

Safe Space as Resistance for Black Women Student-Athletes

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College athletes have increased participation in activism to combat racial injustice. Historically White institutions have been sites of marginalization and exclusion for Black women college athletes. This article interrogates how activism among Black women college athletes is an opportunity to disrupt oppressive higher education and athletic environments to create sustainable change. First, this article reviews literature that illustrates how Black women college athlete navigate higher education. Second, the article identifies how place, race, gender, and space within higher education exclude and limit Black women college athletes. Third, this article examines the intersection of activism and Black feminist thought within college athletics and posit that the creation of Sister Circles as safe spaces for Black women college athletes. Implications for practice suggest that the work of campus administrators and higher education institutions must move beyond diversity initiatives to promote inclusive practices that center Black women college athlete's college experiences.

Keywords: Black women, college athlete, activism

When Colin Kaepernick decided to kneel, he was a catalyst for a resurgence of activism and protest. This was not a new occurrence within sports. Sprinters Tommie Smith and John Carlos raised their fists at the 1968 Olympic Games to protest against racism and social injustice in the United States. Muhammad Ali publicly criticized the war against Vietnam. More recently, the Minnesota Lynx held a press conference to voice their concerns about police violence in Minnesota. These moments of activism took place before Kaepernick, but were necessary for his athletic platform to be used as a weapon against injustice. He was a fresh voice, another leader in the lingering history of athlete activism once thought to have disappeared in modern sport (Reese, 2017).

The Black community has seen shifts in activism throughout American history (Cooper, Macaulay, & Rodriguez, 2019; Marston, 2017). The Black Lives Matter (BLM) movement influenced the context, voice, and platform of Black Americans who protest against systemic racism and police brutality. Their platform was no longer just petitions or boycotts, rather the use of technology and social networks have expanded the reach of their voice and expedited their impact to international communities (Cooper, Macaulay, & Rodriguez, 2019). The shift in how activism is enacted by younger Black Americans has not been lost on athletes. Athletes such as LeBron James, Michael Sam, the University of Missouri football team, and the Los Angeles Sparks understand the value in their sport platform to not only utilize their voices, but through tweets, clothing, and silence, they have shared their stance against intersecting injustices faced by Black Americans.

Colleges and universities have been sites of activism for decades, including sites of activism for student-athletes (Edwards, 2016). The influence of BLM and Kaepernick has shifted how Black student-athletes use their voice, but not without facing backlash. When Alyssa Parker, a Black woman cheerleader at Buena Vista University (BVU) in Iowa, knelt during the Star-Spangled Banner, BVU faced a potential decrease in donations and the university banned kneeling during the national anthem (Bauer-Wolf, 2019). BVU's response to Parker was not uncanny; higher education institutions have not always been welcoming to athletic activism (Edwards, 2016). Contemporary forms of activism have shifted the ways in which athletes, including Black women student-athletes, use their influence to take a stance against issues that matter to them as individuals. In fact, more Black women are participating in activism and protest within the past few years (Marston, 2017).

While increased participation suggests more attraction of Black women to activism, little attention has historically been given to the activist labor of Black women (Waller, Norwood, Spearman, & Polite, 2016). Within higher education and college sport, Black women have been historically marginalized. In this discussion, I suggest that the role of activism is an opportunity for Black women to create change at historically White institutions (HWIs). For context, I use Cooper, Macaulay, and Rodriguez's (2019) definition of activism: "engagement in intentional actions that disrupt oppressive hegemonic systems by challenging a clearly defined opposition while simultaneously empowering individuals and groups disadvantaged by inequitable arrangements" (pp. 154-155). The history of activism in athletics and higher education suggests that this opportunity may provide an effective response to challenges that Black women face at HWIs. First, I discuss the college experiences of Black women student-athletes in higher education with a particular focus on their experiences at HWIs. Next, I examine four limitations within higher education that influence the college experiences of Black women college athletes:

place, race, gender, and space. Lastly, I discuss the role of activism for Black women college athletes and propose the creation of safe spaces as an act of resistance against their marginalization within higher education.

Higher Education and Black Women College Athletes

Many HWIs have less than 60 years of experience educating women and Black students. Campuses that are exclusive can “condition the operation of power and the constitution of relational identities” (Delaney, 2006, p. 6). Higher education was designed to educate White, Christian men (Brown & Dancy, 2010), but were forced by federal legislation to increase access to other genders and races (Brown, 2001). The historical context is important as the responsibility to decrease marginalization on college campuses is that of the entire institution and not just the athletic department.

Black womanhood is often misunderstood. The history of Black women is dominated by narratives they did not write for themselves (hooks, 1981; Collins, 2000). Many of these narratives harness negative images and stereotypes about Black women, depicting them as: lazy, hypersexual (Sapphire), mother/nurturer (Mammy), unattractive, aggressive, loud, strong and animalistic (Collins, 2000; Harris-Perry, 2011; hooks, 1981). Negative stereotypes about Black women exist within predominantly White spaces, including HWIs. Since the majority of higher education institutions were not initially designed for Black students or women, even more complexity surrounds how these institutions succeed or fail in supporting Black women students. When Black women begin to enter into and participate in predominantly White spaces, they are:

Constructing and reconstructing these oppositional knowledges... These self-definitions of Black womanhood were designed to resist the negative controlling images of Black womanhood advanced by whites as well as the discriminatory social practices that these controlling images supported. Black women’s participation in crafting a constantly changing African American culture [has] fostered distinctively Black and women-centered worldviews (Collins, 2000, p. 10).

In essence, Black women redefine the spaces they enter into, their presence deconstructs and reshapes the images and definitions about them that they did not create. The result of this reshaping is a form of reclamation within these environments for themselves; a representation of empowerment for Black women (Collins, 2000).

