THESIS

RHETORIC AND ACTIVISM IN U.S. WOMEN'S PROFESSIONAL SPORT LEAGUES

Submitted by

Logan Breidenbach

Department of Communication Studies

In partial fulfillment of the requirements

For the Degree of Master of Art

Colorado State University

Fort Collins, Colorado

Spring 2026

Master's Committee:

Advisor: Katie Gibson

Abraham Khan
Sarah Cooper

ABSTRACT

RHETORIC AND ACTIVISM IN U.S. WOMEN'S PROFESSIONAL SPORT LEAGUES

Situated in the contemporary rhetorical moment, this thesis analyzes activist movements in professional women's sports leagues in the United States. Using two case studies—one centered on the political activism of the National Women's Soccer League's Angel City FC, and one centered on the 2025-2026 collective bargaining agreement negotiations between athletes and the Women's National Basketball Association—I demonstrate how athletes and the collectives they are part of enact civic engagement, political judgement, and rhetorical invention. I argue that contemporary activist movements in women's leagues characterize an alternative rhetorical orientation to sport, providing a necessary new imaginary in the face of authoritarian tactics and neoliberal persuasions. This thesis furthers scholarly conversations of sporting rhetoric and athlete activism by locating unique importance in the rhetorical tactics mobilized by athletes in women's leagues. I highlight coalition building, affective reorientation, and a proliferation of possible modes of civic engagement as the generative rhetorical resources of athlete activism in women's leagues, ultimately suggesting that these athletes and athlete collectives are productively positioned both to rearticulate sport and to mobilize sport for projects of progressive politics.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

Introduction

On June 12, 2025, the Players Associations for the Women's National Basketball Association (WNBPA) and the National Women's Soccer League (NWSLPA) released a joint statement. This statement, authored and authorized by both sport unions, was then, and still is now, an unprecedented occurrence; never before have the unions of two professional sport leagues joined together in this way. The statement was not about collective bargaining—the typical domain of a union's public communication. It was not about a change in union leadership. It was not announcing a work stoppage. Rather, this statement addressed the political climate in the United States and beyond:

> We're in the midst of a new season and an incredible moment for women's sports, but it's not lost on us that this country and the world are in turmoil right now. Across the country, families are facing fear, hardship, and uncertainty tied to immigration. We stand with all people seeking safety, dignity, and opportunity, no matter where they come from or where they go. Every person deserves to be treated with dignity and respect. We know that not every situation is simple. But offering compassion should never be up for debate.[1]

Posted on the social medias of both unions, popular media characterized the statement as a response to raids carried out by Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) across the United States, and one outlet called it an action of "solidarity with Los Angeles."[2] When asked by a journalist about the statement, executive director of the NWSLPA Meghann Burke opined "it's important to stand together as workers' unions."[3] While this co-published statement was a first, the show of accord between the two unions comes with precedent. When, in 2022, the NWSL Players Association successfully ratified the league's first ever collective bargaining agreement (CBA), the WNBPA thanked their "colleagues in soccer" for advancing "the labor movement."[4] Signaled in this co-released statement and the rhetoric that precedes it is a certain rhetorical orientation to sport. This rhetorical orientation ushers in a vision of coalition, in which the

athletes of each of these women's leagues are not siloed to their respective sport but joined together in their labor and political activism.

Consider now an alternative occurrence in the sporting world: about six months removed from the WNBPA/NWSLPA joint statement, the commissioners of arguably the five most established men's professional sports leagues in the United States set a meeting with President Donald Trump to discuss plans to memorialize the country's 250th anniversary. The meeting was set for late January 2026 and the invitees included the National Football League's (NFL) Roger Goodell, the National Basketball Association's (NBA) Adam Silver, the National Hockey League's (NHL) Gary Bettman, Major League Baseball's (MLB) Rob Manfred, and Major League Soccer's (MLS) Don Garber.[5] Instead of players from each league, the visit to the White House was to include a small and select group of men whom are highly representative of the corporate interests of the leagues they are responsible for, and instead of standing with those "facing fear, hardship, and uncertainty,"[6] the meeting's agenda was to present the Trump administration's plans to "use sports to help mark America's 250th birthday."[7] Though delayed, even the suggestion of this meeting is iterative of sport's long history of being mobilized in the name of nationalism, and the connection between the two certainly brings with it masculinist understandings of what sport is and who is awarded legitimacy in sporting spaces.[8] The consensual gathering of the commissioners of five men's leagues and the sitting President to discuss how each sport might be manipulated to publicly honor the 250th anniversary of the U.S. suggests that this unholy union between sport, nation, and masculinity is still very much alive. Signaled here, then, is another rhetorical orientation to sport—a hegemonic one that articulates sport to particular manifestations of authority, nation, and gender, and maintains these articulations through a variety of sporting practices and structures.

The similarities between these two vignettes are important. Both demonstrate the often obscured yet ever present reality that sports are highly political. We like to think of our athletes as the enacting the purest iterations of American values: hard work, teamwork, healthy (albeit a little violent) competition, and playing for the love of the game. Despite examples to the contrary, sport remains mystified for many as a bastion of simpler and unifying times, undefiled by the corruption and complications of the political landscape. This popular mythos, to which many are attached, often leaves little room to consider that professional athletes and the gigantic infrastructure of corporate sport within which they play have stakes far beyond their respective courts or arenas. Renowned activist and sport sociologist Harry Edwards captured this reality best, arguing that sport is indeed "part and parcel of that wasteland" of social and political life.[9] The overtly political import of sport, demonstrated by the two occurrences above, is one that this thesis assumes, takes seriously, and is interested in probing. Yet while both the joint statement and the commissioners' meeting signal a politics of and a rhetorical orientation toward sport, the specific qualities gestured to by each instance are nonetheless deeply different.

Set against the backdrop of the current political and sporting landscape, and contrasted to the commissioners' meeting, this first-of-its-kind joint statement from the WNBPA and the NWSLPA is a synecdoche, a microcosm representing the dynamics that this thesis is dedicated to investigating. First, the statement recognizes that women's sport is finding itself in an unprecedented and "incredible moment"; popularity and profitability have skyrocketed, ushering in a new rhetorical situation for women athletes, teams, and leagues to navigate. This "new season" also invites the attention of scholars, as traditional articulations of women's sport shapeshift and are rearticulated. Secondly, while it was generated by athletes, the statement is not about sports. Moving beyond an insulated, self-contained viewpoint, the WNBPA and the

NWSLPA explicitly address the precarity visited upon huge swaths of the population during the second term of the Trump administration. In this way, rhetorical acts like the co-released June 12th statement suggest a rhetorical orientation that challenges the hegemonic logics that have long organized sport. This alternative orientation to sport is not unique to the women's game—there is a well-documented and much-studied tradition of individual athletes, Players Associations, and sometimes entire clubs who have used sport and its rhetorical resources to agitate for social change in various forms. Understudied, however, are the unique imports of athletes and collectives of athletes that agitate from their positionality within women's leagues in the contemporary rhetorical moment.[10]

Given the clear exigencies around women's professional sport, my thesis works toward answering the following critical questions: First, how are athletes and the collectives they make up (Players Associations, unions, and leagues) navigating the contemporary rhetorical situation to enact civic participation, political judgement, and rhetorical invention? Secondly, how might one characterize the ethos of athlete activists/activism in women's leagues? Ultimately, I argue that contemporary activist movements in women's leagues characterize an alternative rhetorical orientation to sport, providing a necessary new imaginary in the face of authoritarian tactics and neoliberal persuasions.

This project is relevant and significant for the field of Communication Studies for two reasons. First, because it examines the rhetorical invention of, broadly, non-male athletes. This thesis takes up understudied rhetorics of those who are often on the margins of sport culture and society: women athletes, queer athletes, and athletes of color who have yet to receive substantial scholarly attention. The study of these rhetorics is important for conceptualizing athlete activism more broadly. Second, this thesis turns critical attention toward the complex articulation of

gender, race, nation, and democratic participation within the arenas of the WNBA and the NWSL, giving us a greater understanding of how these athletes and collectives of athletes offer models of collectivity, rhetorical creativity, and citizenship. These models demonstrate how the rhetoric generated out of women's professional sports leagues in the United States may at some times, and in some fashion, characterize a counterhegemonic orientation to sport.

I use the following pages to contextualize this thesis, both culturally and academically. I begin by enumerating the contemporary exigencies surrounding women's professional sport in the United States. Though not all of the sociocultural and political context surrounding women's sport is new, the shifting cultural fanfare around leagues like the WNBA and the NWSL place athletes in a rather new rhetorical situation under which their activism is conditioned. I then move into a review of relevant literature regarding athlete activism. I close this introduction with an overview of the case studies that I explore in later chapters.

The rhetorical situation and the "rise" of women's sport

Women's sport is a "contested ideological terrain."[11] This term was used by sport scholar Michael Messner in 1988, about 15 years after Title IX was passed, to describe the female athlete's presence in organized sport. Suspicious of claims of "the imminent demise of inequalities between sexes," Messner argued that women's entry into sport, while representing a genuine attempt for self-determination, signaled a "challenge to the ideological basis for male domination" and thus was not to occur uninhibited.[12] Situating women's influx into sport within relevant historical, cultural, and political contexts, and rooted in fairly binary understandings of sex and gender, Messner located the contestation of "power relations between sexes" in the body of the individual female athlete.[13] Ultimately, Messner concluded that any counter-hegemonic potential represented by the female athlete's presence was to be subverted by the hegemonic

structures of sport to reaffirm normative gender politics and secure patriarchal organization in both sport and in society.[14] While decidedly outdated, Messner's initial characterization of the female athlete as "contested ideological terrain" has staying power, and can be expanded as a useful term to describe the current, albeit changed, landscape of women's sport today.

Historically under duress, the popularity and stability of women's sports leagues are at an all-time high. Record-breaking viewership spans the field of women's sports, including professional leagues and their collegiate counterparts. For example, the National Women's Soccer League (NWSL) has set and subsequently shattered attendance numbers in the past two years, with one of the league's most recent expansion team, Bay FC, packing over 40,000 fans into the MLB's Oriole stadium.[15] Or we can consider the Women's National Basketball Association (WNBA), whose single-season attendance passed 2.5 million with just 13 teams, breaking the 2002 record that was established in a then-16 team league.[16] Unprecedented popularity has even visited less traditionally mainstream sports, such as at the 2025 Women's Rugby World Cup when a record-breaking 42,723 fans showed up to watch the United States and England face off.[17] While media coverage often chalks the recent viewership frenzy up to the popularity of a few superstars (Sophia Smith, Caitlin Clark, and Ilona Maher, in each respective example), the expansion of existing leagues and the proliferation of new ones for athletes to compete in tell a story that speaks to a broader surge of cultural momentum.[18] Indeed, the popular tee-shirt that reads "Everyone Watches Women's Sports," was once considered a "groundbreaking anthem;" now, it is undeniable.[19]

In addition to cultural popularity, the discourse of women's sport as a rich site for profit circulates with fervor. I'm thinking here of people like tech millionaire Alexis Ohanian, who is now a prolific investor in women's professional sport. Ohanian describes women's sport as a

"tremendous opportunity for innovation and progress," citing professional leagues in particular as an untapped market for untold profit.[20] This discourse is also well-captured in the *Forbes* cover on Michelle Kang, billionaire and owner of three women's soccer clubs (one of them being the Washington Spirit of the NWSL). The headline of this magazine cover is telling of Kang's perception of women's sports: "This is not charity; this is not some corporate DEI project. I'm on a mission to prove that this is good business–not just a business, but a good business." One can almost hear the tone of derision that coats the phrase "corporate DEI project"–a phrase that cannot be understood outside of contemporary attacks on anything even closely resembling diversity, equity, or inclusion. This sentiment from Kang clearly does some rhetorical heavy lifting, positioning women's sports firmly within capitalist logics ("good business") while denying any association with projects of inclusion. This dual characterization by Kang—women's sport both as profitable and separate from DEI projects—demonstrates how the current environment of women's sport, unlike its past iterations, is now valuable within the neoliberal logics of ruthless entrepreneurship and profit potential.

Women's sports also serve as the setting for a variety of political firefights, namely those that concern anxieties around gender. Most notably, the scapegoating of trans athletes—specifically (and almost exclusively) trans women athletes—finds its way into much of the vitriolic discourse of the Trump administration, though these attacks are often guised with appeals to fair play and the paternalistic language of "protecting" female athletes.[21] We can see how women's sports serves as a conduit for these politicized battles in the case of Lia Thomas, a trans athlete, whose swimming records were revoked by the University of Pennsylvania after threats of revoking federal funding were made.[22] As demonstrated by Messner's arguments in 1988, the anxiety around particular bodies entering the historically masculine realm of sport is

not new. However, this dynamic has found a new form and a new energy under Trump-era American politics. Travers highlights this promotion of gender injustice as a key characteristic of what they call the sport nexus; they characterize this nexus as "an androcentric sex-segregated commercially powerful set of institutions that is highly visible and at the same time almost completely taken for granted to the extent that its anti-democratic impetus goes virtually unnoticed."[23]

More than just individuated instances of discrimination, scholars mark this renewed connection between anti-trans rhetoric and women's sport as undergirded by white supremacy and neo-fascism.[24] In concurrence with the official acts from the presidential administration, anti-trans legislation has cropped up like wildfire around the nation, keeping pace with the growing interest in women's sports leagues.[25] The "antigender ideology" that has suffused contemporary conversations about women's sport is one iteration of what Judith Butler describes as "fascist trends, the kind that support increasingly authoritarian governments."[26] Butler's articulation reminds us that regimes are constructed in various venues, with women's sport playing a critical role in the contemporary administration's rhetorical approach. Thus, we are returned to the characterization of women's sport as a "contested ideological terrain," located not just in the individual bodies of athletes (though contemporary anti-trans rhetoric tells us this is true, too), but in women's leagues as a whole.[27]

These contemporary exigencies–popularity, profit, and political investment–while not each completely new themselves, create a new rhetorical situation in which athletes in women's leagues and the collectives that they form (such as Players Associations) operate. Convinced that sport is a prescient and pressing site of study for rhetorical critics, this thesis extends sustained attention to contemporary activist movements in U.S. American women's professional sport, as

contextualized within the current rhetorical situation. Though plenty of interesting and important instances occur in other levels (such as collegiate) or areas (such as international) of sport, I limit my focus in this thesis to women's professional sport in order to more deeply investigate the rhetorical navigation of athletes and athlete collectives in the contemporary moment.[28] Toward these ends, I now turn toward the relevant literature to ground my thesis in the study of athlete activism and in theories of the athlete as citizen and activist.

Athlete activism

One can ground much of the literature on athlete activism, particularly racial activism, within the work of Dr. Harry Edwards: an athlete, activist, and sociologist who helped to organize the protests of Black athletes at the 1968 Olympics in Mexico City. Though these protests did not accomplish many of their goals, they did result in the iconic picture of Tommy Smith and John Carlos raising their fists on the Olympic podium—a picture that has served as the paragon of athlete activism for the last half-century.[29] Shortly after his organizing work with Black athletes, Edwards wrote *The Revolt of the Black Athlete*, which chronicled the organization of the Olympic Project for Human Rights (OPHR), the attempted boycotts of the 1968 Olympics, and the oppression of the Black (male) athlete in the United States in the middle of the twentieth century.[30] Corrective work has since been offered here by scholars such as Brown et al., who recenter American sprinter Wyomia Tyus as present and involved in those storied 1968 Olympic protests. The fact that Tyus, a Black woman, and her activism went long unnoticed captures an evident theme in much of the historic scholarship on sport and activism, which is that narratives of women, queer, and nonbinary folks are often hard to find. Nevertheless, Dr. Harry Edwards's scholarship was and is foundational to many scholars of sport and athlete activism; one need

only to look at readers such as *The Impact of Dr. Harry Edwards* to understand the contributions he made, both in practice and in scholarship, to the field of athlete activism.[31]

Rooted in the critical legacy of Edwards's scholarship, contemporary scholars have continued to advocate for sport and sport activism as an important and relevant site of study. Douglass Hartmann, for example, advocates for a critical, dramaturgical approach to studying sport, which emphasizes "sport's primary role and significance as a platform, a meaning-maker, a cultural theater wherein audiences and observers…encounter social issues, identities, and problems." [32] Honest about the uneasy relationship between athlete protest and actual change, Hartmann maintains that the cultural and symbolic power of sport is consequential, especially in the face of recent trends of right-wing populist engagements with sport.[33] In a related essay on the performance and reception of race-based athlete activism, Hartmann and colleagues highlight "sport's distinctive ability to dramatize and display, for large public audiences, racial activism and resistance."[34] It is through sport and athlete activism, these authors argue, that the pressing and contentious issues of society—racial violence, gender inequality, and the negotiation of labor rights—play out for a broad audience. Compounding Hartmann's perspective, Cooky and Antunovic note that "the world of sport has served as a symbolic site for social justice, ushering change in the wider society and inspiring movements that often do not directly or solely tie to sport."[35] Athlete activism or activism within sport, then, holds weight and importance beyond the pitch, court, or arena.

Contemporary work on athlete activism demonstrates attention to the cultural politics and symbolic power of sport. A 2022 edited volume on contemporary perspectives of athlete activism takes up these dimensions in a variety of case studies. Chapters include international perspectives, such as resistance by athletes in the Olympic Games or gender equality activism in

women's Spanish football;[36] amateur or collegiate perspectives, such as how high school athletes perceive athlete activism, or how athletes at universities understand their role regarding using their athletic platform;[37] studies on disabled athlete activism, such as how disabled athletes might act as spokespeople for disability activism outside of sporting arena;[38] and intersectional or race-based athlete activism, such as an analysis of the intersectional resistance of Serena Williams's fashion choices, or Raheem Sterling's use of media and press to resist racist discourse.[39] The expansive nature of these case studies captures the proliferating venues in which athlete activism has been and is being studied, as sport maintains its important position in the public imaginary.

