field of play—can be read differently than the commodified Williams who comes to us through various product endorsements; yet, her commodified images depends greatly on Williams the tennis star. Depending on one’s interpretation of meaning—the signification of her sporting body—Williams comes to us as either body-object or body subject (or both at once, and herein lies the complexity), as noted by Michael Messner in his observations of the female athlete. For Messner body subject “represents a genuine quest by women for equality, control of their own bodies, and self-definition, and as such represents a challenge to the ideological basis of male domination.” Similarly, bell hooks contends that part of the struggle for black subjectivity is the quest to find ways to construct self and identity that are oppositional and liberatory. Thus, on the tennis courts, we see a Williams who is in control of her body—from her style of play to the clothes she wears.

The body-object, as describe by Klaus V. Meier, is a body “drained of its humanity; it is a dead body devoid of its vivifying, expressive and intentional abilities and qualities. From body-object spring the terms objectification: attitudes and
behaviors by which people are treated as they were things. These terms are critical in the signification of Williams sporting body because on the one hand as body-subject she able to “rescue the objectified, maligned, and mistreated [historized black ] body to attain an increasing awareness of the depth and richness of [her] ‘lived-body’ and to approach it as a diverse and dynamic reality.” Yet, through various mediated advertisements she comes to us as body-object, devoid of the depth and richness of an African American ethnic identity as represented in other public spaces.

**Williams Agency**

As body-subject, Williams’ black sporting body also resists such forms of fetishization because of the representational power that her celebrity affords her. Williams’ dominant performances on and off court allow her to signify or function as an empowered black woman, one who is in a position to transform ways of seeing black womanhood in America’s public sphere. Williams’ sporting and economic success enables her to be a positive and transformative image of/for black womanhood. Part of Williams’ agency is attributed to her Black expressive cultural style—from beaded cornrows to colored outfits—that she exhibits on the tennis court in addition to her style of play and in other through self-representation off the tennis court. Her flare and style is part of hip hop culture. In *Check It While I Wreck It: Black Womanhood, Hip Hop Culture, and the Public Sphere*, Gwendolyn D. Pough asserts that the “Hip-Hop concept of wreck sheds new light on the things Blacks have had to do in order to obtain and maintain a presence in the larger sphere, namely, fight hard and bring attention to their skill and right to be in the public sphere.” Williams insists that she has this right to be in the
public sphere and makes no apologies that her sporting body and style of play does not resemble White women tennis players. Moreover, Williams’ challenges the repressed and conservative status quo of traditional professional women’s tennis. Her colorful clothes stand in opposition to the white attire that historically has been worn by tennis players. From her two piece Trinty-Matrix-like outfit with high fashion tennis shoes with detachable tops to look like black boots to her green and yellow one piece with yellow knee-high socks, and her two piece pink out fit, Williams is definitely making her mark on the tennis courts (see figures 29-32). Allen Guttman observes that “tennis did more than any other sport to revolutionize the clothing worn by upper-class sportswomen.” In 1894, one year after a prominent women tennis player “appeared on the tennis courts of the Newport (Rhode Island) Casino—in bloomers,” it was announced in Scribner’s “that the summer resort had given birth to a new ideal of physical beauty—the female athlete.” It was like Mrs. Alva Astor, Guttman notes, “were likened to the icon of the new woman, the Gibson Girl.” Thus, tennis courts were the sites where new notions of aesthetic ideals of American womanhood were introduced and flourished. Lisa Smith adds that women tennis players were influential on women’s fashion because during Victorian times, they “found it hard to dash around on the grass in what was then considered correct attire: long skirts and blouses, under which were corsets and petticoats,” so they wore attire that they can better move around in. In fact, Williams expressed that wearing the “cat suit” enabled her to move around better. Also, Smith remarks that female athlete, Suzanne Lengden, “brought the game of tennis into a new era” with her sense of “glamour and ballet to the court,” and
“beyond sport, she was the first female superstar, a grand personality whose clothes, romances, and quirks were discussed endlessly by admirers on both sides to the Atlantic.” Smith’s description of Lengden in could very well fit the description of Serena Williams today. In essence, unlike other tennis players, Williams is bringing back to tennis a sense of style, glamour, and new notions of aesthetic ideals for American womanhood that has been associated with tennis in its earlier periods. What is different, however, the space is occupied by a Black female body with a working-class background. A Black woman from Compton is the one setting trends, and not the upper-class “country club” women. Still her style remains outside normalcy so that power and privilege of white heterosexual womanhood remain at the center of the tennis world. In addition, Williams’ hi-octane and physical performances on court challenge the discourse that women should play tennis gracefully, delightfully (beautifully). For many, William’s style of play is beautiful. Williams’ black, athletic body stands in stark contrast to the white, often blonde, ‘soft’ tennis players who have historically dominated the game. Williams’ colorful, physical, self-reflexive performance demands of the audience that they recognize her blackness on her terms, without recourse to a double consciousness.  

Hill-Collins remarks that unlike other “African American female tennis stars whose demeanor and style of play resembled the White women dominating the sport,” Williams rejects “tennis norms.” In her brief discussion of Williams, Hill-Collins points out that “Black athletes have more leeway in reclaiming assertiveness without enduring the ridicule routinely targeted toward the bitch” and that their “body types
also represent new forms of femininity.”332 Michael Messner questions “what are we to make of the current fit, athletic, even muscular looks that are increasingly in vogue with many women? Is there a new counter-hegemonic image of women afoot that challenges traditional conceptions of femininity?333 Yes, and that’s Serena Williams. Hill-Collins agrees in that “Black women athletes’ bodies are muscular and athletic, attributes historically reserved for men, yet their body also represents new forms of femininity.”334 As a subjective agent, she is resists white hegemony. The literal presence of her black female sporting body across a wide range of media texts displaces the white female body from its position as dominant identity. This shifting of power relations is played out in a 2004 Olympics Nike advert where white female bodies are imaged morphing into the black female body of Serena Williams. Here Williams embodies the ‘new woman’ in American culture. For many, she is the new super iconic role model in town which young women wish to emulate. Elle magazine reports that “the TV ratings of women’s Grand Slam finals have increased in the last few years, in part attributable to the Williams presence on the courts.”335 Also many attribute the increased participation in tennis, particularly African American girls, to Williams.

Hill-Collins, Heywood, and Dworkin, attribute the increased visibility of female athletes in the public sphere to the passage of Title IX and to new technologies in mass media. Haywood and Dworkin state that “the visibility given to female athletes and to other previously marginalized by race, for instance, was dependent upon the need to cultivate new markets and had the effect of bringing previously marginalized into the cultural center of terms of our day-to-day iconography, what people see.”336 They
further add that “this has the effect of normalization: the ‘margins’ become a part of everyday American life.” However, they also briefly comment in their endnotes the irony in such a statement given “that some argue that black and white America have never been more separate and unequal.” There’s no denying that Serena Williams has made her mark on the world of tennis and in American culture. As a counter-hegemonic agent, she disrupts the common sensical way of viewing that has existed in the world of tennis. As a result, her presence has forced “issues of excellence and diversity to the forefront of American politics.”