The inclusion of athletics further complicates discourse about spaces for Black women. Athletics is a microcosm of society; a place where race and gender have not always been celebrated outside of athletic success. The college athletics environment remains a place where Black women experience discrimination against their race, gender, sexual orientation, class, and athletic status (Smith, 2000; Withycombe, 2011). Varied forms of discrimination against Black women college athletes lead to the construction of **athletic** environments that can reinforce negative stereotypes and treatment of these women as the “Other” (Fanon, 1970). This leads to Black women being celebrated for their athletic prowess, yet not acknowledged for their femininity and beauty similar to their White women counterparts (Ferguson & Satterfield, 2017). Thus, when athletics is not a place that celebrates Black women college athletes and they are marginalized from the larger campus experience due to their race, gender, and athletic status, they are often without a social or academic space where their Blackness, womanhood, and

athletic identity are equally valued (Bruening, Armstrong, & Pastore, 2005). This especially occurs at HWIs where Black women college athletes comprise a small population.

Black women in higher education have made significant gains in their college attendance and graduation rates. In the 2018-2019 academic year, Black women earned 11.4% of bachelor's degrees awarded (U.S. Department of Education, 2022) and 49% graduated within six years, compared to 66% for all women (NCES, 2022). In the 2021-2022 school year, 522,165 college athletes participated in National Collegiate Athletic Association (NCAA) sports (Divisions I, II, and III) (NCAA, 2022a). Of that total, 229,060 were women (44%), 58,783 were Black men (11%), and 24,522 were Black women (5%) (NCAA 2022a; NCAA, 2022b). Correspondingly, Black women account for 19,833 (4%) of all NCAA college athletes not at HBCUs (NCAA, 2022b). Additionally, Black women college athletes at Division I institutions graduate at a higher rate (67%) compared to their Black women non-athlete peers (56%) within six-years (NCAA, 2022c). Black women are attending and graduating college at high rates, however their representation within college athletics is not representative of that growth.

Exclusion and Challenging Myths

Black women excel in higher education, yet athletics has been a place of exclusion. Black women athletes were prevented from participation in the 1932 Olympics because of their race (Gissendanner, 1996), had a lack of access to sport facilities due to Jim Crow laws (Dees, 2008), had decreased access to sport diversity due to socio-economic status and high school sport availability (Smith-Evans, George, Graves, Kaufmann, & Frolich, 2014), and have faced a lack of adequate media coverage of their athletic accomplishments (Carter-Francique & Richardson, 2016). Black women college athletes' exclusion originates from racist ideology that insinuates they are the antithesis of Whiteness or the "Other." Being the "Other" within sport causes Black women college athletes to be considered "invisible and placed on the margins with limited access and opportunities for participation and professional engagement as well as limited and negative media stereotypes" (Carter-Francique & Richardson, 2016, p. 4).

Title IX of the Education Amendments of 1972 (Title IX) barred discrimination based on sex within educational institutions receiving federal funding and increased the capacity for competitive women's sports at the collegiate level (Olson, 1990). Title IX increased access to sports facilities, teams, and funding due to federal oversight for girls and women and, consequently, challenged social myths about women being a weaker sex. Although women's sport participation rates increased after Title IX, Black women's participation rates did not increase as significantly as White women; rather, individual success on the collegiate and national level spurred attention to Black women college athletes (Cain, 2000; Dees, 2008).

There is a perception that Black women are "doing just fine" and do not need as much assistance to be successful due to their increasing success in higher education, which is problematic (Davis, 2016). This perception refers to Black women as the 'new model minority' due to increased higher educational attainment, life expectancy rates, economic power and political participation (Kaba, 2008). Lee (2015) describes the historical model minority stereotype as associated with Asian Americans who were "good citizens and good minorities precisely because they were seen as quiet, uncomplaining, and hard-working people who achieved success without depending on the government" (p. 7). One consequence of this stereotype is a depiction that those who do not fit within the model minority stereotype are underachieving.

Lee (2015) argued that the model minority “maintains the dominance of whites in the racial hierarchy by diverting attention away from racial inequalities and by setting standards for how minorities should behave” (p. 8). The new model minority stereotype, thus, focuses on Black women’s success as a new standard for other minorities, while minimizing the political and socio-economic marginalization they continue to face (Harris-Perry, 2011), including the quality of their higher education experiences. As such, Black women college athlete’s success in higher education is worthy of further investigation for a balanced, equitable understanding regarding promising practices that enhance the quality of their college experiences.

Limitations of HWIs and Black Women College Athletes

It is not just the responsibility of college athletic departments to support Black women college athletes, it is the responsibility of the entire institution. While HWIs often market themselves as diverse, researchers have questioned the efficacy of diversity for White students (Laird, 2005; Maruyama, Moreno, Gudeman, & Morin, 2000; Quaye & Harper, 2014; Rankin & Reason, 2005; Strayhorn, 2008). Higher education is at a crossroads where diversity cannot be the goal, campuses must be inclusive. Inclusion is not just the presence of diversity, but rather inclusive spaces are ones where “members of different groups [get] to interact in ways that challenge pre-existing stereotypes about others” (Tienda, 2013, p. 8). Many HWIs struggle to create policies and promote practices that move beyond diversity. However, interventions that support Black women college athletes require colleges and universities to “establish shared definitions of success that can link representation with inclusion and participation” (Byrd, 2019, p. 159). This section identifies four limitations of HWIs that directly impact how Black women college athletes are supported by inclusive and equitable policies and practices: place, race, gender, and space.