One specific case study that has received a generous amount of scholarly attention is ex-NFL quarterback Colin Kaepernick and his kneeling for the national anthem in protest of anti-Black violence. Though Kaepernick was quickly exiled from the league due to his acts of protest, he quickly signed on to a highly lucrative deal with Nike, starring in advertisement campaigns and commodifying his overtly political choice to not stand for the anthem in protest of racialized violence. Kaepernick's 2016 protests inspired a wave of NFL player protests for the next two seasons, ultimately resulting in an NFL-wide branding change.[40] Notably, Kaepernick's protests and the events that followed signaled for scholars a new articulation of athlete activism with commercial value. Courtney Daum points out the nuance of this watershed moment in contemporary athlete activism, arguing that "while NFL player protests demonstrate that individuals are still able to utilize radical democratic tactics… their viability is imperiled as liberal democracy is increasingly supplanted by the economization of politics."[41] Using the broader NFL player protests as a case study, Daum explicates the ways in which the contemporary context of neoliberalism conditions athlete activism and its successes. Specifically, she describes how support for and solidarity with the athletes' protests against anti-Black

violence "was transformed into consumerism as activism and measured in Nike sales and individuals' decisions whether or not to purchase or wear Nike attire."[42]

Reckoning with how athlete activism interacts with, is enabled, or is constrained by neoliberal dynamics is one growing subfield of literature on athlete activism. Jay Coakley's expansive reader entitled *Sport in Society: Issues and Controversies* covers this topic in a chapter on the characteristics and outcomes of commercial sport.[43] Further, Andrews and Silk write about the affective-ideological articulation of sport and neoliberalism. Corporate sport, they argue, is the direct result of this affective-ideological articulation. Consequently, participants of corporate sport, including spectators, are oriented toward neoliberal sensibilities through the "seemingly benign experience of sport consumption."[44] This means those participants are oriented positively toward "the nation, the free market, and the expression of individualism," while being negatively oriented toward "the state, public institutions, and expressions of nonmajority collectivism."[45] We can see how athlete activist movements themselves are often at the mercy of these very orientations, taking the aforementioned protest-turned-advertisement-campaign of Kaepernick as an example. While perhaps beginning as an expression of radical democratic action, kneeling for the anthem was eventually subsumed and reconfigured by corporate interests.[46]

Andrews and Silk do offer a description of how athlete activism fits amongst this affective-ideological articulation, though not an optimistic one. They conclude that "activist movements periodically agitate against both neoliberalism, in general, and its corporate sport offspring, in particular, yet both abstract machines plough on largely unaffected."[47] This thesis takes a particular concern with this quote from Andrews and Silk. While I will nowhere argue that activist movements in women's leagues have escaped the affective-ideological articulation of neoliberalism within corporate sport, I will proffer some examples of how athletes and their

collectives are negotiating the current rhetorical situation in nuanced ways. Further, the case studies in this thesis will pay attention to the contrary affective orientations displayed in contemporary activist movements in women's leagues, specifically regarding the nation, individualism, and nonmajority collectivism.

Another growing field of literature to which this thesis contributes is the specific examination of how gender plays a role in athlete activism. Cheryl Cooky notes how gender inequality and the activism it necessitates by athletes is often overlooked within broader histories of feminist activism in the United States.[48] Cooky's book chapter proceeds with a history of activism connected to the body, denoting how "sport and physical activity played an important symbolic role" in the U.S. women's suffragist movement.[49] Drawing on the work of sport scholar and historian Jamie Shultz,[50] Cooky notes how women engaged their physicality to draw attention to the suffragist movement and upset gendered expectations in the first half of the twentieth century. The sexist stereotypes and assumptions that dominated this time period barred many women from participating in organized sport; thus, the performance of physical activities was a radical act of redefinition of what a woman's body could do.

Critically, Cooky draws attention to how this type of sporting activism was reserved for white, wealthy women, as "working-class women, immigrant women, and women of color…experienced less resistance and fewer gendered barriers in their opportunity to participate in competitive organized sport."[51] Bagley and Liao confirm these historical asymmetries of belonging in contemporary times. Writing about uniform politics and the body of the "female" athlete, these authors draw attention to how the intersections of race and gender are captured in sporting uniform codes. Constrained by the Western liberal construction of women's sporting space as liberating, non-normative bodies and "marginalized femininities are marked as

primitive, oppressive, and potentially harmful."[52] Bagley and Liao offer the banning of the hijab in recent uniform codes as one example how these exclusionary logics exile particular femininities from American sport. Though shapeshifting through history, these two sources demonstrate how the complex intersections of oppression—in which race, gender, and class all play(ed) a part—bar certain bodies from being granted access to ideal femininity (i.e. white femininity) and to a fully recognized place in organized sport.

Contemporary studies on the activism of athletes in women's leagues has reckoned with this history of inclusion/exclusion. For example, Brown and colleagues draw attention to the erasure of Black women's activism in the WNBA, despite its constant presence since the conception of the league. This essay documents historical and current examples of Black feminist athlete activism that have been obfuscated by dominant narratives and histories; yet these authors argue that the strong presence of Black feminist activism by the Black women and non-binary athletes of women's leagues have undergirded many of the more recognized instances of Black athlete activism, such as the activism of Wyomia Tyus in solidarity with John Carlos and Tommie Smith during the aforementioned 1968 Olympics.[53] "Such athletes," these authors argue, "have often showcased strategies for change that have been adopted by their male counterparts (who are more often than not credited at their expense)."[54] Thus, Black feminist activism is conceptualized in this piece as an internal wave: invisible from the surface, but powerful in its effects nonetheless. Further, Cooky and Antunovic note that in the contemporary era of athlete activism, queer/women of color athletes have been central to social justice movements, yet their "contributions are rendered invisible in narratives that instead center activism by sportsmen or in men's professional leagues."[55]

When attention is turned to the activism of women in sport, extant literature has noted even further disparities in what types of activism are covered by popular media. Cooky and Antunovic demonstrate this through a comparison of the reception of the WNBA's series of Black Lives Matter protests and the U.S. Women's National soccer team's (UWSNT) movement against unequal pay. The authors argue that the UWSNT, represented by mostly white players, mobilized through a popular feminism that was based on merit claims, making their appeals less threatening to the dominant structures of patriarchy and capitalism. The WNBA's protests were much more radical, insofar as they appealed to the explicit call to halt anti-Black violence and called out systemic and institutional racism. Thus, "the hypervisibility of the UWSNT equal pay activism relative to the WNBA's BLM activism…create[d] an asymmetry of visibility of feminisms."[56] Ultimately, while media coverage and visibility cannot be directly equated to the efficacy or value of certain activist movements, scholars draw attention to this important metric to discuss how the narrative of activism propelled by queer/woman of color athletes, both historically and contemporarily, is kept out of the conversation around athlete activism, further marginalizing these bodies and the issues they take up. Media and scholarly visibility, while not a solution to marginalization, is a necessary corrective.

Uninterested in proffering athlete activism in women's leagues as untouched by the milieu of oppressive and discriminatory dynamics, my interest in this thesis is to navigate both the promises and pitfalls of contemporary activist movements in women's leagues. I take this cue from Bagley and Liao, who argue that "it remains vital to bracket our discussion of sport and 'politics' when it remains safely within the confines of status quo interests."[57] I model such bracketing from these authors who, in their piece on WNBA uniform politics, want to "consider the potentials and limitations of commodifying feminist politics."[58] In a similar way, I want to

consider the potentials and limitations—not just either or—of activism as it exists in women's sport today. Further, I follow the call of Brown and colleagues who argue that "Black women and nonbinary athletes' efforts must be placed at the forefront of athlete activism literature."[59] Noting the potential pitfalls of intersectionality in reifying cemented, albeit more complex, identities, I am nonetheless committed to highlighting the rhetorical invention and activist efforts of the athletes of color and gender-expansive athletes who compete in women's leagues.

Shifting focus, this project also pulls on literature that conceptualizes the athlete as citizen and the athlete as activist. Two pieces in particular serve as core anchoring points for the direction of this thesis and its case studies. The first is a piece by Michael Butterworth entitled *The Athlete as Citizen: Judgement and Rhetorical Invention in Sport*. In this essay, Butterworth argues that contrary to popular media and societal opinion that athletes' have no right to engage in the public sphere (encapsulated in the now-famous "shut up and dribble" comment),[60] sport is actually a productive site for thinking about politics, and that the athlete is indeed engaged as a citizen.[61] Butterworth is working out of a rhetorical understanding of citizenship rooted in Robert Asen's discourse theory of citizenship. Though often associated with the nation and the awarding of individual rights, citizenship in Asen's view is more premised on engagement in democratic practices. A discourse theory of citizenship emphasizes "the *practice* of democratic citizenship over the *institutional* rights that attempt to categorize citizenship."[62] Butterworth further pulls on Nola Heidlebaugh's conception of active and artistic judgement, which acts as "a call to view citizenship as a creative process that is responsive to public concerns as they emerge and develop."[63] Taking these two definitions in concert, the essay is interested in how athletes demonstrate citizenship.

Butterworth then turns to three examples to think about how we might conceptualize the athlete as citizen. First, he covers tennis player Andy Roddick's boycott of the 2009 Dubai Tennis Championships as an example of active judgement, deployed at the opportune time; secondly, he takes up NFL player Scott Fujita's open support for and advocacy around same sex marriage and adoption as a process of engagement; finally, he addresses the Phoenix Suns' (both players and coach Steve Nash) response to Arizona's regressive immigration bill, SB 1070, as a demonstration of constitutive and artistic political judgement.[64] Ultimately, when working off of this conceptualization of citizenship—as an engaged process of active, artistic judgement—Butterworth argues, "the sporting context is a rich site for such embodiment."[65]

Compounding Butterworth's case for viewing the athlete as citizen, I also draw on Abraham I. Khan's book chapter entitled *The Ethos of the Activist Athlete*. Focused more specifically on the contemporary context in which the Black athlete finds themself, Khan attempts to give form to the specificities of the athlete activist through conceptualizing ethos as a rhetorical resource. If "ethos marks a communal orientation to public affairs," Khan describes this communal orientation of the Black athlete activist in particular as constituted by four dimensions: double-consciousness, risk, solidarity, and poetry.[66] Buttressed by specific examples, both contemporary (the 2015 Missouri football team strike and protest) and historic (MLB player Curt Flood and his explicit use of the sport-as-plantation metaphor), Khan explicates this four-pronged ethos of the Black athlete activist as ultimately "a mechanism for discovering, harnessing, and expressing the power to take the whole thing down"—the "whole thing" meaning organized sport as well as the extractive systems of labor that structure society overall.[67]

Khan provides two more conclusions regarding the ethos of the activist athlete that are important to this project. First, he describes the ethos of the activist athlete as a "gathering

place," noting both the security and strength that is to be found in solidarity.[68] As mentioned earlier, neoliberalism functions as an undeniable context of contemporary (commercial) sport and the activism that is in sport's orbit.[69] Thus, if the affective-ideological articulation of sport and neoliberalism works to positively align us to expressed individualism, then the exemplars of solidarity that athlete activist movements give us are important in their resistance to hyper-individualism. Secondly, Khan proffers "ethos" and its four elements as rhetorical and conceptual resources for "discovering what binds the past to the present, and for tracing the legacies of resistance that continue to place Black athletes at the center of struggles for social justice."[70] For scholars, intellectuals, and activists who are interested in studying such social movements, ethos directs attention to the inherent historicity of Black struggle and guides contemporary analyses of such struggle witnessed today. For this thesis in particular, recognizing the ways that current activist movements are linked, both to the past and to each other, is an important task.

The work of Butterworth and Khan, in their respective conceptualizations of athlete as citizen and athlete as activist, act as jumping off points for this thesis. In this thesis I offer a specific examination of the gendered dynamics at play in each of these theoretical constructs. Speaking to Butterworth's construction of the citizen athlete, I will examine how athletes in women's leagues, specifically women, queer, and athletes of color engage in citizenship as a process, made up of active and artistic judgement and opportune rhetorical invention. As premised in the introduction, these athletes have decidedly different rhetorical constraints, and a new rhetorical situation in which they are engaging in activist movements. We can dare to imagine that these circumstances might lead to a new and different notion of the citizen as well. Further, I will take up Khan's offering of ethos as a resource for conceptualizing activist

movements. Specifically, how might athletes in women's leagues embody the four prongs of ethos as theorized by Khan? And what (if any) are the unique qualities of contemporary activist movements generated by the athletes that are part of women's leagues? This thesis takes up these questions to proffer a specific examination of the athlete of women's leagues and the collectivities of women's leagues, such as Players Associations or specific club organizations, as enacting engaged citizenship as well as the ethos of the activist athlete. Thus, this project will add to the current body of literature on athlete activism as it exists contextually: placed within a lineage of struggle and resistance, constrained and enabled by neoliberal articulations of feeling, awash with the complex politics of gender and race, and perhaps reimagining democratic engagement in a time when democracy is under fire.

Chapter overview

In the second chapter of this thesis, I turn to Angel City Football Club (ACFC), the Los Angeles-based NWSL team. Amidst a climate of proliferating rhetorics of containment and ever-materializing manifestations of these rhetorics through increasing raids and arrests, Angel City FC responded in their June 14th, 2025, matchup against the North Carolian Courage. During the pre-game, players, coaches and staff appeared in warm-up shirts that read "Immigrant City FC;" the backs of the shirts were emblazoned with the phrase "Los Angeles is For Everyone/Los Angeles Es Para Todos." Informed by literature on citizenship, fandom, and athlete activism, this chapter makes the case for both the momentary and sustained rhetorical impact of Angel City's "Immigrant City FC" (ICFC) campaign. Through a close textual analysis of a video posted by the soccer club that introduces and summarizes the ICFC campaign, I argue that Angel City's "Immigrant City FC" campaign mobilizes the distinct rhetorical resources of sport to re-imagine belonging outside of the constraints of national boundaries and identities. My analysis of the

campaign demonstrates how some manifestations of marginalized sporting practices, such as some iterations of women's sport and women's sport fandoms, have the potential to be taken up in projects of progressive politics. Further, I highlight the anti-fascist rhetoric generated by Angel City as a demonstrative example of the potential role of women's sport in resisting authoritarianism in the United States.

In the third chapter, I examine the 2025-2026 collective bargaining agreement negotiations between the WNBPA and league leadership. I frame these negotiations as a critical example of labor activism in contemporary women's sport. My analysis illustrates the negotiations through three chronologically situated rhetorical acts—first, the 2025 WNBA All-Star Game; second, a statement written and read by Napheesa Collier in her 2025 season exit interview; and thirdly, the WNBPA website that houses the past CBA. Pulling from public sphere theory, this chapter acknowledges WNBA athletes' leveraging of critical publicity. More specifically, using Robert Asen's conceptualization of the public as a network of relationships, I underscore the fundamentally relational quality of WNBA athletes' labor activism. Ultimately, I argue that WNBA athletes use multimodal argumentative tactics to construct a critical public that can be leveraged against league leadership. This critical public is conjured through appeals to relationship—both between the players and the league, and between players and fans—and it is these relationships that transmute spectators into invested participants of the WNBPA's labor activism. This relational activism by the athletes of the WNBA is important not only in the context of the contemporary negotiations, but also in the broader search for tactics of resistance in the face of a hegemony of neoliberalism. Further, I illuminate in this chapter an alternative rhetorical logic in fights for more just compensation; where "equal pay for equal play" justifications have been successful in other cases of labor activism in women's sports, the

rhetorics forwarded by WNBA athletes in the 2025-2026 CBA negotiations foreground relationship instead of merit, suggesting a wage system based not on performance but on care.

In the final and fourth chapter of this thesis, I provide some conclusions regarding the two case studies and the implications of the project as a whole. Specifically, I discuss four key takeaways that speak back to relevant scholarly conversations, such as Butterworth's athlete as citizen and Khan's ethos of the activist athlete. First, I think through the potential for coalition building demonstrated by athlete collectives in women's sport. I then turn to the mobilization of the affective as a key thread running through both case studies and offer it as a characteristic appeal of athlete activist movements in women's leagues. Thirdly, I discuss how considerations of women's leagues expand and proliferate the possible enactments of sporting citizenship and civic engagement. I conclude by discussing the position of athletes in women's leagues as a generative standpoint for redefining what sport is and how it can function in our contemporary times.

---

[1] WNBPA and NWSLPA, @thewnbpa and @nwsl_players, "A Joint Statement From the WNBPA and the NWSLPA," June 12, 2025, Instagram, https://www.instagram.com/p/DKzeWQ0xjrK/?utm_source=ig_embed&ig_rid=056c3a81-b8f6-4adb-9ec2-c6c26afee917.

[2] Tamerra Griffin, "NWSL, WNBA Unions Release Joint Statement In Response to Immigration Raids Across U.S.," *The Athletic,* June 12, 2025, https://www.nytimes.com/athletic/6421588/2025/06/12/nwsl-wnba-unions-joint-statement-immigration-raids/; "NWSL, WNBA Player Unions Address ICE Raids, Voice Solidarity With Los Angeles," *Just Women's Sports*, June 13, 2025, https://justwomenssports.com/reads/nwsl-wnba-player-unions-address-ice-raids-voice-solidarity-with-los-angeles/.

[3] "NWSL, WNBA Player Unions Address Ice Raids."

[4] Emma Hruby, "Sports World Reacts to NWSL's Landmark CBA," *Just Women's Sports*, February 1, 2025, https://justwomenssports.com/reads/nwsl-soccer-league-cba-ratified-reactions/#:~:text=The%20WNBPA%20thanked%20the%20NWSLPA%20for%20their%20efforts%2C%20saying%20"we%20are%20proud%20of%20your%20commitment%20%26%20resolve;" other women's Players Associations, namely the now-folded Premier Hockey Federation, also publicly congratulated and thanked the NWSLPA for their historic action, signaling an ethos of solidarity across women's sport.

[5] Adam Crafton, "Commissioners of NFL, NBA, NHL, MLB and MLS to Meet with Trump Over America 250 Plans," *The Athletic*, January 21, 2026, https://www.nytimes.com/athletic/6988774/2026/01/21/america-250-trump-sports-commissioners-meeting/?source=athletic_pulsenewsletter&campaign=16499391&userId=31803660.

[6] WNBPA and NWSLPA, "A Joint Statement."