Moreover, representations of William’s remake the politics of race and respectability. Because she embodies a black subjectivity that expresses “little desire to mimic [her] White counterparts, “we have to rethink how the politics of race and respectability function in her representations.” bell hooks notes that when “Black subjects give expression to multiple aspects of our identity, which emerge form a different location, we may be seen by white others as ‘spectacle.’” She writes, however, that

their mode of seeing cannot be the factor which determines style of representation or the content of one’s work. Fundamental to the process of decentering the oppressive other and claiming our right to subjectivity is the insistence the we must determine how we will be and not rely on colonizing responses to determine our legitimacy.

Hooks insistence in self-determination describes her notions of a radical black subjectivity. In this regards, William’s embodies this radical black subjectivity. In
“claiming our rights” speaks to the aspect of respectability invoked by black Detroiter after World War II. In *Remaking Respectability: African American Women in Interwar Detroit*, Vitoria W. Wolcott contends that black Detroiter’s concept of respectability was shaped different from southern African Americans discourse of respectability. Wolcott points out that black Detroiter, men and women, used a “more masculine language of self-defense and self-determination rather than female respectability when discussing their priorities and strategies.” Protection and self-defense was “an aspect of respectability that placed self-determination and community survival above public presentations of bourgeois life.” This is the version of respectability in representations of William’s sporting body. In accepting the NAACP President Image award in 2003, “Image-a-Nation” the theme, Serena expressed that “we just don’t play for ourselves anymore, but we play for you,” the African American community. With this acknowledgement, William’s solidarity, which is essential to community survival, to the African America community is evident. Donna Daniels observes that Serena William’s “black confidence and intelligence conveys arrogance to the white media.” William’s confidence is her way of claiming space, or in the hip-hop vernacular breaking “wrec” not only in the white dominated world of tennis, but in a culture that still questions the place of all Black women.

William’s subjectivity is one that demands respect on her terms. Unlike Rudolph, Williams’s sporting body represents no pretense to police her body through the discourse of race and respectability. Instead, Williams’s expressive imagery of racial uplift is to represent Black womanhood in the way that she sees it—through
oppositional knowledge. Furthermore, she doesn’t signify the form of respectability constructed around Debi Thomas’s sporting body. To the opposite, Williams explicitly self-identifies as a Black tennis player and makes no apologies for it. The sign of Thomas’s respectability produces a message that in a color-blind society race does not matter; Thomas is respected because she is not too Black. The sign of William’s respectability reads that she is too Black—deal with it. For Williams, respectability comes in resisting socially constructed norms that place the Black female body outside normalcy. What distinguishes William’s respectability is the “recognition by the cultural dominant of the sheer influence and pervasiveness of black presence in mainstream American culture.” In “On a Night of Respect Serena Starts Up Her US Open,” journalist Craig Gabriel comments on the pre-game ceremony honoring black women in history at the 2007 U.S. Open at the Arthur Ashe Stadium. Gabriel writes that “it was an amazing sight to see so many great African American women assembled to honour a woman (Althea Gibson) that was a trailblazer.” Among other women honored were Debi Thomas, Jackie Joyner Kersee and more. Leading the entertainment was Aretha Franklin who sang her signature song, and as Gabriel notes, “the oh so appropriate ‘RESPECT’.” An image of Franklin performing her song juxtaposed with an image of Serena Williams playing at the U.S. Open the same night encapsulates the concept of respectability William’s exudes. The tribute at the U.S. Open as well as these images also speaks to all Black women, that despite the differences within Black womanhood theirs is a presence that demands to be respected as Franklin so soulfully expresses.
Finally, representations of Serena Williams speak to the ways in which black womanhood has been contested, negotiated, and redefined. On the tennis courts, Williams’ agency and autonomy is quite apparent, but this is much more contested and complex in the wider construction of her celebrity image, especially in the world of advertisements where she is regularly fetishized. Nonetheless, in seeking to explore the multiple meanings of Serena Williams’ celebrity status, one is also hoping to discover much about the way race and gender play out in contemporary American society. Representations of Williams reveal that a racist ideology still operates in US society wherein African American women are included in the American project under particular conditions; yet, Williams’ sporting body serves as counter discourse that transforms images of African American womanhood wherein black is once again beautiful. To this end, how African American women collectively benefit from the power of Williams’ celebrity remains to be explored. Does the increased visibility of Serena Williams in advertisements for McDonalds, Avon, Puma, Nike, and Wrigley, help to change the popular imagination of the construction of black womanhood? Since Williams’ entrance into the public sphere, her insistence on agency and autonomy attempts to transform the ways in which race and gender have been socially constructed because of her refusal to be externally defined. At the same time, images of Serena fall back on stereotypical images of black womanhood. If so, move over Marilyn and Madonna: Serena is coming and she is changing the face of America as she keeps on ‘droppin’ like it’s hot’.
CHAPTER FIVE: CONCLUSION

In writing about her experience with mainstream mediated images of herself in “Afro Images: Politics, Fashion, and Nostalgia,” Angela Davis admits “with the first public circulation of my photographs, I was intensely aware of the invasive and transformative power of the camera and of the ideological contextualization of my images, which left me with little or no agency.”351 Davis expresses a sense of powerlessness she felt in having no control over these images. The question of agency, of self-determination and self-definition in the images of Black womanhood, has always been a complex inquiry. Davis confirms the power of mainstream media when she writes that “the power of the visual images by which I was represented during the period of my trial” had an impact on black identity.352 Likewise, representations of Black female athletes illustrate the power of the media to construct meanings about Black womanhood. The sporting bodies of Rudolph, Thomas, and Williams illustrate how “the unprecedented contemporary circulation of photographs and filmic images of African Americans have multiple and contradictory implications.”353 Stuart Hall reminds us of the fluidity of meaning representations carry. The discursive formations of race and gender throughout various periods, from the 1960s to the present, shaped and were shaped by representations of black female sporting bodies.

This project is titled “Competing Identities” to refer to the meanings and values placed on the socially constructed categories of race, gender, class, sexuality, and
nation. Depending on the particular social and political climate, meanings and values of Black womanhood shift. However, the two themes that have emerged and remained constant are the persistence of racism — blatant racism in the 1960s, color-blind racism in the 1980s, and commodity racism in the 1990s and early twenty-first century, and secondly, the struggle by African American women to carve out their own self-defined space within a racist and sexist culture.354 Eduardo Bonilla-Silva explains that racism is “about a dominant racial group (whites) striving to maintain its systemic advantages and minorities fighting to subvert the racial status quo.”355 I also use the term “competing identities” to refer to a socially stratified society that ranks categories of people in a hierarchy, a system that result in inequalities. Mainstream representations which reflect this hierarchy negate and distort self-defined black female subjectivity. The Black female sporting body is a site where the cultural battle over identity continues to be waged, and representations of Black female sporting bodies signify the struggle of Black women to occupy a self-defined space in American culture.

I focused on three different time periods to determine if there was continuity or historical rupture in the ways in which the Black female body has been constructed in the public sphere. Here Foucault’s observations of historicizing discourse proved quite useful. He thought that, in each period, discourse produced forms of knowledge, objects, subjects and practices of knowledge, which differed radically from period to period, with no necessary continuity between them. Although Foucault neglected raced and gendered forms of the body, as many feminists acknowledge, his explanation of the body/power relationship has served as important background for my understanding in
the representations of the sporting body. This is important because I question notions of a Black female subjective agent. My concern here is the struggle for one’s own identity in hegemonic representations of the Black female body representations.