Duncan (1996) wrote about space, place, and race in the context of educational institutions for African American students. In the article, the author discussed how Black high school students balance racism and schooling in K-12 education. Duncan (1996) utilized a lens where “... ‘space,’ as relating to the physical body, and ‘place,’ defining the arrangement of public institutions, to relations of domination and subjugation, or the political construction of ‘race’” (p. 134); the lens illuminates’ tensions with racism and school structures in the public school experience of high achieving Black students. I expand this framework within a higher education context to consider how tensions at HWIs, related to racism and structural issues, influence how Black women college athletes experience college. In addition, I add gender due to the inextricable link of race and gender for Black women through a Black feminist lens (Collins, 2000). Gender considers the strength of one’s identity towards femininity or masculinity; the centrality of how an individual may self-identify in relation to being male or female (Hoffman, 2006). Duncan’s (1996) framework is appropriate in this context because the construction of an inclusive environment considers how physical “space works to condition the operation of power and the constitutions of relational identities” (Delaney, 2002, p. 6). This is significant for institutional practices at HWIs that create challenges for Black women college athletes.

Place

Place, the arrangement of public institutions in relation to power and oppression, has always mattered at colleges and universities (Duncan, 1996; Olivas, 2005). Place is not a

physical, fixed location but rather represents a location of intersecting relationships and social structures that have been developed over time (Massey, 2013). How institutions have been arranged, their evolving administrative and academic relationships and social structures impact how students experience college. In a study about the influence of higher education organizational structures on student learning, Berger (2002) suggested that an institutions' increased attention to external priorities negatively affects student learning and may decrease the quality of support and learning opportunities for students. Place is not synonymous to community (Massey, 2013, p. 153). Rather, individuals and their relationships within a particular environment can influence the arrangement of power and social structures within a social institution, such as higher education.

Place, as a limitation, is evident in knowledge production within higher education. Patton (2016) discussed how higher education disseminated and sustained White superiority through the scientific study of race, which has oppressed people of color. College faculty members' research utilized Native American and Black bodies to argue the intellectual and physical inferiority of these bodies in comparison to Whites during the Eugenics movement (Randall, 1996). Key leaders in the Eugenics Movement, ideology purporting White superiority, were prominent scholars and leaders at Indiana University, Harvard University, and New York University (Patton, 2016). They used the power and credibility of their institutions to disseminate research purporting racial superiority that was "taken as absolute truth" (Patton, 2016, p. 323). Faculty members used institutional reputation and popular racist ideology to position colleges and universities as places that perpetuated knowledge used to oppress marginalized populations.

Athletics administrator and college athlete relationships also illustrate the importance of place. Foster (2003) identified how Black women college athletes' relationships with athletic administrators who "acted as agents for the process of transforming black female athletes, they operated with assumptions that were based in racialized expectations of behavior" (p. 301). The study found that athletic academic advisors used their positions of power to coerce Black women college athletes into dependent relationships with them. Influenced by negative stereotypes of Black women college athletes, academic advisors controlled the athletes through isolation (e.g., up to 20 mandatory study hours each week), used additional agents such as tutors and mentors to police study habits and dispositions, and used a racialized understanding of "Black" behaviors to identify certain experiences of the athletes (Foster, 2003). The findings of the study indicate that those in positions of power can utilize their authority to strong arm Black women college athletes into conforming to behaviors deemed acceptable by those in power, even with seemingly good intentions. These relationships were oppressive and relied on the power of academic advisors; Black women college athletes were stereotyped because of their race and gender. The place frame demonstrates a limitation in higher education through individual relationships and ideologies that taint the quality of social and academic interactions of Black women college athletes at HWIs.

Race and Gender

Equally important to place, the intersection of race and gender matter within higher education. White feminine and beauty standards include lighter skin, straight hair, a thin body, meekness, and non-assertive attitude. In contrast, these standards appear to cancel out Black women's bodies as an adequate equal. Even in sport, where women's bodies should reflect the strength required for competition, Black women college athletes have been publicly ridiculed for

not aligning with White standards. For example, radio show host Don Imus referred to Black women college athletes on the Rutgers Women's Basketball team as "rough," "Jigga-boos" and the "Toronto Raptors" (Gill, 2011). Imus and his colleagues' comments reiterated long-held stereotypes about Black women, laced with inappropriate humor. While there was some immediate backlash, Imus' career did not suffer nor did the reprimands he faced erode the stereotypes within college sport. A negative consequence for Black women college athletes who do not fit in the unrealistic standards is the performance of hyper femininity, an over exaggeration of qualities associated with femininity and majority beauty standards (Ferguson & Satterfield, 2017). Black women college athletes' misalignment with White feminine and beauty standards leads to campus environments that are not inclusive and unwelcoming, causing them to change their behavior to survive (Ferguson & Satterfield, 2017).

Serena Williams is the most public example of the problematic nature that exists with the devaluation of Black womanhood. In a 2017 interview with *Vogue* magazine, Williams shared,

I feel people think I'm mean...But Maria Sharapova, who might not talk to anybody, might be perceived by the public as nicer. Why is that? Because I'm Black and so I look mean? That's the society we live in. That's life. They say African American have to be twice as good, especially women. I'm perfectly OK with having to be twice as good. (Haskell, 2017, para 24).

Williams' description of the difference between herself and Maria Sharapova, a White tennis athlete, demonstrates a perception of the difficulty Black women athletes contend with because of their race and gender. Being perceived as nice was a limiting expectation of Williams, influenced by her misalignment and expected behaviors of women athletes. While being twice as good may appear as a daunting task, Shorter-Gooden (2004) found that when Black women value themselves it helps them to resist negative stereotypes via increased self-perception. This coping strategy is often employed within college athletics as well.