[7] Adam Crafton and Joe Vardon, "White House Event With Trump, Sports Commissioners is Delayed by Snow: Sources," *The Athletic*, January 26, 2026, https://www.nytimes.com/athletic/7000510/2026/01/26/white-house-

event-with-trump-sports-commissioners-is-delayed-by-snow-sources/?source=athletic_pulsenewsletter&campaign=16601907&userId=31803660.
[8] Michael Butterworth, *Baseball and the Rhetorics of Purity: The National Pastime and American Identity During the War on Terror* (The University of Alabama Press: 2010).
[9] Harry Edwards, *The Revolt of the Black Athlete* (Free Press, 1969).
[10] A note about language moving forward: following the lead of Aarti Ratna, Janelle Joseph, and Kyoung-yim Kim—authors of the introductory essay in a special issue on race, gender, and the queering of sporting cultures—when I use the term "women," I use it in a "broad and open capacity, to acknowledge gender self-determination in spite of the scientific variability of sex." Though professional sport is rhetorically delineated in terms of a gendered/sexed binary, and the topic of this thesis requires me to use the term "women's sport," I also often intentionally refer to the rhetors in question as "athletes in women's leagues" (compared to the term "women athletes"), in attempts to recognize those athletes that identify outside of/beyond this binary; Aarti Ratna, Janelle Joseph, and Kyoung-yim Kim, "Introductory Essay: Race, Gender, and Queering/Querying Sport and Movement Cultures," *Women's Studies International Forum* 113 (2025): 1, https://doi.org/10.1016/j.wsif.2025.103180.
[11] Michael A. Messner, "Sports and Male Domination: The Female Athlete as Contested Ideological Terrain," *Sociology of Sport Journal* 5, no. 3 (1988): 197-211, https://doi.org/10.1123/ssj.5.3.197.
[12] Messner, "Sports and Male Domination," 198.
[13] Messner, "Sports and Male Domination," 203.
[14] Messner, "Sports and Male Domination," 207.
[15] "Bay FC expected to shatter NWSL attendance record at Oracle Park," *The Gist*, August 22, 2025, https://www.thegistsports.com/article/bay-fc-expected-to-shatter-nwsl-attendance-record-at-oracle-park/?utm_medium=email&utm_campaign=FINAL%20-%20Sports%20News%20-%20Ed%201305%20-%20Monday%20-%202025-08-25&utm_content=FINAL%20-%20Sports%20News%20-%20Ed%201305%20-%20Monday%20-%202025-08-25+Version+A+CID_988764bd71662d1807bb68a7fff5aeaf&utm_source=Email%20Newsletter&utm_term=new%20NWSL%20attendance%20record.
[16] Associated Press, "WNBA Breaks Single-Season Attendance Mark," *ESPN*, August 21, 2025, https://www.espn.com/wnba/story/_/id/46040489/wnba-breaks-single-season-attendance-mark.
[17] Meredith Heil, "England Tops US in Front of Record Women's Rugby World Cup Crowd," *Just Women's Sports*, August 26, 2025, https://justwomenssports.com/reads/england-tops-us-in-front-of-record-womens-rugby-world-cup-crowd/?utm_source=newsletter.justwomenssports.com&utm_medium=newsletter&utm_campaign=top-wnba-teams-punch-playoff-tickets&_bhlid=2ba55dc7878230f4bb2789faaf4d4586ed040937.
[18] Jeff Kassouf, "NWSL's 16th Expansion Team Denver Summit FC Reveals Name, Logo," *ESPN*, July 22, 2025, https://www.espn.com/soccer/story/_/id/45793134/nwsl-16th-expansion-team-denver-summit-fc-reveals-name-logo; Press Release, "WNBA Announces Expansion to Historic 18 Teams with New Teams in Cleveland, Detroit and Philadelphia," *WNBA*, June 30, 2025, https://www.wnba.com/news/wnba-expansion-cleveland-detroit-philadelphia; "What is AUSL? 2025 Softball Schedule, Teams, Players, More," *ESPN*, July 26, 2025, https://www.espn.com/mlb/story/_/id/45458259/athletes-unlimited-softball-league-schedule-teams-players.
[19] Cheryl Robinson, "How Togethxr's 'Everyone Watches Women's Sports," Is Changing the Game," *Forbes*, April 4, 2025, https://www.forbes.com/sites/cherylrobinson/2025/04/04/how-togethxrs-everyone-watches-womens-sports-is-changing-the-game/.
[20] Don Riddell and Amy Woodyatt, "Reddit Co-Founder Alexis Ohanian Talks to CNN About Investment in Chelsea Women and Women's Sports," *CNN*, May 22, 2025, https://www.cnn.com/2025/05/22/sport/alexis-ohanian-chelsea-womens-investment-intl-spt.
[21] Donald Trump, "Keeping Men Out of Women's Sports," Executive Order 14201, February 5, 2025, https://www.whitehouse.gov/presidential-actions/2025/02/keeping-men-out-of-womens-sports/.
[22] Max Matza, "UPenn to Ban Trans Athletes After Probe Stemming from Lia Thomas," *BBC*, July 1, 2025, https://www.bbc.com/news/articles/cy4yy4dv2dyo.
[23] Ann Travers, "The Sport Nexus and Gender Injustice," *Studies in Social Justice* 2, no. 1 (2008): 79, https://doi.org/10.26522/ssj.v2i1.969.
[24] Mia Fischer, "Protecting Women's Sports? Anti-Trans Youth Sports Bills and White Supremacy," *Communication and Critical/Cultural Studies* 20, no. 4 (2023): 397-415, https://doi.org/10.1080/14791420.2023.2267646; Tiffany Jones, "Trans Ban Expand: Anti-LGBTIQ+ Lawfare and Neo-fascism," *Sexuality Research and Social Policy* 22 (2025): 69-84, https://doi.org/10.1007/s13178-024-00948-x.
[25] Trans Legislation Tracker, "2025 Anti-Trans Bills: Trans Legislation Tracker," accessed September 5, 2025, https://translegislation.com/.

[26] Judith Butler, "Why is the Idea of 'Gender' Provoking Backlash the World Over?" *The Guardian*, October 23, 2021, https://www.theguardian.com/us-news/commentisfree/2021/oct/23/judith-butler-gender-ideology-backlash.
[27] Messner, "Sports and Male Domination."
[28] Especially in the new Name, Image and Likeness landscape, collegiate athletics demand their own dedicated analyses, which is yet another reason that I limit my focus in this thesis to professional women's sport.
[29] Abraham Iqbal Khan, "The Ethos of the Activist Athlete," in *Handbook of Communication and Sport*, ed. Michael Butterworth (De Gruyter, 2021), 161-178.
[30] Edwards, *The Revolt of the Black Athlete*.
[31] Letisha Engracia Cardoso Brown, A. Lamont Williams, Amanda N. Schweinbenz, and Ann Pegoraro, "A Perfect Storm: Black Feminism and Women's National Basketball Association Black Athlete Activism," *Sociology of Sport Journal* 42 (2025): 4, https://doi.org/10.1123/ssj.2023-0088.
[32] Douglas Hartmann, "Retheorizing the Cultural Politics of Sport After a Decade of Activism, Populism, and Polarization," *Journal of Sport and Social Issues* 48, no. 1-2 (2024): 40, https://doi.org/10.1177/01937235241249364.
[33] Hartmann, "Retheorizing the Cultural Politics of Sport," 35-37.
[34] Douglas Hartmann, Alex Manning, and Kyle Green, "The Performance and Reception of Race-Based Athletic Activism: Toward a Critical, Dramaturgical Theory of Sport," *American Journal of Cultural Sociology* 10 (2022): 562, https://doi.org/10.1057/s41290-022-00173-2.
[35] Cheryl Cooky and Dunja Antunovic, "'This Isn't Just About Us': Articulations of Feminism in Media Narratives of Athlete Activism," *Communication and Sport* 8, no. 4-5 (2020): 694, https://doi.org/10.1177/2167479519896360.
[36] Jules Boykoff, "Athlete Activism and the Olympic Games: A Dialectic of Resistance and Restriction," in *Athlete Activism: Contemporary Perspectives,* ed. Rory Magrath (Routledge, 2022): 8-19; Celia Valiente, "Elite Athlete Activism for Gender Equality in Sport," in *Athlete Activism: Contemporary Perspectives,* ed. Rory Magrath (Routledge, 2022): 109-119.
[37] Cole G. Armstrong and Ted Butryn, "Educated Activism: A Focus Group Study of High School Athletes' Perceptions of Athlete Activism," in *Athlete Activism: Contemporary Perspectives,* ed. Rory Magrath (Routledge, 2022): 20-31; Yannick Kluch, "'It's Our Duty to Utilize the Platform We Have': Motivations for Activism Among U.S. Collegiate Athletes," in *Athlete Activism: Contemporary Perspectives,* ed. Rory Magrath (Routledge, 2022): 32-43.
[38] Damian Haslett and Brett Smith, "Disability, Sport and Social Activism: Para Athlete Activism," in *Athlete Activism: Contemporary Perspectives,* ed. Rory Magrath (Routledge, 2022): 65-76; Stuart Braye and Tom Gibbons, "Disabled Athlete Activism: Using an Emancipatory Theological Approach to Promote the Use of Disabled Athletes in Disability Activism in the U.K.," in *Athlete Activism: Contemporary Perspectives,* ed. Rory Magrath (Routledge, 2022): 77-87.
[39] Shaonta'e E. Allen, "Braids, Beads, Catsuits and Tutus: Serena Williams' Intersectional Resistance Through Fashion," in *Athlete Activism: Contemporary Perspectives,* ed. Rory Magrath (Routledge, 2022): 132-143; Jonathan Cable, "'Best Way to Silence the Haters?' Raheem Sterling's Use of Social Media and Selective Press Interviews in the Fight Against Racism," in *Athlete Activism: Contemporary Perspectives,* ed. Rory Magrath (Routledge, 2022): 167-180.
[40] Jason Kido Lopez, "Rewriting Activism: The NFL Takes a Knee," *Critical Studies in Media Communication* 38, no. 2 (2021): 183-196, https://doi.org/10.1080/15295036.2021.1884275.
[41] Courtenay Daum, "Taking a Knee: Neoliberalism, Radical Imaginaries, and the NFL Player Protests," *New Political Science* 41, no. 4 (2019): 515, https://doi.org/10.1080/07393148.2019.1686739.
[42] Daum, "Taking A Knee," 526.
[43] Jay Coakley, *Sport in Society: Issues and Controversies*, 13th ed. (McGraw Hill, 2021).
[44] David L. Andrews and Michael L. Silk, "Sport and Neoliberalism: An Affective-Ideological Articulation," *The Journal of Popular Culture* 51, no. 2 (2018): 512, https://doi.org/10.1111/jpcu.12660.
[45] Benedict Anderson, "Neoliberal Affects," *Progress in Human Geography* 40, no. 6 (2015): 734-753, https://doi.org/10.1177/0309132515613167.
[46] Daum, "Taking A Knee," 528.
[47] Andrews and Silk, "Sport and Neoliberalism," 527.
[48] Cheryl Cooky, "Women, Sports, and Activism," in *The Oxford Handbook of U.S. Women's Social Movement Activism,* eds. Holly J. McCammon, Verta Taylor, Jo Reger, and Rachel L. Einwohner (Oxford University Press, 2017): 602-620, https://doi.org/10.1093/oxfordhb/9780190204204.013.39.
[49] Cooky, "Women, Sports, and Activism," 604.

[50] Jamie Schultz, "The Physical is Political: Women's Suffrage, Pilgrim Hikes, and the Public Sphere," *The International Journal of the History of Sport* 27, no. 7 (2010): 1133-1153, https://doi.org/10.1080/09523361003695801.
[51] Cooky, "Women, Sports, and Activism," 607.
[52] Meredith M. Bagley and Judy Liao, "Blocked Out; Athletic Voices and WNBA Uniform Politics," in *Sportswomen's Apparel in the United States: Uniformly* Discussed, ed. Linda K. Fuller (Palgrave Macmillan, 2021): 59, https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-45477-7.
[53] Brown et al., "A Perfect Storm," 3-4.
[54] Brown et al., "A Perfect Storm," 4.
[55] Cooky and Antunovic, "'This Isn't Just About Us'," 695.
[56] Cooky and Antunovic, "'This Isn't Just About Us'," 706.
[57] Bagley and Liao, "Blocked Out," 62.
[58] Bagley and Liao, "Blocked Out," 68.
[59] Brown et al., "A Perfect Storm," 7.
[60] Emily Sullivan, "Laura Ingraham Told LeBron James to Shut Up and Dribble; He Went to the Hoop," *NPR*, February 19, 2018, https://www.npr.org/sections/thetwo-way/2018/02/19/587097707/laura-ingraham-told-lebron-james-to-shutup-and-dribble-he-went-to-the-hoop.
[61] Michael Butterworth, "The Athlete as Citizen: Judgement and Rhetorical Invention in Sport," *Sport in Society* 17, no. 7 (2014): 867-883, https://doi.org/10.1080/17430437.2013.806033.
[62] Butterworth, "The Athlete as Citizen," 869.
[63] Butterworth, "The Athlete as Citizen," 871.
[64] Butterworth, "The Athlete as Citizen," 872-878.
[65] Ibid.
[66] Khan, "The Ethos of the Activist Athlete," 164.
[67] Khan, "The Ethos of the Activist Athlete," 174.
[68] Ibid.
[69] Andrews and Silk, "Sport and Neoliberalism," 512.
[70] Khan, "The Ethos of the Activist Athlete," 175.

"Immigrant City FC": Sport Activism and the Politics of Belonging

On their June 14th, 2025, match day against the North Carolina Courage, the Los Angeles-based professional women's soccer club Angel City FC (ACFC) sported a particular team uniform during the pre-game. Instead of the typical pink and grey jerseys, club players and staff emerged in black tee shirts with simple white wording. The front of the shirts read "Immigrant City Football Club," the backs were emblazoned with the alternating phrase "Los Angeles is for everyone/Los Ángeles es para todas."[71] Many of the fans cheered their team on in matching tee shirts—which were folded on every seat in the stadium and later put up for sale on the team's website, with all net proceeds donated to a local legal immigration services firm—and waved signs with similar messaging. Minority team owner Rebecca Gomez delivered the pre-game speech, further setting the tone for the evening as she declared "football does not exist without immigrants. This club does not exist without immigrants."[72]

Such statements stand out amidst the backdrop of both local and national politics around immigration. From the beginning of June to the middle of July 2025, United States homeland security agents arrested nearly three thousand people in the Los Angeles region.[73] This statistic is the malignant yet natural offspring of the anti-immigration discourse that has been central to the second-term Trump administration and Trump-era politics as a whole. Justified through "rhetorics of security and risk containment,"[74] the demonization of immigrants is not a new rhetorical tactic in the United States.[75] However, the racialization, surveillance, and physical containment of suspect bodies has found increasing materialization through the proliferating presence of Immigrations and Customs Enforcement (ICE) across the United States, with certain

cities like Los Angeles serving as theaters for the strongman demonstrations of the federal government.[76]

Though (or perhaps because) it is targeted for federal occupation and displays of authoritarianism, Los Angeles is also home to a long lineage of resistance regarding immigration, national identity, and the politics of belonging.[77] For example, the 1960s and 70s saw the energy of the Chicano movement often centralized and performed in the city of Los Angeles.[78] The 1990s saw riots, initially in response to the acquittal of the four police officers that brutally beat Rodney King, and further displaying upheaval at the complex socioeconomic and racialized dynamics faced by L.A. residents.[79] The early 2000s brought *La Gran Marcha*, an immigrants rights gathering of over half a million people and, at that time, the largest protest L.A. had ever seen.[80] Of most relevance to this chapter, in early June of 2025 surges of people again filled the streets of the city to protest the presence of ICE and the growing number of arrests.[81] Thus, I contextualize the demonstration of Angel City during their June 14th match as one moment within this localized genealogy of protest and resistance over who belongs: who belongs in the city of Los Angeles and who belongs in the United States.

However, athlete activism is not always considered with the same seriousness as other forms of protest. Often times, this is for good reason. In many cases, the contemporary landscape of corporate sport empties sporting activism of its radical potential (such as Colin Kaepernick and his protest-turned-major-advertising-campaign)[82] and there is little research demonstrating that athlete activism begets much tangible change.[83] While concerns like these are, of course, important foci for our studies of social movements and activism, the question of this chapter is a different one: in the face of increasing authoritarianism, what are the rhetorical potentialities offered by activism through sport? Scholarly thought on sport underwrites this move,

highlighting "sport's distinctive ability to dramatize and display" issues of social and political importance for large public audiences.[84] What's more, sport conjures the persuasive and powerful force of fandom, implicating many more bodies than just those of the athletes we may see on the field.[85] In this way, we can see activism in and through sport leveraging constitutive rhetorics to mobilize bodies and affects. Guided by these scholars, my interest in this chapter is in explicating the rhetorical function(s) of Angel City's "Immigrant City FC" (ICFC) campaign, as demonstrated through the short video posted three days after their match against the Courage. I argue that despite its investment in citizenship as something to possess, the "Immigrant City FC" campaign employs the distinctive rhetorical resources of sport to (re)imagine belonging outside the constraints of national identities and boundaries. The campaign mobilizes fannish affect to re-signify the "team," and eschews the national to constitute instead a localized group identity.

This chapter is informed by literature on citizenship, fandom, and athlete activism, and contributes to these bodies of scholarship in two ways. First, following the calls of scholars like Karma Chávez,[86] Robert Asen,[87] and Josue David Cisneros,[88] who argue for an expansion of public subjectivity past citizenship, I demonstrate how Angel City and the "Immigrant City FC" campaign offer, even if just for a moment, an alternative type of public subjectivity rooted in fannish affect rather than traditional notions of the citizen. Second, while much extant work has signaled sport's troubling entanglements with nationalism,[89] racialized and gendered logics,[90] and fascist energizing,[91] this chapter continues to theorize how the distinctive rhetorical resources of women's sport might also be mobilized for projects of progressive politics.

This chapter proceeds as follows. After discussing the literature on citizenship, fandom, and constitutive rhetoric, I analyze the "Immigrant City FC" campaign to discuss the two ways

that the campaign (re)imagines belonging. I close by discussing the broader potential of sport's rhetorical resources regarding the politics of belonging, and the resistive potentialities of athlete activism.