In the struggle over social identities, representations of Rudolph, Thomas, and Williams engaged the politics of race and respectability in similar ways to other Black women before them. Within the discursive confines of hegemonic norms, black woman have at times employed this discourse of respectability, albeit in different forms, to assert their subjectivity. Michael Parenti rhetorically asks, “What is the test of respectability?” He writes that “it is broadly whether speech and action are consistent with the comfort and well-being of the people of property and position.” Thus the different configurations of the politics of respectability are in response to expectations and norms of a white, upper-class dominant group. During the 1960s various groups struggled for their rights in American society. One way to lay claim to these rights was through the politics of representation which is why Black woman utilized a strategy of respectability. African American women struggled on various fronts: race, gender, class, and sexuality. Often they faced having to choose parts of their identity while forsaking others so that they might find space in American society. Rudolph employed the politics of race and respectability as racial uplift. However, such a strategy only succumbed to the conventional notions of womanhood and thus reified patriarchy. Hence, the ideal of a Black identity as liberated and free is undermined, at least for women. A black identity as rearticulated through various organizations and intellectuals during the 1960s called for empowerment, a vision that competes with a
gendered black identity that told women to be ladylike, keep their hair straight, and to submit to a male-centered position of womanhood. At the same time Rudolph signified racial uplift for both African American women and men through the politics of respectability. Overall, images of Rudolph in various media reflected African Americans’ hopes for the end of racial segregation. I can only imagine what Black women thought when they saw Wilma Rudolph represent the nation in the 1961 Olympics. For those coming of age in the 1960s, Rudolph presented herself in ways that uplifted the race. As such, she was the pride and joy among many in African American communities. Rudolph exemplified how black people lived vicariously through black athletes as a way to believe that racial progress was indeed possible in the early 1960s and in their generation. However, problematic with such a vision is that black communities turned to a few successful athletes such as Rudolph to represent a large black population devastated by racial discrimination, poverty, and racial violence.

In an opposite way, Thomas signified an American respectability that produced the message that Black Americans were now on a leveled playing field with white America due to the perceived victories of the 1960s civil rights movement. As an American Olympian, Stanford student, wife to a white male, Thomas expressed no allegiance to an African American culture, and thus, racial uplift was not a part of her social constructed image. Therefore, the politics of respectability shifted with the sociopolitical climate. The strategy employed in representations of Thomas’s images was to deny that race even mattered. Such a strategy worked well within a color-blind America and the myth of Black social progress.
Unlike Rudolph and Thomas, embodied in Williams’s representation is a respectability that challenged traditional assumptions about race and gender; Williams demands that cultural participants see her place in the world according to Serena Williams. Williams’s claims space by asserting her right to be here and on her terms, thus the respectability employed in her images is similar to the strategy of respectability used by Black women in Detroit during the 1930s. Theirs was a masculine respectability. Similar to these Black Detroiter, Williams challenged racism, but in tennis by actively shaping her own destiny and challenging the status quo. The celebrity sign of Serena is embraced for its power to cross multicultural boundaries, yet the moment she expresses her blackness, she is read as being too black. As Williams images attest to, she is proud of her radical Black female subjectivity. While Rudolph’s images reveal a complicity with conventional notions of womanhood that gendered her Black body in ways that celebrated assimilation into the dominant group, Williams’s image were more subversive in that she created an identity that challenged cultural hegemony. However, like Rudolph and Thomas, Williams’s mediated identity is not stable, and therefore, at moments her images also succumbed to racialized regime of representations.

Moreover, the discourses of race and gender did not have the same political agenda throughout these various time periods. For instance, in the 1960s it was imperative that the U.S. mend the racial divisiveness that existed in the nation to establish itself as a dominant world power. Therefore, cultural images of Black womanhood served as a “soften weapon” to help America gain a strategic advantage in
world affairs. Presenting Rudolph in her genteel finest and featuring her throughout the media adorned with the wrappings of bourgeois respectability polished up U.S. national imagery. In the 1980s, the new right rearticulated race and gender, and thus, representations of Thomas gave way to the discursive confines of neoconservative politics. By this time, unlike Rudolph, Thomas’s representations indicated that there was no race to uplift, and as such the new right’s color-blind agenda was promoted through Thomas’s images. By the late 20th and early 21st centuries America, a neoliberal democracy and the commodification of a Black culture informed how Williams’s Black sporting body could be read. Her image tells viewers that individual merit is rewarded regardless of class, race, or gender positionalities and thus Williams is symbolic of neoliberal democracy. Also in the 21st century a Black identity is constructed around a newly commodified Black culture. Here I argued the ambivalence of Williams’s representations. To this point, the concept of a postmodern Blackness and how it figures into Williams’s representation is the subject for future scholarship.

Moreover, the significance of African American female athletes is due in part to the lack of positive images of black womanhood in America’s imagery. Dominant discourses about womanhood have for the most part rendered African American women invisible, while at the same time, they have manipulated constructions of the black female body, offering what Patricia Hill-Collins conceives as ‘controlling images’ of black womanhood. Images such as the hypersexualized jezebel, the desexualized mammy, the leeching welfare queen and the emasculating Sapphire have been designed to make “racism, sexism, poverty and other forms of social injustice appear to be
natural, normal, and inevitable parts of everyday life.”358 If these kinds of images are mapped onto the history of the black female body, what happens when an ‘empowered’ black female sporting celebrity enters this space? In relation to the sporting bodies of Rudolph, Thomas, and Williams, the answer is an ambivalent or contradictory one.

These sporting bodies come to us through mainstream or other national mediated channels wherein Rudolph, Thomas, and Williams have little control in the construction and less control of the production of their own images. As a result, these images reify hegemony and represent particular ideologies that are either embraced or rejected by the American public. Whether it be Rudolph in the 60s, Thomas in the 80s, or Williams today, the ideology has remained the same no matter how each historical moment repackages it and sells it to us. The ideology of white supremacy is normalized through the use of images and more specifically through myth. The ideology functions by convincing the American the public that Black women can easily assimilate into a culturally dominant way of life where race and gender become subsumed under nationalism. We know that for the most part nationalism has meant white.

Furthermore, this ideology also functions through the representation of black female sporting bodies. By choosing to celebrate African American female athletes, mainstream media choose “brawn” as opposed to “brain” to represent communities of color. Such representations harken back to the days of not so long ago when images of black peoples were constructed as docile to keep them enslaved. They were racialized as essentially physical and thus primitive people having a low intellect. After emancipation, the image of the buck appeared to justify the re-enslavement of black
people as they were seen as out of control and needed to be confined. Such images have reappeared in America culture via the sports institution. The docile image can be compared to Foucault’s notion of docile bodies. He contends that "one that may be subjected, used, transformed, and improved. And that this docile body can only be achieved through strict regiment of disciplinary acts. The relationship between master and slave rendered black bodies docile in that Africans were subjected to, used, transformed, and improved through permanent endured servitude, which can be described a regiment of disciplinary acts. As Hazel Carby contends, the politics of respectability served to police Black women’s bodies, and thus, this policing fits Foucault’s notion of docile bodies. To this end, images of Rudolph and Thomas sporting bodies can be described, at moments, as docile bodies, a concept that still needs further examination for future studies. Their sporting bodies were subjected, used and transformed and improved in the ways in that promoted a mythic nationalism. The ways in which the media constructed their identity through the various aforementioned images illustrated how the media collude with the state in promoting an ideology wherein white supremacy is maintained.