Black women college athletes' race and gender illuminate a limitation of how higher education institutions support them. O'Neal (2018) wrote that Black women college athletes have to move through college sport without being seen while facing the obstacles related to their race, gender and athleticism. She also writes about how Black women college athletes work to avoid being too aggressive, having too much attitude, and too masculine (O'Neal, 2018). The "intersecting oppressions" (Collins, 2000, p. 69) of race and gender obscures how Black women college athletes integrate and are socialized into HWI environments. Yet, these experiences formulate a desire for relationships and locations where their race and gender are centered in a safe space. Carter-Francique (2013) suggests that when Black women college athletes have access to environments that are exclusive to their race and gender, "it aids in the Black female college athlete's understanding of their overlapping oppressions in hopes to promote an inclusionary society" (p. 102). Thus, just as place matters, relationships and social structures within higher education are undoubtedly influenced by race and gender. The limitations of higher education institutions to meet the needs of Black women college athletes is also apparent in their personal experiences.

Space

The concept of space refers to Black women college athletes' being (Massey, 2013), their bodies as "occupying space and being located within space" (Duncan, 2016, p. 137). In essence, the presence of Black bodies signifies the importance of space. Acknowledging that Black bodies are present in educational spaces is significant to encourage Black student achievement (Duncan, 2016). Further, when space is acknowledged for Black students, "the affirmation of Black people of their Black bodies – an idea and practice that contradicts dominant standards of beauty, goodness, and intelligence – is seen as a revolutionary act" (Duncan, 2016, p. 137). Since race and space intersect and condition each other (Delaney, 2002), Black women college athletes' presence at HWIs places them in a vulnerable position.

Black women can be visible and invisible. Yet, the mere presence of Black women college athletes on college campuses is critical and disruptive. As athletes, they are often recruited for their athletic talent and not their academic ability, which emphasizes the importance of their physicality and physical presence (Hawkins, 2005). In college sports, Black women experience sport clustering, as they are highly visible in sports such as basketball and track and field and less visible in sports such as golf and field hockey based on their participation rates (NCAA, 2017a; NCAA, 2017b). Further, Black women college athletes are visible and gain attention when they win and their performance benefits the institution and its reputation, and this can be witnessed through the level of media coverage they are given (Kane, 1996).

The stigmas and stereotypes about Black women plague how they are seen and unseen as college athletes on campus. Stereotypes about Black women college athletes are sustained within athletics, with deep ties to slavery and misogyny (Bruening, 2005). Their invisibility is a form of silencing by institutions and by not adequately acknowledging their presence beyond athletic victories, it can appear that Black women college athletes' presence on campuses is not as valuable as other student populations (Bruening, Armstrong, & Pastore, 2005). In order to combat the invisibility and selective visibility of Black women college athletes, their space must be acknowledged and affirmed; this affirmation is seen as revolutionary as it contradicts how Black women college athletes are acknowledged by mainstream society (Duncan, 1996).

Black women's presence can be disruptive as it may influence their relationships with administrators and faculty members. For example, intrusive academic support by academic advisors can be fueled by bias, negative stereotypes and create an environment that discourages Black women college athletes to make appropriate decisions for themselves (Foster, 2003). Hawkins (1995) argued this type of treatment, the lack of respect for Black bodies, demonstrates the Black athlete body is colonized within college sport. He contends, "Once recruited, their [Black athletes] lives resemble the life of colonized people...Black athletes have little, if any, opportunity to make decisions that govern their lives as students or as athletes" (Hawkins, 1995, p. 32). Black women college athletes' space is not always valued at HWIs, as their bodies may be used for the value it creates for the institution, but their agency is limited on campus.

Place, race, gender, and space frames limitations that exist at HWIs to support Black women college athletes. The relationships that influence institutional organizations, how social norms about race and gender influence social perceptions, and the ways in which colleges and universities acknowledge the presence of Black women college athletes directly influence how they engage with peers, administrators, and faculty members at HWIs. Espoused instructional values of diversity are limiting and do not meet Black women college athletes' needs. Patton and Ward (2016) state that "when problems [for Black women] remain unnamed, they also remain

visible and unaddressed” (p. 331). I posit that the creation of safe spaces for Black women college athletes is an appropriate response to resist their invisibility and unaddressed needs directly by constructing an environment where they are not relegated to problematic representations of their identities and presence on their campuses.

The Role of Activism in Creating Safe Spaces

During the 1968 Olympics, sprinters Tommie Smith and John Carlos stood on the podium with their fists raised and their heads bowed in solidarity against the social and economic injustices that Black Americans faced in the U.S. (Hartman, 1996). The iconic image and unforgettable historical moment were necessary to draw international attention to the problems facing Black Americans. However, Smith and Carlos were not the only participants who took a stance against the injustices against Black Americans. The all-Black 400-meter relay team dedicated their victory to Smith and Carlos (Smithsonian, 2008). In an interview with reporters, gold medalist Wyomia Tyus wore black shorts in protest and publicly dedicated her medals to Smith and Carlos in an interview with reporters, but it was never published (Renee, 2018). The lack of attention given to Black women athletes at the 1968 Olympics correlates to larger issues of exclusion.

Smith and Carlos were members of the Olympic Project for Human Rights (OPHR), an organization whose organizing efforts used the Olympics as a site for protest (Waller, Norwood, Spearman, & Polite, 2016). Black women athletes were not invited to be a part of this protest. This may have been because of a central focus to address racial issues and not consider the intersection of gender for Black women, that fixing race first would address all the problems that Black women faced (Harry Edwards, as cited in Waller et al., 2016).

The exclusion of Black women athletes, their voice and activism, is synonymous to the exclusion of Black women college athletes in higher education. Black women college athletes have the agency to challenge the systems that marginalize and oppress them, especially since higher education’s efforts to provide support to them often center on diversity and not inclusion. However, the Combahee River Collective identified a similar issue for Black women engaged in work to challenge the multiple oppressions that they face.