Citizenship, fandoms, and constitutive rhetoric

Traditional citizenship, closely articulated here with "an attachment to a nation-state institution,"[92] is an insufficient framework for conceptualizing belonging. Scholars have argued that citizenship is "intricately implicated with borders and alienage;"[93] it is premised on "normalizing discourses of belonging" that exclude certain (queer and migrant) bodies;[94] it is, by design, difficult to obtain;[95] it promulgates logics of proper place which "reduce our bodies and ourselves to a particular racialized and gendered embodiment;"[96] and it is at the root of violent border practices which constitute a broader settler colonial project.[97] Yet, as many of the authors of these critiques point out, the specter of citizenship remains ideologically powerful and culturally relevant, leaving critics to rhetorically wrestle with the category of the "citizen." John Fletcher contends that citizenship's danger "ought not lead to abandonment but to vigilance."[98] Thus, in an attempt to be vigilant, what follows is an exploration of some of the alternative offerings that expand upon, divert from, and complicate traditional notions of citizenship.

An apt starting place is Robert Asen's discourse theory of citizenship. For Asen, citizenship is a process founded out of a radical view of democracy.[99] Rather than asking *what* constitutes citizenship (e.g., official documentation, established domicile in a certain location, etc.), a discourse theory asks *how* citizenship is constituted, reframing citizenship as a mode of public engagement.[100] Importantly, Asen argues that "when viewed as a mode of public engagement, citizenship appears as a performance, not a possession."[101] Asen offers four metrics that might be used to characterize citizenship performances; they might be generative, engaged

in risk, enacting playfulness or creativity, and centered on sociability. Wary of promoting further reductive categorization, Asen offers these four metrics as rhetorical resources or starting places for (re)imagining how citizenship can be done. "Discourse practices," Asen concludes, "present potentially accessible and powerful everyday enactments of citizenship."[102] Yet what is most central to take from Asen is the room made for alternative public subjectivities. In considering alternatives, especially in the purview of sport, fandom provides a site of potential.

Notions of fandom and fannish affect provide helpful vocabulary in theorizing beyond traditional conceptualizations of citizenship. In her book, *Politics for the Love of Fandom*, Ashley Hinck is interested in theorizing a fan-based citizenship, which she defines as a mode of public engagement that emerges from a loving feeling of commitment to, a fannish affect for, a fan object.[103] Hinck collapses notions of public affect and fannish affect to demonstrate how the relationships encouraged through fandom between bodies and objects have the potential to motivate civic action. In fan-based citizenship, "citizens choose popular culture over civic institutions to guide their civic action,"[104] as bodies are reoriented by their fandom toward particular social and political aims that align with the those of the fan object. For Hinck, fandom—especially in the digital world—is an important force in contemporary permutations of citizenship, as a fan's affect is "one of excess, difficult to account for in linguistic explanations."[105] Fannish affect, then, provides scholars with a tool for understanding the mechanics of how fandom and civic action may inform one another. This chapter builds upon Hinck's conceptualization of fannish affect by considering the potential of some permutations of fandom to be leveraged against the contemporary politics of fascism in the United States.

While Hinck provides an account of this excessive fannish affect through a variety of examples, Erin Tarver directs our attention to the particular shape and force of sport fandom. In

her book, *The I in Team*, Tarver argues that far from being inconsequential, sport fandom is a process of subjectification that creates and reinforces both individual and communal identities in the United States today.[106] Sport fandom matters, according to Tarver, because it is "one of the primary ways in which we tell ourselves who we are—and, just as importantly, who we are not."[107] It almost goes without saying that many of the consequences of sport fandom, materializing in varying gendered and racialized subjectivities, are problematic: a topic which Tarver takes up for most of her book. However, Tarver also offers marginal (women's) fan practices and performance as alternatives to hegemonic engagement with sport, giving "reason to hope that sports fandom might not, in every case, function as a mechanism of oppression or the reinforcement of racial and sexual hierarchy."[108] Thus, marginal sport fandom becomes a critical site of inquiry for unearthing potential rhetorical resources that can be used in projects of progressive politics. For the purposes of this chapter and this project at large, the marginalized sport fandom I'm interested in are those directed in and through women's sports.

Tarver's focus on subjectification signals one final tool that I find useful in conceptualizing sport activism and sport fandom in the case of ACFC, which is constitutive rhetoric. Here, I draw from Maurice Charland's foundational argument that audiences, rather than existing as extra-rhetorical, are created by the very discourses that address them.[109] Charland contends, importantly, that both the individual and the collective are interpellated as political subjects through a "process of identification in rhetorical narratives that 'always already' presume the constitution of subjects."[110] The function of constitutive rhetoric in sport settings is intuitive, as sport fandoms can be understood as rhetorically constituted through a series of discourses. For example, in a case study on fan resistance to sport team relocations, Stephen Andon argues that fan movements can "construct and communicate the power of myth

and collective identity" to achieve certain ends (such as keeping a sports team in their original city).[111] Similarly, Kevin Thompson's study of the National Basketball Association's (NBA) 2020 labor strike revealed sport labor activism as highly dependent on tactics that are characteristic of constitutive rhetoric, such as the consubstantiation of Black NBA players and a wider audience of Black Americans.[112] Thus, along with fannish affect, constitutive rhetoric provides a useful vocabulary to describe sport fandom's rhetorical function and ability to collectivize.

This powerful ability to hail large groups into identification is reflected in sport's frequent association with ideas of nation and nationhood. Certainly, the idea of nation is one familiar to the lexicon of sport. Michael Butterworth, for example, examines how the United States' colloquial national pastime was used to construct and reify U.S. American identity in the wake of the attacks of September 11th,[113] demonstrating the ways in which baseball, often touted as a symbol of national unity, promotes problematic myths of citizenship and purity. Butterworth also explicates how mediated sport productions construct public memory in ways favorable to American nationalism,[114] how the rhetorical resources of baseball have been mobilized to recoup presidential reputations,[115] and how responses by team owners and sport media to athlete activism are used to promote an illusion of unity and consensus which decreases the agonistic qualities of American democracy.[116] Each of these examples demonstrate the legacy of sport being rhetorically mobilized in the name of nationalism, making the articulation of sport and nation the dominant paradigm of sport fandom.

Although much existing research on sport has focused on this dominant paradigm and has therefore preserved a latent focus on men's sports, scholarship on women's sports generates further alternatives. Some existing studies have taken the charge of (re)telling histories of woman

athlete activism. For example, scholars have recentered the typically overlooked role of Black women athletes in some of the most memorable athlete activist movements,[117] or demonstrated the connection between embodied activism and the early (white) woman suffrage movement.[118] Other studies have investigated specific activist campaigns generated within women's leagues, such as uniform politics in the WNBA.[119] Studies have also taken up the contemporary role of media as it interacts with athlete activism in women's leagues, noting how media coverage often results in a disparate visibility awarded to various feminisms.[120] Further still, scholars have examined the limits of athlete activism in women's leagues, noting the insufficiencies of symbolic allyship[121] and the promulgation of anti-trans activism as one of the most prominent forms of activism shaping women's sport leagues in the contemporary moment.[122] Finally, I am informed by the scholarship examines women's professional soccer in the United States in particular.[123] This chapter enters the scholarly conversation to speak to the activism of one professional American women's sport team. Next, I turn my attention to an analysis of Angel City's "Immigrant City FC" campaign, drawing specific attention to how the rhetorical resources of sport—fannish affect and constitutive rhetoric—are mobilized in the contestation over who belongs. Beyond this case study, I demonstrate the potential of women's sport activism and fandom to be mobilized for projects of progressive politics.

The campaign: fannish affect, and localized group identities

On June 6th, the same day that L.A. residents protested in the streets, Angel City posted a statement affirming the migrant identity of the city. ACFC was the first local sport franchise to comment on the events, with the silence from the other L.A. clubs, such as the Galaxy, LAFC, and the Dodgers, drawing the ire of sports fans.[124] Worth noting here are the gendered dynamics at play. Angel City represents a women's league and chose to respond to local and national

politics while other clubs like the Dodgers and the Galaxy, while arguably more financially and culturally stable, chose to stay silent. This bold move to speak first suggests an activist ethos in the NWSL, or at least in Angel City's club culture. A week later, during their match against the North Carolina Courage, Angel City players, coaches, staff, and fans wore "Immigrant City FC" shirts during the pre-game. The shirts were subsequently put up for sale on ACFC's website, with all net proceeds going to a local legal firm that provides immigration services and support. Three days later the club posted a public video to officially introduce the campaign. The video is 65 seconds long, and is composed of varying shots of the city, its residents, and clips from the June 14th pre-game. Borrowing from the statement released by the team a week earlier,[125] Rebecca Gomez read the pre-game statement to spectators of both the match and the video:

> We believe in the power of belonging. We know that Los Angeles is stronger because of its diversity, and the people and the families who shape it, love it, and call it home. The fabric of this city is made of immigrants. Football does not exist without immigrants. This club does not exist without immigrants. Mi gente, I need to hear you repeat after me: This is our home. This is L.A. This is Immigrant City.[126]

This statement, the complementary visuals, and the form of the video all allow the "Immigrant City FC" campaign to (re)imagine belonging by performing two rhetorical functions. First, the "Immigrant City FC" campaign mobilizes fannish affect to reconstitute the "team." Second, the campaign strategically avoids vocabularies of nationalism, instead constituting a localized group identity under which the new "team" can belong. These rhetorical moves invite fans of Angel City FC to reject the demonization of immigrants and challenge federal anti-immigration policies by embracing an inclusive politics of belonging. In what follows, I'll explicate the mechanics of each rhetorical function as it appears through the video.

To demonstrate how the ICFC campaign reconstitutes the "team" of Angel City, I begin with a contextualization of the club's origins and reputation. Ten years after L.A.'s previous

women's professional soccer club (and the league as a whole) folded, the NWSL awarded Los Angeles an expansion bid. Prompted by a fan-generated movement in 2019 to "bring NWSL to LA,"[127] Angel City FC began to form in 2020, and the club played their first season in 2022. The team was announced with a majority female ownership group that included many high-profile celebrities, athletes, venture capitalists, and even former members of the famed 1999 U.S. Women's National Team. Catapulting from the foundations of this flashy ownership group, the easily marketable club quickly developed a reputation as both an innovative and progressive organization that fans quickly rallied around.[128] By 2024, the club sold to Disney CEO Bob Iger and his wife Willow Bay for $250 million, making ACFC the most valuable women's sport franchise in the world at the time.[129] Further, the club's public-facing commitments to inclusivity, diversity, and social consciousness were consistently signaled by a variety of rhetorical choices made by the team and communicated through their website and social media presence. This linking of profit and political commitments—what some scholars have skeptically termed "corporate social responsibility"[130]—reached new heights with ACFC's brand development as deeply committed to fans and highly involved the Los Angeles community.

While rhetorical critics may (rightfully) be skeptical of the truly progressive political alignments of a club that exists to generate profit, I am hesitant to direct this same skepticism toward the collective identity of ACFC's fans. One such example that complicates what seems like a simplistic branding tactic is the team's affiliation with its six supporter groups. The members of Rebellion 99, Inc., for example, describe their mission as "to support our Angel City Football Club through our wins, draws and losses, as well as work to uplift women, LGBTQIA+ and marginalized communities everywhere."[131] This statement is just one example of the way the Angel City supporter groups conflate their roles as both committed fans and conscious

advocates, as well as see themselves as part of the team, as the club's wins, draws, and losses become held in common. This conflation works to constitute Angel City as a club that publicly values diversity and social justice, revealing how fandom itself is simultaneously shaped by and shapes sport franchises. As such, Angel City's response to the increasing presence of ICE falls in line with the club's reputation as one that welcomes and is *for* those on the margins.

Moving from the established persona of Angel City, the reconstitution of "team" through the ICFC campaign occurs first and foremost through the rhetorical play on the team's name. A team's name is significant. It can, in the most basic sense, signal a connection to a shared geography, literally denoting where a team is located and thus who the team represents. Yet a team name's geographic denotation can quickly move past the literal, connecting those associated with a team to a more ideologically rendered sense of place.[132] Further, as it establishes the identity of both the team and its fans, a team name provides a unifying banner under which to gather. To claim a team's name is to identify oneself with the character of the team; thus, fans become intimately implicated with a team's name and the image it promotes. This powerful identification of fans with their teams can be demonstrated in the resistance to changes in team names, even those with demonstrably racist histories and realities.[133] Thus, team names exist at the complex intersection of geography, identity, and affect, becoming capacious rhetorical objects.

Angel City FC, in the first place, serves as an example of the ideological work that a team name can do regarding place, identity, and affect. While the city is, of course, consistent of a variety of diverse groups, peoples, and heritages, the name Angel City FC invokes Los Angeles's Hispanic roots. The name is a play on the English translation (City of Angels) of the Spanish name of the city in which the club is located (Los Ángeles). Naming the soccer club "Angel City

FC" nods to the enduring character of Los Angeles as a region with a complex geographic and political history, yet foregrounding how the area developed from—among many other influences—the influence of Spanish occupation.[134] Contemporary demographic surveys of Los Angeles reflect this narrative history, with just under half of respondents self-identifying as Hispanic in 2023.[135] Thus, through the rhetoric of the team's name, the identity of Angel City FC and its constituent fandom becomes both geographically and racially situated.

The racialization of Los Angeles as primarily Latine through the club's original team name is, of course, a social construction; yet the constructed nature of race doesn't negate the sustained rhetorical sway and material significance of race in the city of L.A. Certainly, the way that space becomes racialized can help explain the particular targeting of Los Angeles by the Trump administration, as federal forces are deployed to the coast in staggering numbers to arrest, contain, and deport suspect bodies: a status which Lisa Flores reminds us to be always-already racialized.[136] Here we can see how the name "Angel City FC" reifies the rhetorical racial construction of Los Angeles. Equally as important, the name also connotes the club as representing *this* constructed version of L.A.—a city comprised of a primarily Hispanic population. Even further, loyal fans often "feel themselves to be a part of" the team itself;[137] thus, fans are implicated in this representation as well, signaling the already-held social and political identities of the club's supporters as proud of their city's diverse Latine heritage.

Where the name "Angel City" foregrounds Latine presence and heritage, "Immigrant City" highlights a different (though often rhetorically overlapping) construction of the city as one with a migrant identity. Contemporary demographic statistics corroborate this, with 35.7% of L.A. residents self-identifying as foreign born (more than double the U.S. average) and 82.2% of residents self-identifying as legal citizens of the United States (about 10 percentage points less

than the national average).[138] I highlight these statistics not to invoke the seeming verisimilitude of census reporting, but rather to bring to the fore how, especially when read as a response to federal anti-immigration rhetoric, the "Immigrant City FC" campaign is participating as one of many competing rhetorical constructions of the city of Los Angeles and its residents. In the most basic sense, temporarily re-naming the team communicates to fans and spectators the character of the club as one that stands with immigrants. What's more, reading with the importance of team names in mind, the substitution of "Immigrant City FC" as a team name re-signifies the identity of the team, and therefore the city, as one that is constituted by immigrant bodies.

While temporary, the significance of this re-naming shouldn't be overlooked, as the invocation of the immigrant in the ICFC campaign presents a direct and explicit challenge to well tread rhetorics of national purity by constructing a hybrid Los Angeles. In his examination of *La Gran Marcha,* Cisneros highlights hybrid performances as fusing "the alien and the American to (re)border the civic imaginary."[139] A similar hybrid fusing occurs in the re-naming of Angel City FC to Immigrant City FC, as the "alien" (or, to be specific, the "immigrant") is fused with both the club and the city. Refusing the dividing logics that have made immigrant status incompatible with a national or group unity, this instance of hybridity makes immigrant identity inseparable from and constitutive of the identity of the "team," thus interpellating fans into an identification with, or a fannish affect for, Los Angeles as an immigrant city. To not only explicitly, but artistically, redefine the club and the city as representing immigrants is a direct response to attempted articulations of the immigrant with the alien, the invader, the undocumented, the criminal, and other racist, exclusionary constructs. The immigrant, instead, becomes a teammate, and an identity to proudly represent. In this way, the ICFC campaign re-terms the immigrant as both teammate and team member.

Along with the substitution of the team's name, the ICFC campaign reconstitutes the "team" by using the rhetorical resources of sport to affectively reorient spectators to the immigrant. This affective work can be understood first through the form of the video. The video, as a whole, mimics the stereotypical format of a pre-game hype video. The hype video—which can be characterized by high-energy music, clips of performative "highlights" from the athletes of the team, and often times direct address to spectators—is familiar to sports fans and is intended to garner or stoke feelings of excitement and passion for their team. In other words, it relies deeply on fannish affect. Before discussing how the ICFC video mobilizes these genre-specific qualities, it's worth noting that the choice to mimic this genre is intentional. The launching of the "Immigrant City FC" campaign is certainly a response to the violent, racist, and alienating logics of the Trump administration and its sobering material manifestations within the city of Los Angeles. The team could have responded in an equally sober manner. Instead, the video posted by Angel City adopts a different approach, mobilizing the distinctive rhetorical resource of sport—the "hype"—to mobilize L.A. residents and fans in the name of a unifying team identity.

The qualities of a hype video are present in the ICFC launch video, both in what spectators see and hear, encouraging spectators to identify with the team that is presented to them. The whole of the video is accompanied by an energetic music. The first half (about thirty seconds) of the video consists of cuts between different scenes featuring presumed L.A. residents: young girls playing soccer on a dirt field; a street dancer performing; masked folks moving plastic crates in a warehouse; people in aprons serving meals to one another; and a group of people practicing indigenous drumming together. In fact, other than a few seconds of drone footage at the start of the video, we do not see any proper Angel City FC football players until

the latter half of the video. Taking the place traditionally filled by a highlight reel of a team's top players and performances are the mundane performances that everyday residents engage in, whether that be delivering meals, working in a warehouse, or engaging in cultural practices of singing, dancing, and drumming. Thus, the team members that the video prompts "hype" for are not just the athletes, but the people of the city.