Despite the media’s emphasis on Black athletes, the study is not intended to minimize how representations of African American women in sports contributed to black achievement. Rudolph, Thomas, and Williams make visible black presence and accomplishments in the national culture. But their images are no guarantors of progressive projects for racial justice. Indeed, these representations of Black sporting bodies can just as easily be used to support political projects that deny any specific
claim or warrant on the part of Black women to experiencing disproportionately the
effects of social injustice, economic inequality, and racism. So, liberals use media
representation of Black female sporting bodies to persuade constituents of the
importance of diversity, while conservatives use the same representations to celebrate
the virtues of color blindness and individual achievement. This state of affairs expresses
the contested nature of representation, and shows why representations of African
American female athletes remain an important site of cultural politics.

Sports have been a complex and critical part of the 20th and 21st centuries social
and cultural history, playing a vital role in the creation of nation, community, racial and
gendered identity. To this end, athletes also represent how Black women in general
struggle over the construction of social identities in the public sphere, and their
narratives reflect the lived experiences of many African American women in U.S.
society. These sporting bodies provide useful markers to the ways in which people
have historically defined, resisted, and rearticulated race and gender during the Jane
Crow era; the sociopolitical climate of the Cold War; the neoconservative racial politics
of the Reagan/Bush regime; and late capitalist U.S.A. There has been no full length
study to date that examines the place of Black female sporting bodies and their
representations in the social construction of race and gender in American culture until
now. My aim for this study, then, was to explore the relationship of gendered sporting
bodies to racial formations and politics in society at large, connecting sports to the
larger social frameworks.
Critiquing the construction of national belonging has its roots in W.E.B. Dubois’ notion of a ‘double consciousness.’ In describing the situation of African Americans at the turn of the 20th century, Dubois highlighted the duality of the Negro experience whereby one constantly saw the self through the eyes of others. Dubois identifies, then, the notion of being externally defined and racially objectified by hegemonic ideologies scripted from a white-centric perspective. By virtue of their visual difference, black Americans were the targets of an ideological warfare involving the construction of their bodies as naturally wanton, criminal, sexual, irrational and primitive. Nonetheless, this putting into vision of racial difference also ensured that black Americans had a space in which to define themselves and in which to wrestle with the dominant ideology that sought to objectify them. Racist hegemony brings into discourse that which it seeks to discredit, marginalize, or make ‘strange,’ but in doing so, it necessarily opens up a (counter) space where such forms of otherness can gather together and resist the ideology on offer. Black power emerges in and through the very political system that is trying to disempower and disenfranchise black people. I argue that this ideological warfare continues to be waged today, in all cultural spaces; to this end, Black sporting bodies are exemplary case studies to explore this process.

The contribution of this study lies in its emphasis on representation and ideology. My analysis of Black female sporting bodies is grounded in the belief that one of the ways in which social power is negotiated is through the struggle over the kinds of images, ideas and narratives by which the social world is understood and discussed. As iconic figures, Rudolph, Thomas, and Williams represent variations of Black
womanhood. The significance of the Black female sporting body in the public sphere has transformative possibilities to empower womanhood. The ability of the mass media to organize and mobilize meanings is inextricably linked to power. Their images can either mobilize meaning so that Black women come to identify with a social identity that uplifts and empowers them, or these images can reinforce white heteropatriarchal supremacy in ways that suppress Black women, relegating them to the margins of society. As this study has shown, representations of the Black female sporting body simultaneously empower and disempower.

Images of Rudolph, Thomas, and Williams produce the myth that African American women are embraced by an American culture that celebrates Black womanhood. I hoped evidence would show that these athletes represented a shift in the public imagination where alternative images of Black womanhood were included. Instead, the attitude toward the Black female form has changed very little since Rudolph. Black women continue to redefine their identity because they live in social structures that are antithetical to the space of black female bodies. Due to the way race and gender have been socially constructed in U.S. society, the lives of African American women are often marginalized. The attention given to a few successful women of color athletes gives the illusion that black women in general have truly “made it” and there’s no reason why all black women can’t work hard and achieve success in U.S. society. Still when black women don’t receive societal awards, critics contend that they are the ones to blame due to their own pathology. This idea that one path to success is transferable to other fields is problematic because it ignores the institutional barriers
that make “pulling oneself up from the bootstraps” difficult. It also glosses over the fact that most people of color fall seriously behind whites in income, housing, health, and education.

Despite the productive and comprehensive work done by Black women scholars pertaining to the lives of Black women, they have had little to say about the meaning and significance of sport as a site of cultural struggle. This study addresses that gap. To date, the sport literature contains few analyses in which black women are subjects of study. Over a decade ago Susan Birrell called for greater attention to the insights offered by black feminist scholars and other women of color in order to expand understanding of the interconnectedness of race, class, sexuality and gender in the sociology of sport. While a great deal of research has been done in the area of race and sport, it has largely focused on black men. Similarly, feminist sport studies scholars have greatly enhanced our understanding of the relationship between sport, gender, and sexuality. However, with few exceptions these works have not incorporated ‘race’ into their discussions. In addition to the fact that black women are absent as subjects of study, it is also important to recognize that the dominant theoretical frameworks in sport studies have not adequately taken into account the intersection of race and gender. Given that race and gender discourses have most often framed identity as an “either/or proposition”-- black (male) or female (white)-- black women find themselves in a position that “resists telling.”

The failure to consider the ways in which sport is both an engendering and racializing institution has led to myriad distortions, as well as the marginalization and oversimplification of black women’s experiences in sport. This study attempts to rescue
African American female athletes from invisibility as historical subjects in the
construction of Black womanhood. Thanks to the insights obtained through the black
power movement, the women’s movement, and the anti-colonialism movement, in
addition to the work of many others, we have come to understand how representations
of bodies are tied to systems of knowledge that developed out of histories of slavery,
colonialism, segregation, and imperialism. Hill-Collins affirms that representations of
Black women athletes in mass media also replicate and contest power relations of race,
class, gender, and sexuality. Given Foucault’s insistence on the body as an historical
and culturally specific entity, such an examination tells much about how the Black
female body is subjected by and embedded in a complex cultural politics.

The most important conclusion of this study is that these representations may
have worked to undermine a cultural coming together of a community of actual Black
women. Omi and Winant posit that “in the effort to adapt to the new racial politics they
themselves had created, racial movements lost their decentered political unity.” With
hegemonic appropriations of Black female sporting bodies, mainstream productions of
race and gender made strategic essentialism appear obsolete as competing identities
vied for space in American culture. Jewell argues that due to their social systems, black
women have resisted external definitions of black womanhood. However, in the
aftermath of the Civil Rights Movement in the 1970s, she acknowledges a gradual
decline in black women’s social support networks and questions external factors on the
definition of African American women. Norma Manatu posits that a “lack of
connectedness to a community of like-functioning social black women could result in
in-group alienation for many.”