The major source of difficulty in our political work is that we are not just trying to fight oppression on one front or even two, but instead to address a whole range of oppression...The psychological toll of being a Black woman and the difficulties this presents in reaching political consciousness and doing political work can never be underestimated. There is a very low value placed upon Black women’s psyches in this society, which is both racist and sexist.” (Combahee River Collective, 1977, para 9).

The toll of being a Black woman, described by the Combahee River Collective, is not a deterrent for doing political work to improve their lived experiences. Similarly, Black women college athletes have a similar drive to improve their condition through the creation of spaces that center their race, gender, athletic status, and other identities on their campuses (Carter-Francique, 2013). Singer, Weems, and Garner (2017) discussed the importance of educational activism within athletic reform, where Black college athletes are participants in the resistance and calls for change within college athletics.

Cooper, Macaulay, and Rodriguez’s (2019) definition of activism is significant as it

highlights the importance of “intentional actions that disrupt oppressive hegemonic systems...[that] empower[s] individuals and groups disadvantaged by inequitable arrangements” (p. 154-155). Correspondingly, Cooper (2021) highlights the relationship between activism and resistance as resistance is broader. He notes that resistance is “intentional and/or unintentional actions by individuals, groups, organizations, and/or institutions that challenge oppressive systems and ideological hegemony” (p. 7). This broader view of resistance and examining the role of activism within sport is significant in the context of this discussion. Resistance has been woven into the fabric of the Black woman and Black woman athlete experience throughout American history. Similar to what the Combahee River Collective (1977) noted for Black women in America, within sport Black women athletes have been a symbol of breaking barriers and catalysts for change across racial and gender groups. Moore (2017) made a distinct connection between the success of professional athletes who represented the United States in international competitions as a symbol of democracy. Thus, Black women’s history of resistance and activism is an American endeavor, as the challenging of hegemonic systems, oppression, and inequity is intricately woven into the fabric of historical and contemporary narratives within sport.

Marsha Howard, a University of Wisconsin women’s basketball player, sits during the national anthem of each game because, “Change doesn’t come overnight... So, long as things are still the way they are, then yeah, I’ll continue to stand” (Gibbs, 2019, para 21). When Black women athletes, such as Tyus and Howard, have taken a stance against social injustice, they have been ignored, chastised, publicly shamed, and threatened for their actions (Darnell, 2012; Gibbs, 2019). While activism can be empowering it can also challenge standards of normativity, particularly within sport. Therefore, when athletes become activists, they may face consequences for disrupting the status quo, particularly in sport where some claim the space is apolitical (Darnell, 2012).

Presently, activism is more inclusive (Marston, 2017). More women are participating and leading social change, as evidenced by the Black Lives Matter movement. Athlete activists are “well-informed, deliberate, and reflective... voicing their concerns with other non-sport activists and organizers” (Hartmann, 2019, p. 8), their actions are more strategic and connected to larger social issues outside of their circle of influence (Cooper, Macaulay, & Rodriguez, 2019). The shift in athlete activism illuminates the opportunity for Black women college athletes to use their influence and agency to challenge the isolation, exclusion, differential treatment, and marginalization they face at HWIs. Singer, Weems, and Garner (2017) discussed the importance of educational activism within athletic reform, where Black college athletes are participants in the resistance and calls for change within college athletics. The history of activism for Black women has often seen them, as described by Dr. Amira Rose Davis, “on the periphery of these discussions but never invited to the table, who had to learn how to strategize on their own and mount their own protests” (Cox, 2024, p. 4704). Black women have not been silent.

Activism and Black Women Athletes

In an interview with Courtney Cox (2022), Davis asked a bold question regarding Kaepernick’s activism in professional sport. She asked,

... what if, instead of Smith and Carlos, we connected Colin Kaepernick to Rose Robinson, who refused to stand for the anthem in 1959 at the Pan Am Games? Robinson

was an activist and a pacifist. If you know her name at all, it is because of her antiwar work in the years following her athletic career. But when I was digging through Black newspaper archives researching her, every headline described her as an athlete. That's how I uncovered her athletic career and started looking for her voice. After all, omissions from the archive are often the result of a failure to listen, not of a failure to speak (p. 4704).

Davis connects Rose Robinson, a former professional track and field athlete whose life was committed to being an activist, to current activism efforts in the NFL. She draws attention to a narrative familiar to Black women, omission of Black women's stories and a failure to listen to us. Robinson refused to stand for the national anthem at the 1959 Pan American Games in Chicago, Illinois. Robinson's space, her being and presence, was disruptive in an international competition, but her race and gender, and a lingering history of omission and silencing, has made it easier for her story to be illuminated. Robinson's story is not as popular as Kaepernick's, and like Wyomia Tyus, she has been omitted from narratives about athletic activism. Athletic activism has not always been a safe decision or a celebration of courage for many Black women.

Athletics as a platform, has the power to give Black women visibility to share their voice and their beliefs in a way that makes it difficult for them to be silenced. Asia Todd, a former Liberty University women's basketball player, transferred from the university following a series of social media posts and leadership decisions. In a Twitter post from June 10, 2020, Todd shared,

This decision had nothing to do with basketball or the program... This was simply bigger than basketball. The basketball program, the coaching staff and my teammates at Liberty were amazing. I developed lifelong relationships that I will cherish forever... However, due to the racial insensitivities shown within the leadership and culture, it simply does not align with my moral compass or personal convictions. Therefore, I had to do what I felt was best within my heart, and stand up for what is right.