The visual elements of the video further reorient spectators from the club to the city of Los Angeles as a whole through a detailed, yet consistent, signaling of the club's presence. In each of the clips documenting the various performances of L.A. residents, the logo, signage, or colors of Angel City can be seen. In all of the community events the video documents, Angel City sponsors many of them; the girls on the dirt field are wearing ACFC jerseys, the dancers and drummers dance and drum to the backdrop of ACFC signage, and the meals served and shared by community members are branded with ACFC logos. Thus, through the quick moving clips of the "hype" video, Immigrant City FC, Angel City FC and the city Los Angeles are collapsed into one team for viewers, spectators, and fans to identify with.

The cynical reading of this collapse is plain and simple advertising. In the affective-ideological landscape of corporate sport,[140] the ubiquitous presence of branding, the sale of the Immigrant City FC tee shirts, the pre-game speech read by one of ACFC's Latina-identifying minority owners, and the posting of the entire instance on various social media platforms can all be interpreted as nothing more than a timely branding opportunity. While profit and self-promotion are certainly factors at play when it comes to the football club's involvement in the L.A. community, to end full-stop with this interpretation and omit considerations of fandom is incomplete. Hinck reminds us that fannish affect can transmute our positive affiliations that we hold for a fan object onto other objects.[141] When viewed through the lens of fannish affect, the

constant branding present in the video signals the way in which the ICFC campaign continuously invites spectators and fans to redirect their positive feelings for the club toward the cause the team takes up in the video (i.e. identifying with the immigrant identity of the city). With fannish affect in mind, we are able to see how the ICFC campaign mobilizes the rhetorical energy of fandom to use team branding for different political purposes. The caption on the ICFC video makes this clear, as it reads "we are proud to introduce Immigrant City FC. Created to honor the people who made this city and this club what it is."[142] With this caption and the campaign as a whole, ICFC reclaims the word "immigrant" as something positive, something to boldly proclaim. Through this caption, immigrants are also given credit in the creative and constitutive labor they have done for both the city and the club. This resignification refuses to allow divisive rhetorics to separate the city, the club, and the migrant identity of many of the folks who participate as a member of either group.

I do not mean to suggest that the whole of L.A. are fans of their local NWSL club, nor is each and every spectator of the video posted by Angel City. Yet certain elements of the campaign, as demonstrated through the video and subsequent actions by the club, interpellate the spectator as a fan; the constitutive rhetoric in the form of a call and response by Rebecca Gomez ("mi gente, I need to hear you repeat after me"), the gifting of the tee shirt to match attendees, and the subsequent and continued selling of the tee shirts on Angel City's website, all invite spectators, including those who are not yet fans, to engage more deeply in ACFC/ICFC fandom, or at least develop some level of fannish affect. In other words, the campaign invites spectators to become fans. One Instagram comment on the video reflects this interpellating work, reading "you know what!?! I'm a fan now."[143] While we must be cautious of the neoliberal sensibilities of this turn to fandom as a mode for profitability, I'd also suggest that the affective and practical

outcomes of fandom present as particularly useful resources, ones that can be mobilized for progressive purposes.

Through the affective reorientation accomplished through with the content and the form of the video, the ICFC campaign calls upon team loyalty in the service of the immigrant, thus constituting a new team identity. Tarver explains team loyalty as a merger of care and action; a team loyalist feels "some combination of connection and obligation… and this feeling must be accompanied by some practice…in order to be deserving of the term" of fan.[144] We can characterize the connection and obligation of the ACFC/ICFC fan first through the professed values of the club: namely, fans and spectators are invited to "believe in the power of belonging" and to confess that "Los Angeles is stronger because of its diversity."[145] These two phrases stand out as starkly different from national understandings of both belonging and diversity, making them important markers of the ACFC/ICFC fandom.

Further, the ICFC campaign models for its newly constituted team a collective identity that is engaged in risk for the purposes of solidarity. This engagement in risk is one of the metrics offered by Asen in assessing citizenship as a performance and a mode of public subjectivity. Certainly, the response of the ICFC campaign to the national political situation was risky; the Trump administration has made evident that political retaliation toward enemies, or toward anyone who does not actively support its agenda, is one of its primary modes of governance. As demonstrated through the campaign's direct rebuttal to the presidential administration's rhetoric, the obligation of an ICFC fan is to engage in risk. To be clear, for a corporate football club, the "risk" is primarily a risk of profit. For ACFC, risky behavior could result in sacrificed revenue, fines from governing bodies, or even the repatriation of immigrant players. I do not wish to suggest that ICFC's engagement in risk is doing more than it actually is—there is an

incongruency of precarity felt by certain bodies in the contemporary moment. Yet engaging in risk for the purpose of solidarity is modeled in the campaign. What's more, the active response of Angel City FC to the exigency of national anti-immigration discourse does, in this case, function as what Butterworth characterizes as active, artistic and timely judgement.[146] Here, judgement refers to a rhetor's ability to provide for their audience a way of seeing a phenomena that the audience, too, should adopt. Thus, through the ICFC campaign, Angel City makes a political judgement that communicates to fans and spectators that one's obligation is to engage in risky behavior for the purposes of solidarity. Ultimately, this construction of team identity invites spectators and fans alike to participate in an inclusive politic of belonging—one that conjures identification amongst a broad group of people through the mobilization of a unifying fannish affect.

The second way in which the "Immigrant City FC" campaign reconstitutes belonging is through eschewing the national in favor of a localized group identity. The focus on Los Angeles (as opposed to the United States or even the state of California) is immediately relevant in the first three seconds of the video. The video opens with drone footage of a soccer pitch with the rising skyline of downtown L.A. in the background, visually communicating how football—specifically Angel City Football Club—is part and parcel of the city. The video closes with this footage as well, this time with the center focus on the city skyline rather than the soccer field. The slight shift in footage demonstrates the ways in which the ICFC campaign as a whole begins as a statement made by a soccer team yet ends as a commentary on the status of immigrants and a broader characterization of the city of Los Angeles. In other words, the slight change in visual footage from the beginning to the end of the video demonstrates how the campaign shifts attention from soccer to the politics of belonging.

Using Asen's discourse theory, we can certainly frame the "Immigrant City FC" campaign as a performance of citizenship that expands beyond a strict centering in U.S. American nationality, instead favoring a local sense of belonging. Further, when reading the ICFC campaign as a response to national politics, we can see how Angel City strategically chooses to avoid national discussions in favor of both global and local discussions. The statement heard during the video demonstrates this as it moves from the macro ("football does not exist without immigrants") to the micro scale ("this club does not exist without immigrants"). In evoking the decidedly global sport of football, and even in calling it by its globally recognized name ("football" as opposed to "soccer"), the statement voiced by Rebecca Gomez expands the spectator's view to the decidedly global nature of issues of belonging. Then, rather than turning to consider the United States, the statement immediately moves to a vision of belonging that is fully comprised within the city of Los Angeles. In ignoring the national scale, Angel City strategically navigates away from the problematic border practices associated with nationalist rhetorics. The localized city and club-based understanding is further demonstrated through the text of the statement, such as the claim that "the fabric of this city is made of immigrants."[147] Here, the statement claims immigrants as a vital and constitutive part of Los Angeles specifically, communicating immigrant identity as locally important, though the very same identity is nationally under attack as something to jettison from the body politic of the United States.

In addition to the auditory elements of the video, the focus on the global/local is communicated through visual elements as well. The latter half of the video displays these visual elements as it presents footage from the June 14th pre-game. Fans are seen waving flags that communicate pride for Angel City FC and for Los Angeles itself. Viewers also clearly see one fan waving the flag of Japan, and another waving a keffiyeh, visually signaling the expansion of

the "immigrant" identity of the club and the city. Anja Mihr provides a helpful analytical term in this instance, theorizing the glocal (a combination of global and local). The theory of glocality helps describe how "local actors become active because national governments fail to deliver, manage problems, and respond to citizens' needs."[148] In the case of Los Angeles, we see how Angel City acts in response to the perceived failings of the national government by focusing on rhetorically constructing a more inclusive city-based identity. The video also documents other signage brought by fans to the stadium, presenting sentiments like "no human is illegal/ningún ser humano es illegal" and "immigrants make L.A. great."[149] Statements like this last one can be understood fruitfully helping to construct the local identity of Los Angeles. Yet out of all the visual signs noticeable in the video, the absence of the American flag is conspicuous, and an intentional choice that signals the avoidance of the national and the centering on a localized group identity instead. This eschewing of the national is unique, especially considering how sporting rhetoric has traditionally been taken up for nationalist ends.[150] However, while sport and nation are frequently articulated, the ICFC campaign provides an alternative example of how the rhetoric of sport can be used. In this case, it is used in the service of a local community.

In conceptualizing this turn to local identity, I am informed by Kundai Chirindo's discussion of micronationality. Though not a direct application of his arguments (which are theorized in the context of postcolonial Africa), the micronation as an "alternative imagined community in which rhetoric transpires"[151] provides a helpful construct in thinking through ICFC as a response to national exigencies. While of course the rhetoric of the ICFC campaign is not occurring in a vacuum—it would be foolish to imagine it as completely uninfluenced by the national landscape and prevailing federal attitudes toward immigrants and immigration—there are rhetorical possibilities worth considering in untethering the constituted community, the team,

and the fabric of "Immigrant City FC" from the quilt of the Westphalian-style nation-state. One of these possibilities is provided through the challenge to the "normative expectation that indexes 'good' rhetoric to national interest."[152] Thinking beyond the context of the nation-state makes the oppositional rhetoric generated by the ICFC campaign valuable for its direct challenge to official policy in the United States. In a time when national interests are bent on violence toward and expulsion of Black and brown bodies, antagonistic rhetoric that constructs space as belonging to all bodies and *particularly* those whose status of belonging exists in a limbo of precarity, is deeply necessary. Understanding Los Angeles as its own constituted community beyond the context of the U.S. nation-state redefines these types of rhetorics as not only necessary, but valuable. Excising the United States as the backdrop for rhetoric, the civic culture of L.A. becomes one that truly values diversity, people *and* families, a positive and accessible home, and the power of belonging.

The construction of a local identity can also be understood in this context through the conjuring of the word "home." Through the usage of this word, the folks of Los Angeles come to exist in a place that belongs to them and that they belong to. The word "home" can certainly be read as normative, assuming stability, boundaries, and a proper sense of place. Lisa Flores's concept of stoppage comes to mind here, in which bodies are made, gendered and racialized, as they are stopped.[153] Sara Ahmed connects these two concepts of home and stoppage usefully, arguing that "the politics of mobility, of who gets to move with ease across the lines that divide space, can be re-described as the politics of who gets to be at home, who gets to inhabit spaces, as spaces are inhabitable for some bodies and not others."[154] Yet again, to simply consider the normative meanings of "home" and its inaccessibility is an incomplete reading as it ignores the

ways in which the ICFC campaign's construction of L.A. as "home" claims the city as a space of belonging for those whom national rhetorics of stoppage are targeted.

ICFC's invocation of the word "home" is a claim to inhabit the space of Los Angeles; it redefines Los Angeles as rightful home for immigrants, one that they cannot and should not be moved from. Flores describes this as creating discursive space, connecting the creation of a home to the constitution of identity. Specifically examining the rhetorical tactics of Chicana feminists, Flores argues that "as they construct their own space, where they are in the center, they refuse a marginal identity."[155] Forced out of full identification with either white feminists or Chicano activists, and thus always existing in a borderland, the Chicana feminists Flores identifies instead embrace a rhetoric of difference through a "rejection of the external and the creation of the internal,"[156] leading to group autonomy, feelings of pride and solidarity, and ultimately the creation of a *homeland*. The ICFC campaign functions in a similar rhetorical manner, creating Los Angeles as a discursive space, a homeland, for the constituted team. In this way, the campaign rejects attempts to marginalize many Los Angeles residents, counteracting the rhetoric of stoppage that attempts to (re)move bodies from their home. This is especially powerful in the face of impending threats of deportation or otherwise forced removal from the space. The usage of the word "home" also carries with it an affective register. To call the city "home" is to imagine L.A. not just as a last resort or a sanctuary for temporary stasis (though it certainly can and does serve these two purposes), but as a space of *belonging.* This is communicated through the statement heard in the video, in which attention is given to the people and families of Los Angeles "shape it, love it, and call it home." Thus, L.A. is named, summoned, and claimed by the ICFC campaign as a home for a diverse group of people. Through these rhetorical actions Los Angeles, while in many ways geographically implicated within the nation-state, becomes

something else: a space invigorated by the communicative practices of the people that reside there, and a home beyond the nation, instead existing as an alternative discursive space to which people belong and have loyalty to.

Conclusion

The "Immigrant City FC" campaign provides a useful case study to explicate what can happen at the intersections of rhetoric, sport fandom, public subjectivity, and the politics of belonging. In this chapter, I argue that the rhetorical function of the ICFC campaign—specifically its mobilization of fannish affect and the constitution of a localized group identity—signals the potential that both sport activism and sport fandom present to catalyze an engaged politics of belonging. More than that, I use this case study to explicate two key takeaways more broadly regarding women's sport activism in the contemporary moment.

First, collectives in women's sports—whether that be individual clubs, more player-centric collectives like Players Associations, or entire leagues—have a role to play in resisting the rise of authoritarianism in the United States. When conceptualizing authoritarianism, I am pulling from Steven Levitsky and Lucan Way who, in two consecutive pieces, document the increasing global friendliness toward authoritarianism and the resulting erosion of democratic tradition.[157] Importantly, competitive authoritarianism retains the scent of democratic competition (i.e. candidates must vie for the public's votes), but ultimately this is illusory as governance structures have been manipulated to keep one party in power. Political scientists have written abundantly about the need for democratic institutions (e.g. the judiciary, the military, the press, etc.) to resist these dynamics and retain the ability to function democratically.[158] The case of Angel City FC and the "Immigrant City FC" campaign signals how other institutions—particularly professional sports teams—might participate in this resistance via the rhetorical

resources that sport affords. For better, or often, for worse, sport occupies a salient position in popular and political culture. While we of course may remain skeptical of the radical potential of such a corporate, monetized enterprise as professional sport in the United States, many women's leagues are poised to operate in different and needed ways. As revealed by the swiftness of Angel City's public response (and the silence of other sport teams in the L.A. region), the Los Angeles women's club has incorporated into the forefront of its ethos this type of resistive role. The ICFC campaign is not the only occurrence of a women's sport club responding to national politics. Taken together, these instances may signal in women's sport a collective ethos that includes civic engagement.

This leads me to a second key takeaway which is that, like Tarver argues, some marginalized sporting practices present a distinct opportunity to be mobilized for progressive politics. Here, I am referring both to activist movements generated by women's leagues as well as the fan practices associated with women's leagues. I'll recall that, often times, sport fandom in the United States finds itself an unfortunate bedfellow with problematic constructions of gender, race, and nationhood. This virulent unity marks many fan practices as generative of the type of fascist logics that have come to define U.S. American national politics. Yet these masculinist and nationalist expressions are a common, but not totalizing, reality in sport fandom. Rather, as Tarver argues, "sport fandom may in some circumstances be instrumental in the production of subjects and communities that reject gender, racial, and sexual oppression."[159] We might see the "Immigrant City FC" campaign as characteristic of these unique circumstances. For example, the activism of Angel City demonstrates many characteristics of the athlete-citizen described by Butterworth: the team's response was one that was timely, active, and artistic.[160] What's more, the rhetoric of the ICFC campaign is, in many ways, anti-fascist, generating a political

judgement for its audience that we should condemn the racist and exclusionary actions of the federal government regarding immigration. In this way, the campaign also offers a direct rejoinder to the masculinist articulation of sport and nation that the dominant paradigm of sport fandom has maintained for much of American history.

Like Tarver, I do not wish to suggest women's sport activism or fandom as a "cure-all"[161] and, as such, want to foreground the limits of my argument regarding the potential of the "Immigrant City FC" campaign. The symbolic change in a local soccer club's team name does not, in reality, change the precarious status of migrants or even those bodies for whom the border follows. It will take much more than these symbolic acts to address the violence that is being visited upon bodies that have, through centuries, been constructed as suspect. Further, while the belonging constructed in the "Immigrant City FC" campaign expands the boundaries of who is included, constructions of belonging also often necessitate an outsider. We see this paradox of belonging both in constructions of American national identity and in various sport fandoms. Yet as scholars continue to wrestle with the increasingly difficult task of theorizing and practicing collective politics, I am convinced that there is untapped potential in the rhetorical resources offered by sport, and by sport fandom in particular. Sport fandom is powerful in that it offers a deeply felt sense of belonging and investment. Further, fans become distinct by "caring about what happens in the game and engaging actively with it."[162] As fascist energizing continues to dominate the U.S. American political landscape, care and engagement are qualities that are desperately needed and, I will suggest, are qualities that Angel City FC and the ICFC campaign model. No, the singular and temporary activism of a Los Angeles women's soccer club cannot provoke meaningful change on its own. However, through the strategic leveraging of fandom and

the constitution of a group identity, activism like that of Angel City FC may be one important piece of the puzzle.