Still much research on Black female sporting bodies is needed. For example, K. Sue Jewell’s study on cultural images of Black womanhood and social policy needs to be updated to include current representations of Black female athletes to consider their impact on current social policy in addition to the economic and political state of Black womanhood. Another study needed is similar to that of Heywood and Dworkin. They conducted interviews with elementary and high school-age girls and boys to analyze their perceptions on the role of female athletes. Although their focus was on how images construct gender, they did show one image of Marion Jones to which a “Hispanic boy indicated that he liked the picture of Marion Jones, standing in muscular glamour on the beach, ‘the best.’” When asked why, he shyly declared that ‘she could protect me.’” A focus group consisting of young African American women would be helpful in understanding how images of Black female sporting bodies impact their own identity. Such a study could help gauge how images affect young Black women’s own notions on femininity, class, gender, race, sexuality, and nation.

There many other images of the Black female sporting body that need to be explored. Given the length of this project, I did not include them all. For instance, the Women’s National Basketball Association (WNBA) star Lisa Leslie made history when she signed with a major beer endorsement. Leslie doesn't actually drink Bud Light in the mini comic-drama, nor does she explicitly encourage others to imbibe. But it's a Bud Light commercial, and she's the star. For viewers wondering who this gorgeous, graceful athlete is, the words "Lisa Leslie WNBA Star" appear on the screen. A
voiceover announces that "Bud Light is proud to sponsor the WNBA and the 2000 U.S. Olympic Team," at which point the Bud Light and USA Olympic logos light up a portion of the screen. This commercial ran during the Olympic games. Leslie is highly recognizable to teenage girls and serves as role models for young women, so what does this commercial mean for the non-drinking segment of the African American female population? Not so long ago, the Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco, and Firearms prohibited active athletes from alcohol ads, out of concern about the connection between drinking and athletic performance. But what about the fact that the marketing appeals to an audience of African American women suddenly makes it okay? In addition, Sheryl Swoopes and Olympic gymnast Dominique Dawes are other African American athletes whose images need to be analyzed. Swoopes is the most prominent women's basketball player of her generation: a five-time all-star, three-time Olympic gold medalist and the WNBA's only three-time MVP. In a tribute only corporate America could render, Swoopes is the only female player to have her own basketball shoe: Nike's Air Swoopes. In October 2005, Swoopes publicly announced that she is a lesbian and became one of the most high profile athletes in a team sport to come out publicly. She and her partner, Alisa Scott (former basketball player and former Houston Comets assistant coach), are raising Swoopes' son together. Swoops came out despite the fact that the WNBA constructs a heteronormative environment. Another athlete whose representations have impacted the construction of Black womanhood is Dominique Dawes, the first African American gymnast to medal at the Olympics. In a commercial to advertise baby-back ribs for the restaurant chain Chili’s, Dominique Dawes performs a series of
tumbles, and at the end when she sticks her landing, she says, “Barbecue sauce!” The voice over in the commercial asks, “What’s the inspiration for Dominique Dawes?” Then it cuts to footage of delicious-looking baby back ribs being prepared on the grill. Dawe’s tumbling pattern replicates the pattern of the meat as it’s tossed in the air. Why Dominique Dawes was chosen for this advertisement is the question that needs to be explored. Marion Jones’ image in the public sphere is yet another narrative that needs scholarly attention.

A study is also needed to capture the stories from the athletes themselves. For instance, it would have been amazing to have spoken with Track-and-Field Olympian Florence Griffith-Joyner, also known as Flo-Jo. To know the inspiration behind her image would be invaluable. Florence Griffith Joyner captivated the world. Her racing attire consisted of a variety of outfits -- some lace, some fluorescent, some bearing one leg. Her nails, sometimes longer than four inches, became a trademark. On September 21, 1998, at the age 38, Florence Griffith Joyner died. Her story must be told as well as others.

In “Relocating the Black Woman Subject: The Landscape of the Body in the Poems of Lucille Clifton,” Ajuan Maria Mance argues that African American poet Lucille Clifton draws upon the images, themes, and language of myth to create portraits of the Black female body that expose the failure of dominant conceptions of adult female subjectivity to account for the possibility of a subject who is both woman and nonwhite. Likewise, African American athletes in the public sphere represent their physical selves in opposition to the distorted vision of the dominant culture. Therefore
meanings placed on these sporting bodies offer transformative possibilities for the place
and space for Black womanhood, in all of its complexities, contradictions, and triumphs,
in American culture. African American female athletes as subjects come into view, not
by virtue of their relationship to the sociopolitical order that exists outside of Black
womanhood, but through the assertion of their own personhood. What can we say then
about the representation of the Black female body in the twenty-first century? Perhaps
simply that history repeats itself given that this body remains a highly contested site of
meaning both within and without the Black community and that African American
women still struggle with its representation, vacillating between the poles of
sentimental normalization, the flaunting of eccentricity, and the power of black female
subjectivity.

When I first saw Debi Thomas gracefully gliding across the ice during the 1988
Winter Olympics, I thought, “Finally here is an image of an African American woman
that is rarely seen on television.” In her ballerina like pose twirling around on one
skate, with her bodice and arms glittering and sparkling from every angle in iridescent
sequin, purple chiffon gently floating following her hips in every spin, Debi Thomas
was more than just an Olympic ice skater. I remember Thomas dressed in a shimmering
gold leotard with gently swinging gold beaded tassels to match and jumping in a
ballerina-like leap posed as she seemed to float across the ice. The power of the image
was in the way she affected me. I had never seen a Black woman on national television
being admired by the whole world. In some vicarious way, at that moment in watching
Thomas, I felt that I too could be admired by the rest of the world. My brown skin—my
blackness—mattered in the world. In similar ways, young Black women who see images of Serena Williams both on and off the court, see that their Black female bodies do belong in U.S. culture. Who knows, maybe these young women can learn a few lessons from Williams about exerting a masculinity respectability, one that insists on their own self-determination and self-definition in making their way in world.
CHAPTER ONE: FIGURES

Figure 1

Figure 2
CHAPTER TWO: FIGURES

Figure 3

Figure 4
Althea Gibson’s appearance on the cover of Sports Illustrated in September 1957 reflects how racial attitudes had changed in American society since the days of Alice Coachman.

Figure 5
Wilma Rudolph relaxing at home in Clarksville, Tenn.

Figure 6
World Speed Queen
Wilma Glodean Rudolph

EVEN years ago, in a Clarksville (Tenn.) high school gymnasium, a skinny, 5-year-old girl stumbled over her feet, tripped on the wrestling, she was trying to shuffle and landed in an eight-nine-pound tangle at her arch's feet.

"A skater," said the coach, taking his head. "You are a skater; all right.

Woman. You're little, you're fast and you sit in the way got in my way." Skater got up and tried again.