Todd's decision to transfer from Liberty University could have been done without anyone knowing. However, she chose to post a video to her social media account and wearing a shirt that said Black Lives Matter in sign language. Todd made a visible statement that could not be ignored. As described above, place is a limitation of higher education where the administrative and academic relationships and social structures directly influence how students experience college. Todd's status as an athlete enhanced her voice and provided her an opportunity to challenge the limitations that existed within the university setting. Todd was unable to be omitted and her voice was heard due to her social media platform.

Robinson and Todd represent different narratives of Black women athlete activists. The differences are associated with social norms during their lives, access to social media, and a time period more accepting of athlete activism in public spaces. Nonetheless, Robinson and Todd demonstrate the necessity of elevating the voices of Black women in response to places that are not created for them to thrive and feel safe without racism or racial injustice.

Negotiating Space for Black Women College Athletes

The earlier discussion of place, race, gender, and space is integral to understanding how limitations within higher education pose a challenge to Black women college athletes at HWIs. What a Black woman college athlete experiences in college are influenced by how institutional relationships and social structures are designed to support them (place), how their race and gender are understood by their campus community, and how their physical presence impacts the environments they inhabit (space). There is a need for campuses to shift and create safe spaces for Black women college athletes at HWIs. Collins (2000) argues against structural domains of power that are “social organizations [which] are organized to reproduce Black women’s subordination over time” (p. 277). As a result, numerous college campuses have created exclusive environments that are not inviting and encourage Black female college athletes to operate within structural domains of power.

Massey (2013) asserted that the interconnectedness of place, space, and social identities will cause the prevailing image of an environment to shift over time. While the physical presence of Black women students-athletes has required the creation of institutional initiatives to provide academic and athletic support, more has to be done to shift campus culture to be more inclusive and higher education cultures do not shift expeditiously. The creation of inclusive spaces and policies cannot be time bound and are a method to respond to Black women college athletes’ needs at HWIs.

For Black women college athletes to have a space designed with them in mind is a sustainable solution, a necessary response to counter their current experiences at HWIs. Darnell (2012) writes that athlete activists can be ostracized for their efforts to speak out and critique sport culture and prevailing norms that they exist in. However, historical experiences of exclusion at HWIs require a response that changes the condition of Black women college athletes at their campuses despite criticism and discouragement. Fries-Britt (1998) suggests that supportive environments for Black students increases the likelihood of integrating successfully into HWI campuses. Ultimately, the personal, academic, athletic, and social success of Black women should be a primary concern.

Black Feminist Thought

Black feminist thought is an appropriate framework to understand how safe spaces for Black women college athletes can be an act of resistance. Black feminist thought (Collins, 2000) is a theoretical framework which argues that unique standpoint of Black women is valid and necessary to reject White, masculine viewpoints of the Black woman lived experience; to combat the suppression and silencing of Black women within social, political, and economic spaces; and, that Black women’s voice is empowering and necessary to oppose their oppression. Black feminist thought is an asset-based lens, the framework allows Black women through their knowledge and lived experiences to resist the ways in which they have been excluded within social institutions, including higher education. The three main three key features of Black feminist thought include: (1) Black women’s lived experiences and how they define themselves; (2) intersecting systems of oppression and Black women’s lived experiences; (3) the significance of Black women’s culture (Collins, 2000).

Black women face intersecting oppressions that create a dynamic of race, gender, nationality, social class, and other identities that impact their agency, and this is known as the

matrix of domination (Collins, 2000). For Black women college athletes, race, gender, athletic status, socioeconomic status, sexuality and other social identities may shape how they experience college. Each of these identities are connected to systems of power that may be tied to controlling images, images that may seek to define how they should behave, think, feel, or act. Black women college athletes who experience controlling images regarding their physical appearance, can experience isolation as being a racially gendered minority on their campus and, simultaneously they can experience low self-confidence in their academic abilities due to the “dumb jock” stereotype, which refers to perceived intellectual inferiority. In fact, Black women college athletes can experience both oppressions simultaneously as the only Black woman in a classroom wearing athletic clothing. Black feminist thought argues that deeper analyses of the oppressions that Black women, including college athletes, face will lead to “collective strategies of resistance” (Collins, 2000, p. 229). Hence, one way for Black women to be nurtured despite the opposition they may face from being othered is creating a safe space where they are affirmed.

Carter-Francique (2013) shared the benefits of creating a space for Black women college athletes at a Division I institution. Her study shares how a culturally-relevant program, influenced by Black feminist thought, provided a space for Black women college athletes to receive affirmation, gain knowledge regarding hegemonic ideologies around race, gender, and athletics, and enhanced their self-value within a HWI environment (Carter-Francique, 2013). The findings of this study confirm that the creation of counter spaces for Black women college athletes can be impactful and align with their cultural and personal needs.

Counterspaces

When existing places in higher education are not conducive to affirming and supporting Black women college athletes, counterspaces can fill the gap, as they serve as “transformative sites of resistance” at HWIs (Yosso & Benavides Lopez, 2010, p. 83). These sites are an act of reclaiming space and place for students of color; sites where students of color unsettle dominant social norms on their campus. Yosso and Benavides Lopez (2010) posit culture centers as counter spaces for students of color. They argue that culture centers “provide a counter space to facilitate their [students of color] survival and resistance... [with the] primary responsibility for nurturing a positive, pluralist campus climate in terms of race and gender” (Yosso & Benavides Lopez, 2010, p. 92). Culture centers are an example of institutional sites that foster a positive sense of well-being among students of color within predominantly White spaces.