---

[71] Angel City FC, "Immigrant City Hub," accessed September 27, 2025, https://angelcity.com/immigrantcityhub.
[72] Angel City FC, "We're proud to introduce Immigrant City FC. Created to honor the people who made this city and this club what it is," Instagram video, June 17, 2025, https://www.instagram.com/reel/DLA8MsEMMWb/?hl=en.
[73] Hamed Aleaziz and Orlando Mayorquín, "Immigration Arrests in Los Angeles Spike Amid Aggressive Enforcement," *The New York Times*, July 11, 2025, https://www.nytimes.com/2025/07/11/us/politics/los-angeles-immigration-enforcement.html.
[74] Hana Masri, "'From Palestine to Mexico, All the Walls Have Got to Go": Rhetorical Bordering as Transnational Settler Colonial Project," *Communication and Critical/Cultural Studies* 18, no. 1 (2021): 90, https://doi.org/10.1080/14791420.2021.1898006.
[75] Krzysztof Wasilewski, "The Image of Immigrants as Anarchists in the American Press, 1886-1888," *Hungarian Journal of English and American Studies* 23, no. 2 (2017): 371-386, https://www.jstor.org/stable/26894885; Michael E. Neagle, "The History of the Demonizing Words Used Against Immigrants," *Time,* August 8, 2025, https://time.com/7303350/demonizing-words-used-against-immigrants/.
[76] Jesus Jiménez, Jill Cowan, Hamad Aleaziz, Ana Facio-Krajcer, and Gabriela Bhaskar, "'Completely Disrupted': Fear Upends Life for Latinos in L.A.," *The New York Times*, June 30, 2025, https://www.nytimes.com/2025/06/30/us/latinos-los-angeles-immigration.html; Miriam Jordan, Soumya Karlamangla, Shawn Hubler, Emily Baumgaertner Nunn, Orlando Mayorquín and Matt Stevens, "How L.A. Raids Ignited a New Fight Over Immigration," *The New York Times*, last updated June 16, 2025, https://www.nytimes.com/2025/06/14/us/los-angeles-protests-buildup.html.
[77] Louis B. Perry and Richard S. Perry, *A History of the Los Angeles Labor Movement, 1911-1941* (University of California Press, 1963); Laura Pulido, *Black, Brown, Yellow, and Left: Radical Activism in Los Angeles* (University of California Press, 2006).
[78] Edward J. Escobar, "The Politics of Repression: The Los Angeles Police Department and the Chicano Movement, 1968-1971," *The Journal of American History* 79, no. 4 (1993): 1483-1514, https://doi.org/10.2307/2080213.
[79] "Frustration & Fire: The 1992 Los Angeles Uprising," *Rediscovering Black History*, National Archives, April 29, 2022, https://rediscovering-black-history.blogs.archives.gov/2022/04/29/frustration-fire-the-1992-los-angeles-uprising/.
[80] Adrián Félix, Carmen González, and Ricardo Ramírez, "Political Protest, Ethnic Media, and Latino Naturalization," *American Behavioral Scientist* 52, no. 4 (2008): 618-634, https://doi.org/10.1177/0002764208324611; Josue David Cisneros, "(Re)Bordering the Civic Imaginary: Rhetoric, Hybridity, and Citizenship in *La Gran Marcha*," *Quarterly Journal of Speech* 97, no. 1 (2011): 26-49, https://doi.org/10.1080/00335630.2010.536564.
[81] Miriam Jordan, Soumya Karlamangla, Shawn Hubler, Emily Baumgaertner Nunn, Orlando Mayorquín, and Matt Stevens, "How L.A. Raids Ignited a New Fight Over Immigration," *The New York Times*, June 14, 2025, https://www.nytimes.com/2025/06/14/us/los-angeles-protests-buildup.html.
[82] Daum, "Taking a Knee," 515; Andrews and Silk, "Sport and Neoliberalism," 512.
[83] Hartmann, "Retheorizing the Cultural Politics of Sport."; Khan, "The Ethos of the Activist Athlete."
[84] Hartmann et al., "The Performance and Reception," 562; Hartmann, "Retheorizing the Cultural Politics of Sport."
[85] Erin C. Tarver, *The I in Team: Sports Fandom and the Reproduction of Identity* (The University of Chicago Press, 2017); Ashley Hinck, *Politics for the Love of Fandom: Fan-Based Citizenship in a Digital World* (Louisiana State University Press, 2019).
[86] Karma R. Chávez, "Border (In)Securities: Normative and Differential Belonging in LGBTQ and Immigrant Rights Discourse," *Communication and Critical/Cultural Studies* 7, no. 2 (2010): 136-155. https://doi.org/10.1080/14791421003763291.
[87] Robert Asen, "A Discourse Theory of Citizenship," *Quarterly Journal of Speech* 90, no. 2 (2004): 189-211, https://doi.org/10.1080/0033563042000227436.
[88] Josue David Cisneros, "(Re)Bordering the Civic Imaginary: Rhetoric, Hybridity, and Citizenship in *La Gran Marhca,*" *Quarterly Journal of Speech* 97, no. 1 (2011): 26-49, https://doi.org/10.1080/00335630.2010.536564.
[89] Butterworth, *Baseball and the Rhetorics of Purity.*

[90] Abraham Iqbal Khan, "Accidentally Telling the Truth: Racial Capitalism on the College Sports Plantation," *Communication and Critical/Cultural Studies* 22, no. 3 (2025): 315-333, https://doi.org/10.1080/14791420.2025.2475767; Mary G. McDonald, "Rethinking Resistance: The Queer Play of the Women's National Basketball Association, Visibility Politics, and Late Stage Capitalism," *Leisure Studies* 27, no. 1 (2008): 77-93, https://doi.org/10.1080/02614360701687776.
[91] Fischer, "Protecting Women's Sports?"
[92] John Fletcher, "Of Minutemen and Rebel Clown Armies: Reconsidering Transformative Citizenship," *Text and Performance Quarterly* 29, no. 3 (2009): 223, https://doi.org/10.1080/10462930903017190.
[93] Linda Bosniak, *The Citizen and the Alien: Dilemmas of Contemporary Membership* (Princeton University Press, 2008), 8-9.
[94] Chávez, "Border (In)Securities," 137.
[95] Cisneros, "(Re)Bordering the Civic Imaginary," 27.
[96] Lisa Flores, "Stoppage and the Racialized Rhetorics of Mobility," *Western Journal of Communication* 84, no. 3 (2020): 257, https://doi.org/10.1080/10570314.2019.1676914.
[97] Masri, "'From Palestine to Mexico'," 87.
[98] Fletcher, "Of Minutemen and Rebel Clown Armies," 234.
[99] Asen, "A Discourse Theory," 189-211.
[100] Asen, "A Discourse Theory," 191, 195.
[101] Asen, "A Discourse Theory," 203.
[102] Asen, "A Discourse Theory," 207.
[103] Hinck, *Politics for the Love of Fandom*, 6.
[104] Hinck, *Politics for the Love of Fandom*, 9.
[105] Ashley Hinck, "Fan-Based Citizenship in 'Mary Poppins Quits': Fannish Affect, Public Affect, and the Potential for Solidarity," *Critical Studies in Media Communication* 40, no. 4 (2023): 215, https://doi.org/10.1080/15295036.2023.2249082.
[106] Tarver, *The I in Team*, 2.
[107] Ibid.
[108] Tarver, *The I in Team,* 186.
[109] Maurice Charland, "Constitutive Rhetoric: The Case of the Peuple Québécois," *Quarterly Journal of Speech* 73, no. 2 (1987): 133-150, https://doi.org/10.1080/00335638709383799.
[110] Charland, "Constitutive Rhetoric," 134.
[111] Stephen P. Andon, "From Save The Crew to Saved The Crew: Constitutive Rhetoric, Myth, and Fan Opposition to Sports Team Relocation," *Communication & Sport* 11, no. 1 (2023): 74, https://doi.org/10.1177/2167479520981907.
[112] Kevin G. Thompson, "The Milwaukee Bucks: Professional Athletic Labor's Position in Racist Late Stage Capitalism," in *Social Issues in Sport Communication,* eds. Terry L. Rentner and David P. Burns (Routledge, 2023): 141-151, https://doi.org/10.4324/9781003316763-15.
[113] Butterworth, *Baseball and the Rhetorics of Purity.*
[114] Michael Butterworth, "Public Memorializing in the Stadium: Mediated Sport, the 10th Anniversary of 9/11, and the Illusion of Democracy," *Communication & Sport* 2, no. 3 (2013): 203-224, https://doi.org/10.1177/2167479513485735.
[115] Michael Butterworth, "George W. Bush as the 'Man in the Arena': Baseball, Public Memory, and the Rhetorical Redemption of a President," *Rhetoric & Public Affairs* 22, no. 1 (2019): 1-31, https://muse.jhu.edu/article/718699.
[116] Michael Butterworth, "Sport and the Quest for Unity: How the Logic of Consensus Undermines Democratic Culture," *Communication & Sport* 8, no. 4 (2020): 452-472, https://doi.org/10.1177/2167479519900160.
[117] Brown et al., "A Perfect Storm," 4.
[118] Cooky, "Women, Sports, and Activism"; Shultz, "The Physical is Political."
[119] Bagley and Liao, "Blocked Out."
[120] Cooky and Antunovic, "'This Isn't Just About Us'," 694.
[121] Charlotte Howell, "The 2020 National Women's Soccer League Challenge Cup Anthem Protests: The Limits of Symbolic White Allyship," *The Velvet Light Trap*, no. 87 (2021): 76-79, https://muse.jhu.edu/article/787287.
[122] Fischer, "Protecting Women's Sports?"
[123] Molly Yanity and Danielle S. Coombs, eds., *2019 FIFA Women's World Cup: Media, Fandom, and Soccer's Biggest Stage* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2021); Rachel Allison, *Kicking Center: Gender and the Selling of Women's Professional Soccer* (Rutgers University Press, 2018).

[124] Kevin Baxter, "Angel City Takes A Stand Against Immigration Raids as Other Stay Silent," *The Los Angeles Times*, June 17, 2025, https://www.latimes.com/sports/soccer/angel-city-fc/story/2025-06-17/angel-city-immigrant-city-football-city; Eduard Cauich, "Galaxy Fans Protest Team's Silence in Response to ICE Raids," *The Los Angeles Times,* July 5, 2025, https://www.latimes.com/sports/soccer/galaxy/story/2025-07-05/galaxy-fans-protest-teams-silence-in-response-to-ice-raids.
[125] Angel City FC, "Statement from Angel City," Instagram photo, June 7, 2025, https://www.instagram.com/p/DKnlnMySHxv/?hl=en.
[126] Angel City FC, "IMMIGRANT CITY FOOTBALL CLUB," YouTube video, 01:05, June 17, 2025, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=aTcI6bLaO3Y.
[127] "Who We Are," *Rebellion 99, Inc.,* https://www.rebellion99.com.
[128] Mariana Duran, "Pink Capes, Wigs and No Slurs: L.A.'s Angel City and Its Fans are Building an Inclusive Space," *The Los Angeles Times,* July 11, 2023, https://www.latimes.com/california/story/2023-07-11/angel-city-soccer-builds-inclusive-space-unlike-male-dominated-sports.
[129] Jeff Kassouf, "Angel City's Jump From Hollywood Brand to Good NWSL Team," *ESPN*, May 21, 2025, https://www.espn.com/soccer/story/_/id/45168210/angel-city-jump-hollywood-brand-good-nwsl-team.
[130] Adam Rugg, "America's Game: The NFL's 'Salute to Service' Campaign, the Diffused Military Presence, and Corporate Social Responsibility," *Popular Communication* 14, no. 1 (2016): 21-29, https://doi.org/10.1080/15405702.2015.1084625.
[131] "Who We Are," *Rebellion 99, Inc.*
[132] Keith Kleszynski, "'We Wear Arsenal, but we are Deportivo Hidalgo': Jerseys, Team Names, and a Sense of Place in Latino Recreational Fútbol Leagues in Oklahoma City," *Soccer & Society* 14, no. 1 (2013): 108-116, https://doi.org/10.1080/14660970.2012.753533.
[133] Rob Stein, "Trump Threatens to Derail Washington Commanders' New Stadium Deal Over Team Name," *NPR,* July 20, 2025, https://www.npr.org/2025/07/20/nx-s1-5474356/trump-washington-commanders-new-stadium-team-name.
[134] "The History of Los Angeles," City of Los Angeles, accessed October 25, 2025, https://lacity.gov/government/history-los-angeles.
[135] "Los Angeles, CA," Data USA, accessed October 25, 2025, https://datausa.io/profile/geo/los-angeles-ca?redirect=true#demographics.
[136] Flores, "Stoppage."
[137] Ibid.
[138] "Los Angeles, CA," Data USA.
[139] Cisneros, "(Re)Bordering the Civic Imaginary," 28.
[140] Andrews and Silk, "Sport and Neoliberalism."
[141] Hinck, "Fan-Based Citizenship."
[142] Angel City Football Club, comment @weareangelcity, "We're proud to introduce," Instagram, June 17, 2025, https://www.instagram.com/reels/DLA8MsEMMWb/.
[143] Ivy Ninet, comment @weareangelcity, "We're proud to introduce," Instagram, June 17, 2025, https://www.instagram.com/reels/DLA8MsEMMWb/.
[144] Tarver, *The I in Team*, 19.
[145] Angel City FC, "IMMIGRANT CITY FOOTBALL CLUB."
[146] Michael Butterworth, "The Athlete as Citizen."
[147] Angel City FC, "IMMIGRANT CITY FOOTBALL CLUB."
[148] Anja Mihr, *Glocal Governance: How to Govern in the Anthropocene?* (Springer, 2022): 37.
[149] Ibid.
[150] Butterworth, *Baseball and the Rhetorics of Purity.*
[151] Kundai Chirindo, "Micronations and Postnational Rhetorics," *Women's Studies in Communication* 41, no. 4 (2018): 385, https://doi.org/10.1080/07491409.2018.1551686.
[152] Chirindo, "Micronations," 389.
[153] Flores, "Stoppage."
[154] Sara Ahmed, "A Phenomenology of Whiteness," *Feminist Theory* 8, no. 2 (2007): 162, https://doi.org/10.1177/1464700107078139.
[155] Lisa Flores, "Creating Discursive Space Through A Rhetoric of Difference: Chicana Feminists Craft a Homeland," *Quarterly Journal of Speech* 82, no. 2 (1996): 146, https://doi.org/10.1080/00335639609384147.
[156] Flores, "Creating Discursive Space," 145.

[157] Steven Levitsky and Lucan A. Way, "Elections Without Democracy: The Rise of Competitive Authoritarianism," *Journal of Democracy* 13, no. 2 (2002): 51-65, https://doi.org/10.1353/jod.2002.0026; Steven Levitsky and Lucan Way, "The New Competitive Authoritarianism," *Journal of Democracy* 31, no. 1 (2020): 51-65, https://doi.org/10.1353/jod.2020.0004.
[158] Steven Levitsky, "The New Authoritarianism," *The Atlantic*, February 10, 2025, https://www.theatlantic.com/ideas/archive/2025/02/trump-competitive-authoritarian/681609/; Jason Stanley, *How Fascism Works* (Random House, 2018).
[159] Tarver, *The I in Team*, 173.
[160] Michael Butterworth, "The Athlete as Citizen."
[161] Tarver, *The I in Team*, 202.
[162] Tarver, *The I in Team,* 21.

Labor Activism and Relational Rhetoric in the WNBA

The popularity of Women's National Basketball Association (WNBA) has skyrocketed in recent years. Evidence of this is the 2025 WNBA All-Star Game, the tickets to which sold out in less than seven hours.[163] The July 19th matchup between Team Collier and Team Clark was highly anticipated. Despite a notable dip in viewership numbers that many journalists contributed to the absence of a then-injured Caitlin Clark,[164] the game still garnered over 2.19 million viewers in ABC's Saturday prime time slot, making it the second most watched WNBA All-Star Game to ever occur.[165] With the league's best players gathered in one place for an event that is itself often the pinnacle of domestic sporting spectacle, it seems the All-Stars knew the attention they would attract. Thus, when each player (including the sidelined Clark) appeared for warmups for the exhibition match in matching black tee shirts with simple white wording on the front, the public and league leadership took notice. The tee shirts demanded simply: "Pay Us What You Owe Us."[166]

This unified and highly publicized demonstration by the league's All-Stars represents the current state of relations between WNBA athletes and the league they play for.[167] In October of 2024, most athletes opted out of their 2020 collective bargaining agreement (CBA) with the league and instead signed one-year deals in preparation for new negotiations. While the original deadline for the next agreement between the two parties was October 31st, 2025, that deadline has come and gone not once (on November 30th) but twice (on January 9th), as stakeholders continue to fail in reaching a deal that satisfies both the interests of the union and the league. Tensions continued to escalate with players voting to give union leadership the authority to call a work stoppage when necessary, in the case that no deal is reached.[168] The possibility of a strike,

especially in the contemporary moment of unprecedented popularity for the league, is a signpost of players' rejection of the deep-rooted sexism in sport that claims women athletes should be grateful for the basic opportunity to play professionally.[169] Rather, WNBA athletes are using their collective labor power in the current CBA negotiations to generate progressive change in their workplace.

These changes take many forms, as a variety of components make up the talking points in the current round of negotiations. Through their union—the WNBPA—players are advocating for concepts like league-subsidized housing, facility standardization, roster size increases and, of course, higher salaries. Most visible, however, is the Players Association's push for the league's first revenue sharing system, which would mimic that of other (men's) professional leagues in the United States.[170] The union's request for a revenue sharing model aligns with the monstrous growth of the WNBA over the last three seasons, with the league described as the fastest growing professional sport brand in 2024.[171] Yet as often happens in labor negotiations, this change—which would trigger a fundamental restructuring of the league's profit model—has become a sticking point: one that has garnered increasing attention from press, fans, and the general public.

This chapter examines the 2025 WNBA CBA negotiations as a situated example of labor activism in contemporary women's sport. While popular press and much of the commentary generated by both the union and the league name money as the central issue at stake,[172] the negotiations also provide an inroad to investigate how players imagine—and invite others to imagine—themselves and the league through a network of relationships. What's more, as CBA negotiations continue, individual and collective action demonstrate WNBA athletes' awareness and leveraging of critical publicity. That is to say, this chapter seeks to understand the ways that both individual athletes and the collectives they are a part of—namely, the WNBPA—have acted

within the current rhetorical moment in order to pressure the league to meet their demands. I argue that through multimodal constructions of relationship, WNBA athletes cultivate a critical public that is sympathetic to their labor activism, ultimately turning spectators into invested participants.

My analysis of the 2025 collective bargaining agreement negotiations between WNBA athletes and the league makes two scholarly contributions. First, using Robert Asen's conceptualization of the public as a network of relationships, I describe the fundamentally relational quality of the contemporary labor activism of WNBA athletes. In heeding Asen's argument that scholars "seek out emancipatory practices" in arenas beyond traditional rhetorical sites,[173] I illuminate these rhetorical tactics and labor activism of WNBA athletes and the WNBPA as valuable not just in sporting contexts, but also in the task of resisting neoliberal understandings of labor and the public.[174] Secondly, I expand extant scholarship on the rhetoric of labor activism in women's professional leagues. Much of the literature on this topic takes up U.S. Soccer's Women's National Team (USWNT) and their groundbreaking success in securing equal pay.[175] I highlight a key difference in the 2025 WNBA CBA negotiations, demonstrating how much of WNBA athletes' rhetoric relies on the affective cultivation of obligation, rather than a sort of "equal pay for equal play" justification.[176] As scholars continue to understand the gendered labor dynamics in the "rise" of women's sports, my analysis explores alternative rhetorics that women athletes use to appeal to the public and advocate for their demands.