Within two years she became an all-state basketball player at all-Negro Dart High. Within five years she was a 5-foot 1-inch young lady of charm and pace. And yesterday, after winning her third gold medal in the Rome Olympics, Wilma Glodean (Skater) Rudolph was acclaimed as the
CHAPTER THREE: FIGURES

Figure 11

U.S. Presidential delegation to the 2006 Olympic Games, from left to right: Barbara Bush, Roland Betts, Dorothy Hamil, Eric Heiden, Kerri Strug, Grad Freeman, and Debi Thomas; at Aviano Air Base, Italy, Friday, Feb. 10, 2006

Figure 12
Figure 13

Figure 14

Janice Thomas endured discrimination, but Debi has never felt like part of a minority.
Figure 15

After I landed the triple flip, there was no way I was going to lose up. I wasn't the underdog anymore. When you feel you know what you're doing, you have confidence. I had welcomed the fear in Baton Rouge, and I had to keep my confidence up to overcome the pressure.

Figure 16

Debi pulled off her World Championship title while also carrying a pre-med class load at Stanford University.

Photo by Michael King/All-Sport

a skater Debi Thomas, 21, who grew up in San Jose, is a self-described 'third-year sophomore' at Stanford. Her husband, Brian Vanden Hagen, was his senior year at the University of Colorado.
Thomas with mom Janice and husband Brian.
Figure 18
Debi Thomas, who continues to skate though she's back at Stanford, signs autographs during the opening of a new skating school at the Golden Gate Ice Arena in Redwood City.

Figure 20
At 7, Debi was just another enthusiastic kid.

By 15, she was beginning to bubble to the top.
Figure 25

Figure 26
CHAPTER FOUR: FIGURES

Figure 27

Figure 28

Williams sisters find something to be McThankful for
Figures 29,30,31,32
Figure 34
Lean machine.

When it comes to_copying_her_perfect form here, it's hard to see what studies suggest params pickups at a healthy weight could help your muscle and bone health. For instance, by adding a can of low-fat or non-fat milk to her reduced-calorie diet, instead of 8 ounces or less.

...what I call a milk bar.

Figure 36

Make ours dubsies.

My sister and I hate to lose nutrients, that is. So we drink milk. It has the essential nutrients active bodies need. You might say it's the only thing we serve.

got milk?

Figure 37
NOTES

2 Gloria Hall and Barbara Smith, All the Women are White, All the Blacks are Men, but some of Us Are Brave: Black Women’s Studies (Old Westbury, N.Y.: Feminist Press, 1982), 5-7.
4 Much has been written on the negative stereotypes of Black womanhood. Some include the mammy, matriarch, jezebel, welfare queen, black lady, sapphire.
5 Stuart Hall, Representation: Cultural Representations and Signifying Practices. (London: Sage Publications, 1997). Hall defines representation as “using language to say something meaningful about, or to represent, the world meaningfully, to other people.” Language includes words, spoken sounds or visual images that are called signs.
6 Hall, 6.
7 Coined by Pauli Murray in the 1970s, “Jane Crow” is a term that refers to institutional barriers and stereotypes that prevented Black women from realizing their full potential.
9 Multiculturalism is a growing force in America’s universities and public life. In brief, multiculturalism is the view that all cultures, from that of a spirits-worshiping tribe to that of an advanced industrial civilization, are equal in value.
12 I borrow this term from Gothic literature. A shape shifter is a demon spirit that constantly changes form to trick, seduce, control its intended target.
13 K. Sue Jewell, as well as other Black feminist scholars, have argued how the images of the welfare queen has served to justify why African American woman are not entitled to access to resources because they already sucked the government dry.
15 Conboy, 27.
The idea that forms of subordination are lived through the body has its roots in philosophy beginning with Rene Descartes’ radical bifurcation of the mind and body split. This Cartesian dualism preserves the concept of the mind/body split. Similarly Plato has his divisions as well. He discerns between soul and body. For Plato the soul/body distinction is a rational/irrational distinction. His places higher worth on the soul, and his negative views about the body are connected to his negative views about women. He believed women’s lives were quintessentially body-directed; therefore, they weren’t concerned with the soul. In contrast Merleau-Ponty’s phenomenology attempts to reconcile soul/body and mind/body split. Phenomenology tries to get beyond the binary of Cartesian dualism. Whereas Cartesian dualism maintains the union of individual components, phenomenology seeks unity. For Merleau-Ponty, epistemology comes from the corporeality of man. Taken together, these models reduce the female body to a body that has no worth, or renders the female body invisible and thereby relying on man’s ontological existence for knowledge and meaning.

However, feminist theorists have rejected these kinds of models—descriptions of women’s nature—found in Descartes, Plato, and other philosophers. In fact, modern day ideologies still carry the legacies of these classic models which is why feminist theorists insist on new epistemologies that build from female ontological existence and that disrupt philosophical and scientific body/subject models.


Several terms have been used to describe the experiences of black women in American culture. In theorizing differences based on race, class, gender, and sexuality, scholars have employed concepts such as interlocking oppression, matrix of domination, double and triple jeopardy, intersectionality to name a few. Often times the conflation of these categories, race, gender, class, etc. complicate an understanding of the experiences of black women in American society, yet several scholars attempt to theorize the experiences specific to black women. See Kimberely Crenshaw, “Mapping the Margins: Intersectionality, Identity Politics, and Violence Against Women of Color,” *Stanford Law Review*, vol. 43 (July 1991), p. 1241-1299; Patricia Hill Collins, *Black Feminist Thought*, Angela Davis, “Women, Race, Class”, New York : Random House, 1981; Beverly Guy-Sheftall, *Words of Fire: An Anthology of African-American Feminist Thought; All the Women are White, All the Blacks are Men, but Some of Us are Brave : Black Women’s Studies*, eds. Gloria T. Hull, Patricia Bell Scott, and Barbara Smith


Guy-Sheftall, 13.

25 Gilman, 89.
28 Hine, 28.
30 Wiegman, 6.
32 Stuart Hall, *Cultural Representations*, 15
36 Shohat, *The Struggle Over Representation*, 69.
38 Higginbotham, 14
39 Higginbotham, 11
40 Higginbotham, 16

45 Hooks, 65.

46 Hooks, 66.

47 George Lipsitz’s *Possessive Investment in Whiteness* argues that contemporary whiteness is constructed through governmental policies on the national, state, and local levels.


51 Craig, 14.

52 Craig, 9.

53 Craig, 9.


56 Hargreaves, 62.


61 Scraton and Flintoff, 38


65 Jurgen Habermas used the term to describe “a realm of our social life in which something approaching public opinion can be formed. Access is guaranteed to all citizens. A portion of the public sphere comes into being in every conversation in which


67 Leslie Heywood and Sheila Dworkin, Built to Win: the Female Athlete as Cultural Icon, (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2003), 155.

68 Heywood and Dworkin, 156.


71 Birrell and McDonald, 29.


76 I use the term historicized in the same vein as Foucault’s historicized subject. For Foucault, the subject is constructed out of a particular historical discourse. Thus a historicized body here refers to a racist discourse out of which the black female body has been constructed dating back to enslaved Africans in North America.


79 It wasn’t until 2006 with the release of Wilma Rudolph: A Biography that her narrative finally went beyond juvenile literature. This trend continues with other athletes as well such as Jackie Joyner-Kersee, Marion Jones, Venus and Serena Williams.