Counter spaces can be safe spaces. Black feminist thought argues for a move beyond a structural domain for power, that social institutions must create and change policies to be more inclusive to Black women (Collins, 2000). Interestingly, a limited understanding of counter spaces may be a singular institutional program event that recognizes diversity on college campuses. I argue against this limiting viewpoint. Rather, safe spaces are sites that continually nurture student persistence and success (Carter-Francique, 2013; Carter-Francique, Hart, & Steward, 2013; Yosso & Benavides Lopez, 2010); offer opportunities to discuss and investigate identity and lived experiences (Collins, 2000; Croom, Beatty, Acker, & Butler, 2017); and provide strategies to combat feelings of isolation (Croom et al., 2017).

Counter spaces are safe spaces. As such, when these spaces are created for Black women college athletes they serve as sites of resistance, affirmation, and self-value. Campuses that do not have these spaces created, yet have the desire to, can identify relevant frameworks to inform how to construct these spaces. From here, I posit a Sister Circle framework can be used to create

safe spaces for Black women college athletes at HWIs.

Sister Circles as an Activist Response

Sister circles are an appropriate counter space for Black women college athletes at HWIs. It is the responsibility of the institution to challenge the purpose and maintenance of safe spaces on college campuses. Natter and Jones (1997) assert that people “achieve and resist their systems of identification in and through social space” (p. 149). Black women have created spaces for themselves to speak and express themselves freely throughout history (Collins, 2000). It has been in these spaces where they resist patriarchy, sexism, racism, and other forms of oppression to encourage and uplift themselves. Sites of resistance against forms of oppression include constructive spaces where Black women can redefine who they are as the “other” (Collins, 2005). These spaces have offered refuge and safety as tools for survival and empowerment.

Sister circles are groups formed to provide support to Black women based on professional, personal, or social relationships, relationships that may or may not already exist (Johnson, 2015; Neal-Barnett et al., 2011). Sister circles have been safe spaces for Black women to create support to combat forms of oppression and stress in professional, clinical, and educational environments (Croom et al, 2017; Gaston et al., 2007; Hughes & Howard-Hamilton, 2003; Neal-Barnett, et al., 2011a; Neal-Barnett, et al., 2011b; Niskodé-Dosset et al., 2012). Their existence is not new, as the historical presence of sister circles has been well documented with traces to African culture (Neal-Barnett et al., 2011).

Sister circles evolve to meet Black women’s needs of the environment in which they exist. Within professional environments, sister circles can be used to combat anxiety and stress as Black women may not readily seek out support for their mental health (Neal-Barnett et al, 2011). Sister circles are a form of support that challenge the stigma and lack of attention given to Black women’s mental health. Further, they provide opportunities for gender-specific, culturally relevant interventions to occur. They have been used to deliver lifesaving information regarding preventative health and to provide a sustainable solution to increase positive health outcomes for mid-life Black women (Gaston et al., 2007).

Participation

In sister circles, Black women discuss a specific topic or issue that is related to their interest in a way that is relatable and comfortable for them to engage in. Topics that are often difficult to discuss in environments where Black women are the minority or silenced, Black women may not feel encouraged to participate. Sister circles create a space that encourages Black women’s participation thereby increasing their engagement with the focus of the group or discussion. Conversations can be organic, often based on shared experiences among the women about a particular topic.

Black women in higher education environments can also benefit from sister circles as places to “name, unpack, and address aspects of oppression” (Croom et al., 2017 p. 225). Among undergraduate women, sister circles are desired to fight off feelings of isolation, negative responses to stereotypes and controlling images of Black women, and the desire for student engagement (Croom et al., 2017). Similarly, they can happen informally at professional conferences for women of color to share their experiences with gender, race, and ethnicity in higher education (Niskodé-Dosset et al., 2012). Sister circles provide opportunities for

affirmation for Black graduate and professional women in spaces where mentoring from other Black women is not available (Patton & Harper, 2003). Black women college athletes desire mentorship, yet consistent and sustainable mentorship is not always available outside of family connections (Carter-Francique & Hart, 2010). Unpacking discomfort and sharing personal needs within a sister circle is encouraging and can be transformative for Black women college athletes.

In essence, sister circles serve a multitude of purposes for Black women. They provide mental health, social, academic, and professional support in environments where Black women's needs are not being fulfilled. Black women college athletes have unmet needs within higher education (Bruening et al, 2005; Carter & Hart, 2010; Carter-Francique, 2013; Carter-Francique, Hart, & Cheeks, 2015; Ferguson & Satterfield, 2017). As such, the consequences to their unmet needs can be detrimental to their overall college experience.

Sister Circles as a Coping Strategy

Those in power, in a higher education context – campus administrators and faculty members—must be aware of how they participate in discourse related to race, gender, and athletics. College leaders should be cautious to not make efforts to speak for all Black women college athletes. Grillo (1995) warns against embracing essentialist behavior, as the belief of singular experiences based on social identities can be experienced and discussed independently from all identities an individual may have. Black women college athletes simultaneously experience Black womanhood and student-athletic identity as undergraduate students. College leaders fail Black women college athletes when they allow stereotyping, misogyny, racism, and sexism to inform how they engage with and sustain relationships with these students. However, they may not realize the extent of these –isms because “these oppressions cannot be dismantled separately because they mutually reinforce each other” (Grillo, 1995, p. 27). The lack of safe spaces for Black women could perpetuate the oppression that exists without recourse or institutional intervention.

The mental health of Black women college athletes matter. They may experience stress and anxiety related to their race, gender, and athletic status. In fact, researchers have found increased exposure to gendered racism results in high levels of psychological distress (King, 2003; Lewis & Neville, 2015; Szymanski & Lewis, 2016). Female college athletes face challenges to manage their cognitive and physical health due to gender and racial microaggressions and training demands of their sport (Halson, 2014; Kaskan & Ho, 2016; Simiyu, 2012). Black women college athletes' experiences with stereotype threat also pose a challenge to their health. Stereotype threat can create anxiety and fear of confirming negative stereotypes within athletic or academic environments (Major, Spencer, Schmader, Wolfe, & Crocker, 1998; Stone, Lynch, Sjomeling, & Darley, 1999; Steele, 1997). Negative consequences related to stereotype threat can decrease academic and athletic performance.