This chapter proceeds as follows: after discussing theories of the public sphere, I move into an analysis of the CBA negotiations. I narrate the negotiations through three critical texts, beginning with the aforementioned 2025 All-Star Game to examine the collective demand made by the WNBA All-Stars and their shirts to "Pay Us What You Owe Us." Next, I turn to WNBA

athlete Napheesa Collier's September 30th season exit interview, which takes aim at league leadership. Thirdly, I discuss the WNBPA website, specifically the site that houses the current CBA. These three texts tell a story, both individually and in conjunction with one another, about the ways in which WNBA athletes work strategically to construct a critical public by appealing to the public as a network of relationships. Further, each text reveals the multimodal methods of argumentation that these athletes have mobilized during their labor activism. I close with key implications regarding rhetoric and labor activism in the WNBA.

The public: counter, critical and relational

The body of public sphere scholarship is broad, and its canon heavily debated. Cited across the field as especially generative works are those like Jürgen Habermas's *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere*. Habermas conceptualized the bourgeoise public sphere: a gathering place for the exchange of critical public opinion that can bring leverage to bear on state power.[177] John Dewey added shape to what the public sphere is and does by situating the public as "the authoritative ground of democratic practice."[178] Pairing the theorizations of Habermas and Dewey, we can understand the public sphere as a space constituted by people engaging one another to address issues of mutual concern. Formative theories of the public sphere give us a set of vocabulary with which to talk about discursive democratic practices. Highly idealized, however, Habermas's bourgeoise public sphere requires the bracketing of social difference in order to achieve democratic and rational speech practices. Because this bracketing is a practice inaccessible to non-white, non-male members of the public, the bourgeoise public sphere practically excludes all participants but what Audre Lorde calls the "mythical norm."[179] In response to the exclusivity and elitism bolstered by Habermas's idealized sense of the public, I

turn to three extensions of public sphere theory that complicate the bourgeoise public sphere and elucidate my analysis of the WNBA CBA negotiations.

The first useful extension is the theorization of counterpublics. Formulated as a feminist response to Habermas's singular public sphere, counterpublics describe those collectives of people that do not find themselves located in the majoritarian public. Counterpublics operate as "parallel discursive arenas" in which participants "invent and circulate counterdiscourses to formulate oppositional interpretations of their identities, interests, and needs."[180] In these parallel discursive arenas, issues of *different* public concern—those that are more reflective of the needs of minoritized groups—are discussed, debated, and organized around.[181] Counterpublics are important, as they allow members of subordinated groups to generate communicative appeals in a space that is not "under the supervision" of dominant groups.[182] Furthermore, counterpublics have what Nancy Fraser calls a "dual character," in which their emancipatory potential can be found. This means that counterpublics serve as spaces of withdrawal and safety, and simultaneously as spaces for engagement—often times agitational engagement—with wider publics.[183] We can spot this dialectical tension in the collective action of WNBA athletes, as intermittent with their public engagement are acts of regrouping, strategizing, and decision-making. Counterpublicity has been theorized in sport spaces, such as Monica Crawford's conceptualization of women's sports media counterpublics. Crawford offers the margins of sport—historically recognized as women's sport—as "spaces welcome to a reimagining of an inclusive future of sport."[184] Verity Trott's ethnographic study of Australian women cyclists names digital spaces as counterpublics, which allow for the creation of a more welcoming cycling culture to women and gender non-conforming cyclists.[185] In the field of sport studies, then, we can see how extant scholarship links gender and counterpublicity.

Though Habermas's conceptualization of the public sphere idealizes traditional public address and argumentation, considering counterpublics expands the types of argumentation that each public may use to achieve the common good that is in members' best interest. Fraser reminds us that counterpublics elaborate "alternative styles of political behavior and alternative norms of public speech."[186] As a result, Catherine Palczewski encourages those examining counterpublics to also consider "presentational, nondiscursive elements" of public engagement, such as visual argument or testimony.[187] In this way, a theory of counterpublics allows not only for more folks to participate in the public but also expands the definition of what participation in the public sphere might look like. This chapter is less interested in arguing that the WNBPA is acting as a counterpublic, though that argument could very well be made; instead, I am more interested in the diverse modes of public engagement that theorizations of counterpublics consider. I use this space in public sphere theory to conceptualize the multimodal appeals of WNBA athletes during the 2025 CBA negotiations, such as the reliance on visual rhetoric in the All-Star Game, or the personal testimony of Collier in her exit interview.

The second extension that proves useful in this chapter is the conceptualization of critical publicity, or critical publics. As Dewey pointed to, publics are not everywhere and, in all iterations, democratically oriented.[188] Rather, engaged counter/publics must be cultivated. The outcome of this cultivation is a critical public. Critical counter/publics use their collective ability to engage other publics, speak back to power, and otherwise create change that brings society more in line with the needs and interests of the people. Robert Asen locates one of the largest threats to engaged and critical publics in the contemporary social, political, and economic conjuncture of neoliberalism.[189] Working in a similar fashion to the bourgeoise public, the neoliberal public "disregards difference and discounts inequality to reassert a singular and

universal model of publicity."[190] As a result, the usefulness that is gained in considering publics—namely, the collectivity that is necessitated and centralized by the theory—is neutered by neoliberalism, rendering members of the public first and only as individuals competing under market logics and "detached from critical publicity."[191] Asen concludes his explication of neoliberalism as it effects the public sphere by arguing that "it is difficult to imagine a democratically oriented critical publicity as a process of isolated individual activity."[192] This sentiment leads to one last extension of public sphere theory that is useful for understanding the labor activism of WNBA athletes.

A direct rejoinder to the individually situated neoliberal public sphere is the public conceptualized as a network of relationships. Here I pull again from Robert Asen who, using the works of Hannah Arendt, G. Thomas Goodnight, and the aforementioned Habermas and Dewey, names relationality as a central theme in public sphere theory. Arendt, for example, argues that people exist in public in a "web of human relationships," and it is through this web of relationality that we achieve agency.[193] As a result, Asen contends that "people and the topics they discuss do not, in themselves, constitute public; instead, publics arise in the relationships that people construct."[194] The rhetorical practices of the networked counter/public, then, can be understood as building and reifying relationships not only amongst members of that public, but also between multiple publics. This means the resistive or transformative practices of a public necessitate not just argumentation and engagement, but the construction of new and different *relationships*.[195] To borrow once more from Asen, it is "relationships [that] give publics their energy, dynamism, [and] productive force."[196] This relational quality of publics is one that WNBA athletes take advantage of, calling league leadership, fans, and spectators both out of poor relationality and into more just relationships that align with the athletes' demands. Next, I

use these extensions of public sphere theory to move into an analysis of the collective bargaining between the WNBPA and the league.

The negotiations in three acts

Official negotiations between the WNBPA and the league extended more than two months past their original deadline, and much of the discussion between the two parties has taken place behind closed doors. However, even before negotiations began in earnest, athletes have turned to persuasive tactics designed to construct a critical public. In an arena as currently popular as professional women's basketball in the United States, these tactics have strategically moved CBA negotiations from a somewhat private sphere into public view. Importantly, the multimodal rhetoric generated by athletes during the CBA negotiations frames the athletes and league leadership with the intention of calling spectators into certain relationships. Each text I take up in the following analysis—the 2025 All-Star Game, Collier's September 30th 2025 post-game interview, and the WNBPA website—represents an instance of WNBA athletes' leveraging of visibility toward the end of cultivating a critical public. Through the rhetorical construction of and reliance on various genres of relationality, athletes have looked to gain bargaining power and leverage this power on the league so as to have their demands met. Less interested in the efficacy of athletes' efforts, this analysis seeks to understand how WNBA athletes, as members of a counterpublic, appeal to spectators through the construction of relationships.

We might think of the 2025 All-Star Game temporally as the first instantiation of the public dimension of negotiations, in which the athletes made their first move. While the union and the league met in December of 2024 for preliminary conversations, the proximate and more official discussion kicking off the negotiations between the two groups was slated for July's All-Star Weekend.[197] With league leadership representatives, many of the league's most talented and

popular athletes, and an overwhelming number of fans in attendance, the wide-spread visibility made the Weekend the ideal time for athletes to set the narrative regarding the ensuing labor negotiations. Choosing the All-Star Game in particular, versus other events throughout the weekend, signals immediately a relationship of solidarity amongst WNBA athletes. Though events like the skills competition or the three-point contest were also widely viewed and highly attended, the exhibition match uniquely allowed athletes to communicate their message—"Pay us what you owe us"—as a collective. Despite each athlete belonging to perhaps a different WNBA team than the person beside them or even being organized into two teams for the exhibition match, during this game the labor identity of each athlete transcended other kinds of identities, unifying the athletes under one common cause. Thus, from what can be considered the beginning of the CBA negotiations, athletes signaled to league leadership their intention to remain unified.

In this moment of unified demonstration during the All-Star Game, WNBA All-Stars mobilized forms of visual argumentation to engage publicly. More specifically, through the manipulation of their uniforms the WNBA All-Stars created an image event. Image events are "staged acts of protest designed for media dissemination." [198] In an era saturated with social media, where images populate and circulate more quickly than ever, this form of visual rhetoric can be highly efficacious through the "tactical exploitation" of technology.[199] What's more, image events describe a type of visual argument that traditional theories of the public sphere tend to discount; in other words, the image event most often is a tactic of counterpublics, used to amplify their rhetoric, make available alternatives to dominant conceptions, and give airtime to ideas that otherwise may not receive much seriousness from the more general public.[200] In this way, athletes were able to publicly center discussions of labor and compensation that may

otherwise have stayed behind closed doors. This quality of image events suggests Fraser's feminist work on the public sphere. Fraser destabilized Habermas's assumption that "discourse in the public sphere should be restricted to deliberation about the common good," whereas mentions of "private" issues were always inappropriate and undesirable.[201] We see in this initial instance how members of counterpublics, like those WNBA athletes, can strategically use publicity, shifting private issues into public view in order to create change. Publicity here becomes a tool of the disenfranchised.

Though the players' shirts did have a short discursive claim that was disseminated in their act of protest, the main medium of this dissemination—through photograph—remains important for understanding the rhetorical choices of the athletes. Releasing a written statement would have allowed the union and the athletes to address with more nuance the situation at hand and would have afforded more space for detailed appeals to league leadership and to the public. Highly conscious of their level of visibility, however, athletes took advantage of the All-Star Game as the ideal venue for staging and carrying out an image event. Because image events are able to encapsulate complex political and philosophical stances in ways that are more digestible to, or at least more likely to circulate in, the public, choosing to wear the tee shirts as a collective allowed athletes to circumvent the potential barriers to more traditional argumentation that often exist for those members of counterpublics.[202] Thus, with the collective and somewhat provocative uniform choice, athletes were able to communicate quickly and effectively to a broad audience.

The turn to the manipulation of uniforms, or uniform politics—fundamentally a visual mode of argumentation—is one familiar to WNBA athletes. For example, when then-Atlanta Dream co-owner Kelly Loeffler condemned athletes' 2020 protests against racialized police violence, WNBA athletes used uniform politics to respond. As a result of WNBA athletes

donning tee shirts endorsing her opponent in the Georgia senate race, Loeffler was not only effectively forced out of WNBA ownership but also lost her Georgia senate seat to Reverand Raphael Warnock. Like the "Vote Warnock" shirts, the All-Star Game reveals yet another instance of WNBA athletes relating to one another through their communal identity: one that expands past the basketball court. Further, the uniform politics of the WNBA represent the grassroots activism efforts within the league, as both the "Vote Warnock" and the "Pay Us What You Owe Us" tee shirts were created, distributed, and worn only after players had gathered to discuss how they might respond as a collective. Though symbolic, the solidarity and commitment that WNBA athletes demonstrate when enacting uniform politics has the potential to reap concrete consequences, such as in the case of Warnock.

WNBA uniform politics are also intimately connected to economic in/security in the league.[203] Because uniforms are a source of revenue in the historically financially unstable league, front office leadership has been swift to sanction uniform manipulation that might interfere with the money made from corporate sponsorships. As a result, Bagley and Liao note a present tension between corporate and marginalized voice regarding uniform politics.[204] For example, the league applauded when players used their jerseys to honor LGBTQ victims of the Pulse nightclub shooting, but subsequently fined and punished players who used their jerseys in protest of racialized police violence.[205] Often times, this preference for certain sorts of uniform-based activism lends itself to unbridled promotion of causes that fit well with the neoliberal ideals governing corporate sport; popular feminisms and issues around gender or sexuality take center stage, while activism around issues that challenge the individual and capitalist underpinnings of both sport and greater society—such as athletes' protest in response to the murder of George Floyd—are suppressed through fines or strategic media coverage.[206] As a

result, more radical demonstrations or protest are erased or suppressed, as they threaten both the economic status of the league and the economic subjectivity that neoliberalism invites individuals to embody. A public protest of unjust wages is one such type of protest that the corporate voice of the WNBA is not interested in platforming. Finding themselves with less access to corporate voice, which is often perceived by dominant publics as more "rational," WNBA athletes' turn to alternative modes of engagement, like image events and uniform politics, allows them to appeal to the public in a different sort of way.

While the photographic and embodied medium allows for fast and wide dissemination of their message, the images of WNBA All-Stars in their tee shirts blatantly reveal a fraught relationship between players and the league. This poor relationship is, of course, seen through the sentiment on the All-Stars' tee shirts; understanding the phrase "pay us what you owe us" is simple enough and is reminiscent of a similar campaign put on by the National Women's Law Center in its continual advocacy for equal pay and against the gender-wage gap.[207] In the context of the All-Star Game, WNBA athletes are specifically naming a failure of relationship between the two parties. When the tee shirt demands that "you" pay what is owed, audiences can intuitively interpret the pronoun as referring to the ones who cut athletes' paychecks: league leadership. While the "you" technically isn't named as such, the affordances of visual rhetoric allow the text of the tee shirt to invite viewers to read (or view) between the lines and name the WNBA front office as the ones lapsing in their financial obligation to athletes. Further, the usage of the word "owe" conjures a certain relationship between the two parties, most basically a financial one. To owe means to be in debt, to be bound to someone or something through obligation. One might "owe" someone fiscally, but the idea of obligation can stretch further than that. As viewers are only left with a six-word statement and images of their favorite WNBA

athletes gathered in solidarity, the suggestion becomes clear: the league is both financially and morally obligated to compensate athletes appropriately for their labor and has failed to do so.

This public revelation of league leadership's negligence is the first step in WNBA athletes' attempts to raise a critical public. Though the phrase "pay us what you owe us" is most easily interpreted as directed toward league leadership, the All-Stars weren't telling their front office something they didn't already know. This begs the question: is there another intended audience for the All-Stars' tee shirt message? Here, we can introduce spectators as a third persona in this rhetorical act—a silent other, an audience that is implicated but not directly spoken to.[208] By establishing a relational failure between the players and the league, athletes use their tee shirts to compel audiences to align themselves with the cause of better pay for athletes, as they are invited to name the injustices experienced by WNBA athletes as a product of poor relationship between the two parties. Ultimately, as WNBA athletes make a political judgement, spectators are invited to do the same, allying themselves with athletes to rectify unjust compensation. Through this act, a critical public of spectators begins to be constructed, the power of which is able to be leveraged against the league to create change in the infrastructure of professional women's basketball.

Where the All-Star Game demonstrated players' collective activism and a reliance on visual argumentation, Napheesa Collier's September 30th post-game statement and season-exit interview demonstrates how individual testimony supports the union's labor activism efforts. Collier is positioned uniquely in the league, not only due to her notable level of skill in her craft, but also because of her involvement in the founding and launching of Unrivaled: a three-on-three domestic league that plays during the WNBA offseason. Because of this second role as a founder and owner alongside being an athlete in the league, Collier brings with her knowledge of the

demands of front office leadership, specifically what it takes to start and run a professional sports league. Her statement is spurred by officiated concerns during the 2025 WNBA playoffs. More importantly, however, Collier called out WNBA commissioner Cathy Englebert, linking inconsistent officiating to overall negligence in league leadership and referencing the ongoing CBA negotiations. "The real threat to our league isn't money," Collier stated, "it's the lack of accountability from the league office."[209] Collier's four-minute statement caused a stir, with many of her fellow athletes vocalizing agreement and the union releasing a statement of support in which they claimed "the players know their value even if the league does not."[210] This personal testimony, while seeming to stand alone, is fundamentally enmeshed with the ongoing collective bargaining agreements.

There is a long tradition in strains of Western thought that gives testimony a questionable standing in relation other modes of public argumentation. We might think here of Plato's distinction between knowledge and true belief, with conclusions based on witness testimony forever excluded from the realm of knowing.[211] More modern iterations of this view on testimony reappear in Habermas's bourgeoise public sphere, in which differences in personal experience must be bracketed, or put to the side, in order to achieve truly rational and democratic deliberation. Fraser, Felski, and others quickly pointed to this exclusion of personal experience as a sexist practice, and one that allows dominant publics to actually reify the power of its dominant (white, male) members.[212] A rejoinder to such assumptions about the use of testimony, much of Black feminist thought finds the testimony of some lived experiences valuable for knowledge building and indispensable for democratic decision making in society;[213] Patricia Hill Collins argues that "like other subordinate groups, African American women not only have developed distinctive interpretations of Black women's oppression but have done so by using

alternative ways of producing and validating knowledge itself."[214] For Hill Collins, it is *because* of one's racialized and gendered locations in the matrix of domination that one's lived experience need be made public through witness testimony. The testimony of oppressed groups is powerful for a multitude of reasons, one of which being its ability to "stimulate oppressed groups to resist their domination."[215] Of course, this outcome of public testimony is often diametrically opposed to the interests of dominant groups, lending yet another justification for suppression of the standpoints, or testimonies, of those with marginalized identities. Collier's use of testimony, then, represents a form of appeal that brings with it the power to move audiences not just to align themselves with the appeals of the speaker, but to consider their own oppression as well.