80 Rudolph’s parents, Ed and Blanche Rudolph had eight children and Wilma was the sixth. Ed Rudolph already had 14 children before he married Blanche, making Wilma the 20th child of 22.

The Tigerbelles Women's Track club at Tennessee State University became the state's most internationally accomplished athletic team in the mid-twentieth century. The sprinters won some twenty-three Olympic medals, more than any other sports team in Tennessee history. Mae Faggs and Barbara Jones became the first Olympic-winning Tigerbelles in 1952, and the Tigerbelles won another medal in 1956. Soon, Gold Medal winners included Edith McGuire, Madeline Manning, Barbara Jones, Martha Hudson, Lucinda Williams, Chandra Cheeseborough (two), Wilma Rudolph (three), and Wyomia Tyus (three). Tyus was the first athlete to win Gold Medals in the sprints in two consecutive Olympiads (1964 and 1968). The first star of the Tigerbelles was Wilma Goldean Rudolph.


85 Biracree, 5.


89 Nelson, 2.


94 Here it’s important to note how I’m using the term representation in this study. *The Oxford English Dictionary* defines representation primarily as “presence” or “appearance.” There is an implied visual component to this primary definition. The term also has a semiotic meaning, in that something is “standing for” something else. In his analysis of textual representations, Edward Said emphasizes the fact that representations can’t be exactly realistic. Therefore, representations can never really be a natural depiction of something. Instead, they are constructed images, images that need to be interrogated for their ideological content which is the aim of my analysis.


Lansbury, 234.

Cahn, *Coming on Strong,* 126.

Cahn, *Coming on Strong,* 126

Cahn, *Coming on Strong,* 114-117

Cahn, *Coming on Strong,* 208.


Hall, *Representation: Cultural Representations,* 245.

Hall, *Representation: Cultural Representation,* 245.

Lansbury, *The Tuskegee Flash,* 58

Susan Cahn, *Coming on Strong,* 114-117.


Quoted in Susan Cahn, *Coming on Strong,* 214.

Susan Cahn, *Coming on Strong,* 213.

The 1936 Olympics was the first televised Olympic Games, but it was broadcasted only in Germany.


Cahn, *Coming on Strong,* 118.


Walters, 54.


*Time* 76 (September 19, 1960), 74-75.


Kitch, 99.
123 Dana Gibson and Charles Christy were two white male illustrators whose works produced meanings of white womanhood.
126 Young, 197.
131 Quoted in Craig, Ain’t I a Beauty Queen?, 35.
132 Craig, Ain’t I a Beauty Queen?, 35.
133 Rudolph, The Story of Wilma, 68.
134 “Storming the Citadel,” Time, 10 February 1961, 57.
135 Susan Cahn, Coming on Strong, 133.
137 Darlene Clark Hine, “Rape and the Inner Lives,” 920.
139 Borstelmann, 441.
140 Cahn, Coming On Strong, 74.
141 Michael D. Davis, Black American Women in Olympic Track and Field,
Horatio Alger, Jr. was a 19th-century American author who wrote approximately 135 dime novels. Many of his works have been described as rags to riches stories, illustrating how down-and-out boys might be able to achieve the American Dream of wealth and success through hard work, courage, determination, and concern for others. This widely held view involves a significant simplification, as Alger's characters do not typically achieve extreme wealth; rather they attain middle-class security, stability, and a solid reputation — that is, their efforts are rewarded with a place in society, not domination of it.


Susan Cahn, Coming On Strong, 125.


Rudolph, 7.

Rudolph, 161.

Rudolph, 164.

Rudolph, 167.

Rudolph, 89.


Craig, Ain’t I a Beauty Queen, 139.

Craig, Ain’t I a Beauty Queen, 140.


Davis caught the public’s attention as a black woman intellectual when in 1969 she was fired from her teaching position at UCLA because of her Communist Party membership. Her fame grew when she was charged with kidnapping, conspiracy, and murder in connection with Jonathan Jackson’s unsuccessful attempt to take hostages at the Marin County Courthouse in order to bargain for his brother’s freedom. She became a fugitive and was imprisoned, supported by an international campaign to “Free Angela,” and ultimately was acquitted. Her image was disseminated on Federal Bureau of Investigation “wanted” posters, reprinted constantly by the media, and sold on countless posters produced by her defenders and by independent artists.

Craig, Ain’t I Beauty Queen?, 72.

Craig, Ain’t I Beauty Queen?, 72.

Hine, A Shining Thread of Hope, 296.

Female bobsledder Vonetta Flowers became the first African-American to win a gold medal at the Olympic Winter Games in Salt Lake City.

Prior to Thomas’s visibility, the 1970s offered not one Black female athlete in the public sphere. Florence Griffith Joyner, also known as Flo-Jo, became Olympic Silver Medalist in the 200-meter dash in 1984 and three-time Olympic Gold medalist in 1988, was becoming the most visible African American female athlete during the mid 1980’s. She also shared the spotlight with sister-in-law Jackie Joyner Kersee, who won an Olympic silver medal in 1984 in the heptathlon. In 1988, Kersee surpassed her own record, scoring 7,291 points in the Olympic heptathlon in Seoul, South Korea, winning the gold medal and setting the world, Olympic, and American records for the event. She also won the gold medal and set the Olympic record in the long jump at Seoul, with a leap of 24 feet three inches.


Dale Mitch, “A Shooting: In One Meteoric Blaze Against the Night Sky, Debi Thomas’ Rise to the Top was Brighter than Haley’s Comet.” *The Olympian*, December

Janice shares with Sports Illustrated her experience of segregation in Wichita Kansas. In the seventh grade she went to a segregated school. In the movie theater, she had to sit in the balcony. At the local Wolworth, she couldn’t sit in the booth. Hotels and restaurants wouldn’t admit blacks.

Julia, a half-hour comedy premiering on NBC in September 1968, was an example of American network television's attempt to address race issues during a period of heightened activism and turmoil over the position of African-Americans in U.S. society. The series was the first to star a black performer in the leading role since Beulah, Amos 'n' Andy, and The Nat "King" Cole Show all left the air in the early and mid-1950s. Julia's unthreatening respectability served as the basis for a great deal of heated debate during the series' initial run. In the midst of growing political militancy among many African-Americans, some critics accused the show of presenting Julia as a "white Negro."


While Dyson praises the diversity of the show, he also notes its problems. Both Dyson and Gray agree that one major drawback of the show was its failure to comment on the economic and social disparities and constraints facing millions of African Americans outside of the middle class.

Gray, *Watching Race*, p. 84.

Sut Jhally and Justin Lewis, "Enlightened" Racism", 93

Sut Jhally and Justin Lewis, "Enlightened" Racism", 93

Sut Jhally and Justin Lewis, "Enlightened" Racism", 94

T. Callahan, “The Word She Uses is Invincible,” 47.


Swift, “Books or Blades,” 23.

Mitch, “A Shooting,”46

Mitch, “A Shooting,”46

Patricia Hill-Collins, Black Sexual Politics, 122

Dale Mitch, “A Shooting,”47


Sut Jhally and Justin Lewis, “Enlightened Racism”, 95

Sut Jhally and Justin Lewis, “Enlightened Racism”, 95

Quoted in Jhally and Lewis, “Enlightened Racism”, 98

Hill-Collins, Black Sexual Politics, 193.