Experiences with discrimination are associated with psychological distress (Thomas, Witherspoon, & Speight, 2008). Black women college athletes may use coping strategies to manage their response to discrimination. Coping strategies are behaviors used to manage certain demands or expectations (Kauer & Krane, 2006). Negative coping strategies include internalizing negative feelings, self-blame, drug and alcohol use, isolation, resistance to seek help, risky sexual behaviors and detachment (Thomas, Witherspoon, & Speight, 2008; Wei, Alvarez, Ku, Russell, & Bonett, 2010). Many of these coping strategies are due to a lack of emotional support Black women college athletes may encounter in their undergraduate

experiences (Syzmanski & Lewis, 2016). Over time, help-seeking behaviors of college athletes have increased perhaps due to the increased availability and access to mental health professionals (Barnard, 2016).

Sister circles are an appropriate coping strategy for Black women college athletes' marginalization at HWIs. They create a support network for Black women to cope with negative experiences they may encounter in their college environment. Bimper (2015) found within sport, racial or other forms discrimination can be dismissed, although college athletes still acknowledge discrimination is prevalent on college campuses. Sister circles can provide an environment where Black women college athletes do not face the pervasive existence of racism or sexism. Rather, in sister circles all oppressions can be named, deconstructed, and addressed in a healthy manner.

Further, sister circles are uplifting. The marginalization Black women college athletes face in predominantly White spaces can be oppressive and burdensome. When being in predominantly White spaces becomes overwhelming, Black women college athletes desire a space specifically for them to feel valued and encouraged (Carter-Francique, 2013; Ferguson, 2016). Sister circles are spaces to provide social support and healthy coping strategies to enhance overall well-being (Linnabery, Stuhlmacher, & Towler, 2014). Further, participation in social activities and enhanced well-being are positively connected, and this is especially true for Black women who have not identified positive coping strategies (Linnabery, Stuhlmacher, & Towler, 2014). Black feminist thought encourages Black women to redefine their narratives within a society that has strived to define them (Collins, 2000). There is power in self-definition that occurs within sister circles, opportunities for Black women college athletes to deconstruct the power and oppression they face, yet focus on success, survival, and positive coping experiences. Correspondingly, Black women college athletes have the opportunity to reconstruct stories of empowerment that operate as counternarratives to the controlling images and false narratives that exist in historically White institutions.

Conclusion and Implications for Practice

This article aimed to advance an argument that Black women college athletes at predominantly White institutions have an opportunity to create safe spaces, an activist response to counter experiences of being marginalized, excluded, and isolated in higher education. Recent activism of Black athletes demonstrates the capacity of their athletic platforms to promote their stance against racial injustice. I first introduced literature that detailed Black women college athletes' college experiences with a particular focus on their experiences of exclusion and marginalization within HWIs. I used this discourse to situate Black women college athletes within a contested terrain in higher education, a terrain that is limited in providing adequate support. Using a place, race, gender, and space framework, I discussed how limitations within higher education impact the capacity of institutional support that is relevant to the unique experiences of Black women college athletes. Next, I presented and drew connections to how trends in athlete activism align with a Black feminist approach to resist marginalized, overlapping oppression for Black women college athletes. Finally, I suggest that sister circles are an appropriate, activist response for Black women college athletes to disrupt normative standards within HWI environments that have oppressed them through an identity centered, healthy safe space.

Institutional efforts to support Black women college athletes must center their race and gender simultaneously. Byrd (2019) suggests that institutional diversity efforts can "retreat from

race...in which diversity no longer explicitly signals a concern for race and ethnicity” (p. 156). Activism is intentional and disruptive (Cooper, Macaulay, & Rodriguez, 2019); when institutions fail to adequately support all of Black women college athletes’ identities, their response, too, must be intentional and disruptive. Campus administrators who seek to increase their support of Black women college athletes should have an interest and commitment to holistically supporting this population. Sister circles can be an appropriate administrative decision to provide culturally relevant support for Black women college athletes. Carter-Francique (2014) writes:

Thus, practitioners should recognize black female college athletes’ predisposed developmental challenges and the availability of resources...to attend to their developmental needs. So, whether those needs are met within the collegiate athletic environment or through collaborative efforts within the university (i.e., black student organizations, department of multicultural services) or through the community (i.e., black churches, black female community leaders) it is important that black female college athletes feel supported, empowered, and valued. (p. 53).

While sister circles are an opportunity for Black women college athletes to feel valued at HWIs, it is ultimately the responsibility of campus administrators to provide access to and support for these safe spaces. Administrators must embrace the experiences of Black women college athletes into their policy-making decisions and consider how their practices may negatively impact this population (Cooper, Cooper, & Baker, 2016). There are opportunities for community building and partnerships through cross-campus collaboration and community engagement to develop safe spaces for Black women college athletes. Sister circles may be disruptive to traditional support provided to Black women college athletes, but they are developmentally appropriate. Activism, through participation in a sister circle, may be a necessity for Black women college athletes, but will only be sustained through administrative support.

In an ever-changing political climate, activism will continue to be an opportunity and option for Black women college athletes. Their sport platform provides them a public voice and opportunity to challenge prevailing norms that can marginalize and exclude them within higher education. This article presented a frame that sees Black women college athlete activism within a campus setting as an opportunity and necessity. Institutions and administrators have an opportunity to be proactive in how they support Black women college athletes through the creation of safe spaces, such as sister circles.

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