Robertson, “Debi Thomas’ Love Story.”

Time Magazine, April 11, 1988


Lanker, 145.

Lanker, 147.


Hall, Representation, 228.


Blacke, 44.


Abigail M. Feder, “A Radiant Smile for the Lovely Lady: Overdetermined Femininity in ‘Ladies’ Figure Skating,” in Reading Sport: Critical Essays on Power and
Representation. ed. Susan Birrell and Mary McDonald (Boston : Northeastern University Press, 2000), 208.

240 Ellyn Kestnbaum, Culture on Ice, 133.


243 Dick Button, “Figure Skater’s Meld Skill with Pizazz,” in USA Today found on http://www.geocities.com/brianboitanofan/pazazz.html?200525.


245 Smolowee, 78.


248 Stevens, 99.

249 Rolling Stone, “Bladerunner,”52.


251 P. Axthelm, “Cool as Ice, Witt Hits Gold in the Women’s Figure Skating Showdown, Debi Thomas Bold Strategy Backfires.” Newsweek, March 7, 1988.

252 Axthelm, 63.


254 Brand and Callahan, 110.

255 Axthelm, “Cool as Ice,”42.

256 Axthelm, “Cool as Ice,”42.

257 Axthelm, “Cool as Ice,”43.

258 Axthelm, “Cool as Ice,”44.

259 Axthelm, “Cool as Ice,”44.

260 Kestnbaum, Culture on Ice, 136.

261 Kestnbaum, Culture on Ice, 136

262 Kestnbaum, Culture on Ice, 136


264 Kestnbaum, Culture on Ice, 137.

265 Kestnbaum, Culture on Ice, 137.

266 Kestnbaum, Culture on Ice, 141.

267 Kestnbaum, Culture on Ice, 142.

268 Kestnbaum, Culture on Ice, 142.

269 Kestnbaum, Culture on Ice, 119.

270 Kestnbaum, Culture on Ice, 119.


272 Rohden, 68.

Craig, Ain’t I a Beauty Queen?, 7.
Craig, Ain’t I a Beauty Queen?, 7.
Swift, “Another Miracle on Ice, “52.
Swift, “Another Miracle on Ice, “52.
Andrews, Excavating Michael Jordan’s Blackness, 58.
Hill-Collins, Black Sexual Politics, 122.
Hill-Collins, Black Sexual Politics, 122.
Harvey, 2.
Critics of neoliberalism sometimes refer to it as the "American Model," which they find promotes low wages and high inequality.
Andrews and Jackson, Sports Stars, 8.
Harvey, A Brief History, 3.
Hill-Collins, Black Sexual Politics.
Stuart Hall, Representation, 62.
Spencer, “Racism at Indian Wells, “41
bell hooks, Black Looks, 26
In another McDonalds ad, “365 black,” the promotion of black history month with a caption next to William’s that states “black history should be all year long,” Williams wears a blonde, straight hairstyle. Of course William’s blonde hair could be read many ways, however her choice of hairstyle begs the question is Serena William’s change in
hairstyle from beaded cornrows to straight blonde hair a part of this process of
negotiation? For example, her transformation from beaded cornrows in the “Got Milk”
campaigns at the beginning of her career to her straight, blonde hairstyle in the
McDonalds ad illustrates the complexity of how a black identity signifies in Serena
William’s celebrity status. Because Williams wears straight blonde hair extensions both
on and off the court and comes to us through mediated representations, it can not be
determined whether it is she, her stylist, or advertisers who choose this hairstyle unless
we ask Williams herself. If this is her choice of hairstyle, then again we see William’s
clever negotiation of her social identity wherein for African American long blonde
straight hair no longer signifies a desire for mainstream notions of beauty, but instead
signifies various meanings. For one, William’s strong sense of self-identitification with
an African American ethnicity coupled with her blonde locks offers new meanings of
the politics of hair. In other words, Williams creates space that allows for various
expressions of black womanhood; she exercises agency. The politics of black hair has
received much attention in various disciplines in academic scholarship, so much can be
said about Williams hair aesthetics and black female identities.

302 Birrell and McDonald, Sports Essays, 3.
303 Marshall, Understanding the Celebrity, 51.
305 August 2, 2004 National Examiner, p.25
306 Heywood and Dworkin, Built to Win, 155.
307 Hall, Representational Strategies, 268.
308 Gilman, Difference and Pathology, 232.
309 hooks, Black Looks, 63.
310 hooks, Black Looks, 63.
311 Hooks, Black Looks, 63.
312 Elle.Com, Retried on November, 8 2005.
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and R. Hunt (eds), Silver Lining: Some Strategies for the Eighties, p. 28-52, London:
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315 Donna Daniels, “Gazing at the New Black Women Athletes: How do we see the new
women athletes of color? Donna Daniels gazes at Venus and Serena Williams,”
316 Steven Roberts, Serena Willams’ Escapes Rocky Start. New York Times, August 28,
317 John McEnroe, “The Cocky Williams Sisters are as Cold as Ice,” Sunday Telegraph
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http://www.telegraph.co.uk:80/et?a...rrvs&pg+/et/00/9/17/stmac17.html.

Peters, 1.

Peters, 1.


bell hooks, Yearning: Race, Gender, and Cultural politics (Boston, MA : South End Press, 1990).

Meier 1988, 93


Mier, 1988 “Embodiment, Sport, and Meaning, 96

Gwendolyn Pough, Check It While I Wreck It: Black Womanhood, Hip Hop Culture, and the Public Sphere, 2004, 17.


Ibid., 125.


There are, of course, a number of examples of white tennis players who have challenged gender norms. For example, Martina Navratilova’s foreign, masculine, lesbian body was initially placed in a power saturated binary with ‘golden girl’ Chris Everett-Lloyd. However, it is the racial specificity here which increases the division – the ‘difference’ – so that Williams’ corporeal presence has to be acknowledged.

Hill-Collins, Black Sexual Politics, 135.


Hill-Collins, Black Sexual Politics, 135.

www. Elle.com

Heywood and Dworkin, Built to Win, 32.

Heywood and Dworkin, Built to Win, 32.

Heywood and Dworkin, Built to Win, 32.

Hill-Collins, Black Sexual Politics, 135.

Hill-Collins, Black Sexual Politics, 135.

Bell hooks, Yearning: Race, Gender, and Cultural Politics, South End Press: Boston, MA, 1999, 22

Hooks, 25.

Wolcott, Remaking Respectability, 10.

Wolcott, Remaking Respectability, 10.

Donna Daniels, Gazing at the New Black Women Athletes,” 35.

Herman Gray, Cultural Moves, 3.


Gabriel, 4.


Davis, “Afro Images,” 274.

Davis, “Afro Images,” 274.

In fact, contemporary race discourse is a combination of the various racist ideologies evidenced all these time periods.


Hill-Collins, Black Feminist Thought, 70.

Hill-Collins, Black Feminist Thought, 70.


Hill-Collins, Black Sexual Politics, 134.

Omi and Winant, Racial Formations, 138.


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