Building from the All-Star Game, in which WNBA athletes insist on a more just financial relationship with the league, Collier's statement is most concerned with the lack of relational care from front office leadership. The statement begins by centering the "lack of accountability from the league office" as the core problem of concern.[216] For Collier, this shows up in poor officiating, in which "officials lose control of the game," putting athletes at risk. It shows up in interactions with league commissioner Cathy Englebert, whom Collier characterizes as dismissive of player concerns and player safety. Collier seems to be most dissatisfied, though, with WNBA leadership's lack of interpersonal care. This theme animates the statement and can first and foremost be seen in be seen in Collier's word choices that allude to a relationship between athletes and the league. The idea of accountability, for one, conjures a similar affective force as the word "owe" and the obligation it necessitates between two parties. We might also notice the affectively loaded terms that Collier relies upon as a signal of this relationship: leadership ignores issues that fans, coaches and athletes are "begging to be fixed;" the characterization of players going to "battle" to protect a league that doesn't value those same

athletes in return; and finally, references to what is "right and fair" for not only athletes but fans as well.[217]

Collier also emphasizes relationality by comparing Englebert's leadership to the leadership of Unrivaled. She specifically cites the actions of Unrivaled president Alex Bazzell as exemplary of what leadership can and should look like.[218] Despite the job being busy, Collier argues that good leadership requires connecting with players and checking in on them throughout the season, especially when an injury occurs. This dedication to maintaining relationship is "what leadership looks like."[219] It is important to note that though this statement is delivered in the height of CBA negotiations, Collier uses her airtime not to complain about salary or ask for revenue sharing, but rather to describe the relationship with league leadership that she would like to see. Collier defines leadership through its "human element," going on to say that "basic integrity" must be upheld in order to lead well. These qualities are essential, not subsidiary; they are, for Collier, the "bare minimum any leader should embody."[220]

Collier then turns even more explicitly to her own experience of dealing with injuries throughout the 2025 WNBA season, enumerating a personal testimony of the league's lack of concern. Many of her fellow athletes reached out to check on her during her time on the injured list (due to ligament and muscle tears resulting in surgery),[221] demonstrating yet again an ethic of care and posture of solidarity that spans the athletes of the league, regardless of team membership. Yet, Collier notes, this ethic of care doesn't seem to apply in all levels of the league. "Do you know who I haven't heard from? Cathy. Not one call. Not one text," reports Collier.[222] Interestingly, what Collier takes aim at here is not Englebert's lack of support for the players' financial demands, but her lack of interpersonal support and demonstrated care. In this moment, Collier is calling out league leadership for their inhumanity and their dismissal of the

interpersonal connections. This is starkly different from perhaps the expected commentary on the issues at hand. One might expect Collier and her colleagues to express dissatisfaction at a variety of other things, namely pay; the union and its players certainly have done so at times, as evidenced by the All-Star Game. Yet the centering of interpersonal relationship does something powerful, in that it shifts the focus from business interests to the inherent humanity of the league. This shift, which relies on constructing and centering relationships, rejects the neoliberal impulse to evaluate everything in terms of individuals and profit margins.

We see this shift from money to relationship again when Collier mentions the possibility of being fined for speaking out against the league. "I'm not concerned about the fine," says Collier, "I'm concerned about the future of our sport."[223] Again, Collier sets money against a much loftier ideal: the future of women's basketball. The lack of concern for the fine, though located in an individual WNBA athlete, reflects the greater ethos of the players in the league; this ethos might be characterized as a willingness to engage in risk and endure the cost, both financial and otherwise, of speaking truth to power.[224] What's more, the union—which includes almost all of the active players in the league in its membership—reflected on Collier's statement, saying that "her words speak to the feelings and experiences of many, if not most or all our members."[225] To call upon league leadership to engage more relationally with athletes in turn forces those in power to see the humanity of those who make the league what it is. This in itself is powerful, but we can also think about how centering human relationship might also lead leaders like Englebert to feel more open to the concerns of the athletes, and more willing to meet their demands. Indeed, it is not a "dismissive, tone-deaf approach" to leadership that will serve the players well.[226] Rather, Collier beckons Englebert and others into more just, engaged relationships, reimagining the ethos of the league as one where leadership comes from

commissioners, coaches, and players alike, all cooperative and working together to make the league into a space that works for each group.

Moving from a strict focus on the connection between the league and its athletes, Collier signals a different sort of relationship—one between the players of the league and the fans of the league—which continues the construction of a critical public. Wrapping up her statement, Collier characterizes herself as someone who has the responsibility to "fight for what is right and fair for our athletes and our fans."[227] Here, linking the interests of the athletes and the fans conjures a consubstantiality in which things like poor officiating, dismissive and impersonal leadership, and unjust wages affect both groups. Through this linking, fans are invited into the negotiations, as Collier constructs the interests of the fans as one in the same with the athletes. This expands the stakes of unresponsive leadership. In this way, fans are implicitly asked to align themselves with those demands of the athletes. To bargain in bad faith, then, means risking the labor power of not just the athletes who play in the league, but the labor of fans as well, whose financial investment, attention to, and care for the league generates revenue. Collier drives this point home with a rather damning sentiment: "We have the best players in the world. We have the best fans in the world. But right now, we have the worst leadership in the world."[228] To bring to bear the labor force of 144 athletes is certainly something that league leadership can and must recognize (especially if the union chooses to strike); even more effective is to compel the fans of the league to side with the athletes, and to mobilize their own critical consciousness to hold league leadership accountable. Collier's strategic choice to include the fans in the conversation does just this.

Importantly then, Collier uses her exit interview as a moment of revelation, in which she brings the simmering problems between league leadership and WNBA athletes out into the open. She mentions this dynamic outright in the statement as well when she says

> I have finally grown tired. For too long, I have tried to have these conversations in private, but it's clear that there is no intention of accepting that there is a problem. The league has made it clear: it isn't about innovation, it isn't about collaboration, it's about control and power.[229]

Clearly, this shift from private to public is one made by Collier in response to the dynamics of the league, signaling her awareness of the usefulness of critical publicity in holding the league accountable and moving closer to the type of relationship with league leadership that Collier and other athletes want to see.

Overall, Collier's statement functions to describe the state of relations, literally, between athletes and their front office leadership. In Collier's assessment—one that was affirmed by many other athletes in the league—Englebert is failing at her job. What failing looks like, however, is poorly relating to athletes and refusing to care for them. Demonstrative of the agreement with Collier's assessment is the affirmation on social media made by retired two-time league MVP Elena Delle Donne, in which she echoes "It's the care for the human part for me. I'm still not sure if Cathy knows I retired. Heard from everyone but her."[230] Thus, Collier's testimony functions to bring these relational dynamics out into public view and to strategically construct a critical public in which favor lands with the athletes. While this statement comes closer to traditional modes of argumentation—it is, in many ways, a public address—the appeals rely much more on the lived experiences of Collier and her colleagues, which effectively conjure a picture of correcting the status of the poor relationship between the league and its laborers.

The myriad of constructed relationships, already established in the All-Star Game and in Collier's statement, are revealed in full force through the online and public presence of the union.

When one navigates to the website of the WNBPA, they encounter a myriad of resources which reveal how the union sees itself in relation to the league. Specifically, the site that houses the current CBA is filled with interesting text. The website explains what a collective bargaining agreement is, as well as the role of the union in negotiating it. It is split into three sections: the first is a small section titled "About the CBA;" the second is titled "Players' Role in the CBA;" and the third section provides the entire text of the current CBA. The site is clearly intended for athletes in the league, as the explanations directly address the speculative player and how they might participate in the union. This can certainly be seen at the end of the "About" section, which concludes with the sentiment "It is your union and you should participate."[231] This statement again mobilizes ideals of obligation, communicating to athletes that an active labor consciousness is not optional, but rather one carried out with duty to oneself and to fellow athletes in the league.

In the next section which describes the players' collective and individual role in the union, the language of democracy appears frequently. The first descriptor that players encounter reads: "as a democratic organization, during bargaining, we will frequently solicit the viewpoint of all players."[232] This statement does two things. First, in describing itself as a democratic organization, the union appears as an alternative site for understanding what democratic engagement and governance looks like. As the 2025 (and now 2026) CBA talks become more and more high profile, the union acts as a model for the wider populace. This is especially important in light of the creeping authoritarianism within the federal government—a space that has been historically and widely touted as a bastion for democratic principles. Second, the statement assumes a diversity of viewpoints in union membership, thus finding it necessary to solicit across the league, rather than concentrating the power of opinion in the hands of a few

players. What's more, the union goes on to say, "we encourage players to call staff and members of the Negotiating Committee whenever they have questions and to make their opinion known."[233] In this way, this statement on the union website connects democracy to a variety of opinions. This conjures what Michael Butterworth and others have called the agonistic qualities of healthy, vibrant democracy.[234] It also means members of the public sphere can and should disagree, should vie for the best path toward a dynamic common good, and should recognize fellow members as challengers with the same end. We see this in the final description on the website, where "ultimately, all players vote on whether to accept a collective bargaining agreement,"[235] making the agreement truly representative of the desires of the players.

Though most of the content that exists on the website is clearly directed at WNBA athletes, the question of audience becomes complicated by the action alert that appears on the website.[236] When navigating to the website, all of the prior mentioned content appears. After about three seconds, however, a large purple box which reads "ACTION ALERT" [sic] appears on screen, immediately capturing the viewer's attention and filling the entire space. The text following the title tells viewers that "after months of stalling negotiations, the WNBA and team owners continue to ignore player demands and jeopardize the future of women's professional basketball."[237] The action alert includes four images of folks showing support for the athletes, many of them young women, one holding a bullhorn and wearing a shirt paying homage to the All-Star Game that reads "Pay Them What You Owe Them," many holding signs with the same message or the demand to "Pay our players," a few signs reading "union strong." Even these few images demonstrate the diffuse support for the athletes. It signals something more, though, to see an image of a young woman holding a sign reading "union strong." We are able to see how the

WNBA CBA negotiations have invited spectators to engage, not only in expressing support for the athletes but in examining and engaging in their own labor identities as well.

The website's appeal to fans instead of athletes in the league is provocative and continues to reveal the tactic of constructing a critical public of spectators during the ongoing 2025 CBA negotiations. At the bottom of the purple box there is a white button that reads "click to support." When one clicks, it takes them to an official letter writing campaign, which asks those on the page to write to Englebert and NBA commissioner Adam Silver on behalf of the athletes in the WNBA. The title of the campaign reads "WNBA players deserve a higher salary and better working conditions."[238] What's going on here is interesting insofar as it provides a view into the more private aspects of the collective bargaining. We see again here with the action alert and the letter writing campaign the intentional choice to allow spectators to see behind the curtain, so to speak. This signals how the WNBPA seeks to ignite a critical publicity. With a goal of 25,000 letters, the WNBPA hope to send the message to league leadership that the public is not only watching but is on the players' side. Where the All-Star Game and the statement by Collier use visual and testimonial modes of argumentation to augment public opinion, the action alert goes one step further, asking spectators not just to think or feel a certain way, but rather to act in a certain way.

This action alert and the letter writing campaign represent the final step in cultivating a relationship between spectators, players, and the union, as spectators are moved from an affective orientation to actual action on behalf of athletes' demands. This movement from affect to action is critical in that it garners more bargaining power for athletes. As WNBA athletes enact their commitments to their collectivity as a union, and to the fans, the web of relationship is strengthened and is able to be levied to get player demands met. This applies to salary but

importantly can be taken up to advocate for new and unprecedented structures within women's leagues that other collective action such as the NWSLPA has achieved—eliminating the draft, expanding free agency protection and options, more robust protections for athletes who want to pursue a family, and more. Yet WNBA athletes' rhetorical construction of relationship with spectators has further import as well. It is through this relationship with athletes that unionization and collective action might take on new and different meanings for spectators. Through a positive affect for athletes and action on their behalf, spectators might be led to examine their own labor identities, thus re-signifying collective action as something that is not only possible or desirable, but something that we are obligated to.

Conclusion

The 2025 WNBA collective bargaining negotiations provide a useful, if in flux, site to study the rhetoric of labor created by the athletes in women's leagues in this contemporary moment. Because WNBA athletes occupy the space of a counterpublic, the athletes and their union have creatively turned to alternative modes of argumentation and engagement, such as visual modes and the use of personal testimony. Through three connected instances, I demonstrated how WNBA athletes have forwarded to spectators a relationship between the athletes and the league that is in a state of injustice and have ultimately invited spectators to make a political judgement by admitting themselves into this relationship. In other words, athlete and union rhetoric functions to rhetorically construct new relationships. This relationship moves from affect to action, ultimately turning spectators into participants who are invested not just in the labor negotiations of the WNBPA, but in their own labor identities as well. I use this case study to understand two key takeaways regarding rhetoric, labor activism, and women's sport.

First, the dependence on the construction of relationships as a form of civic engagement resists the neoliberal tendency to, even in the public, conceive of oneself as ultimately individually situated. While sport may often, on the surface, appear as a collegial and unifying space in culture, Andrews and Silk remind us that corporate sport has been "articulated to neoliberal sensibilities."[239] Not only is this evident in the hyper-commercialized realm of the WNBA and other professional leagues, but sport also then "covertly reproduces the neoliberal order through the seemingly benign experience of sport consumption."[240] Centered on affective stakes, the neoliberal order promotes positive affects toward the nation, the free market, and the individual, and promotes negative affects for the state, public institutions, and expressions of non-majority collectivism.[241] In the public sphere, these neoliberal affects greatly stifle the radical possibilities of critical publicity or of other forms of collective politics. In many instances throughout the 2025 CBA negotiations, the rhetoric of the WNBPA and WNBA athletes have resisted these neoliberal tendencies, instead constructing webs of relationships that obligate groups and individuals to one another. Refusing to detach expectations of common care, like Collier does in her statement, suggests to spectators that there is a different way of moving forward in professional sport. Naming relational obligation reminds of a fundamental interconnectedness.

Second, WNBA athletes' focus on relationship provides an alternative to more merit-based justifications for fair compensation; that is to say, "equal pay for equal play" logics. Certainly, there are merit-based appeals present throughout the labor negotiations: athletes frequently reference the work they have done to get the league to where it is, popularity- and profit-wise. Yet where equal pay jurisprudence and public argumentation can perhaps more easily fall prey to more capitalist understandings of waged labor (i.e. one gets paid for the quality

of work that one performs), appealing to relationship asks instead that members of various publics enact certain, accompanying obligation to one another. While this relational logic, too, can be usurped by the affective drift of capitalist or even authoritarian underpinnings, the construction of new and different relationships holds with it a promise of collectivity that merit-based arguments do not.

Within both of these conclusions, it is imperative to wrestle with the gendered dynamics of the construction of relationships as a tactic of labor activism. Even more specifically, in a league which has been and is much built by the labor of Black women, we must locate the aforementioned relational activism as originating from specific locations within the matrix of domination. Born out of the experience of multiple forms of oppression, Hill Collins argues that the resulting standpoint often lands Black women in "a better position to see their interrelationships."[242] What's more, Hill Collins names struggle for institutional transformation as a primary dimension of the activism of Black women; importantly, she writes "because struggles for institutional transformation are rarely successful without allies, this dimension of Black women's activism relies on coalition-building strategies."[243] We might very well imagine this turn to relational rhetorics in the 2025 WNBA CBA negotiations as yet another permutation of coalition-building strategies that have long been the tactics of those who are stratified through both race and gender. In this way, the rhetorical tactics of WNBA athletes are important to consider not in *spite* of their identities but *because* of them. While athletes overall have much to teach us about collective action and activism, this chapter urges that paying close attention to the specific imports of women's leagues allows us to learn from those who have often navigated the most difficult of obstacles in the public sphere and have still found manners of persuasion.

---

[163] WNBA @wnba, "The 2025 AT&T WNBA All-Star Game is officially SOLD OUT!," *X*, April 29, 2025, 6:09 PM, https://x.com/WNBA/status/1917370738367160510.

[164] Jason Clinkscales, "WNBA All-Star Game Ratings Fall 36% Without Clark Playing," *Sportico*, July 22, 2025, https://www.sportico.com/leagues/basketball/2025/wnba-all-star-game-2025-ratings-1234863618/; "WNBA All-Star Game Sees Ratings Drop Without Caitlin Clark," *Sports Illustrated*, July 22, 2025, https://www.si.com/onsi/womens-fastbreak/news/wnba-all-star-game-sees-ratings-drop-without-caitlin-clark-01k0s98ny7dk.
[165] Colin Salao, "WNBA All-Star Ratings Dip From Clark High, Still 52% Over Old Record," *Front Office Sports,* July 22, 2025, https://frontofficesports.com/wnba-all-star-ratings-caitlin-clark-abc/.
[166] Kendra Andrews and Alexa Philippou, "'United' WNBA All-Stars Wear 'Pay Us What You Owe Us' Shirts," *ESPN*, July 19, 2025, https://www.espn.com/wnba/story/_/id/45778770/wnba-all-stars-wear-pay-us-owe-us-warmup-shirts.
[167] This chapter was written in December 2025; at the time of writing, the union and the league remain at odds, and still have not reached a new collective bargaining agreement.
[168] Kevin Pelton, "WNBPA Says Its Members Have Voted to Strike 'When Necessary'," *ESPN*, December 18, 2025, https://www.espn.com/wnba/story/_/id/47348578/wnbpa-says-members-voted-strike-necessary.
[169] Messner, "Sports and Male Domination"; Adele Pavlidis, "Being Grateful: Materialising Success in Women's Contact Sport," *Emotion, Space and Society* 35 (2020): 1-6, https://doi.org/10.1016/j.emospa.2020.100673.
[170] Duane Rockerbie, "Revenue Sharing in Professional Sports Leagues," *Encyclopedia* 4, no. 3 (2024): 1173-1187, https://doi.org/10.3390/encyclopedia4030076.
[171] Susan M. Shaw, "The WNBA Was the Fastest-Growing Brand in Professional Sports in 2024," *Forbes*, February 4, 2025, https://www.forbes.com/sites/susanmshaw/2025/02/04/the-wnba-was-the-fastest-growing-brand-in-professional-sports-in-2024/.
[172] Ben Pickman, "WNBA Players' Proposal More Than Double Revenue Share Proposed by League: Sources," *The Athletic*, December 15, 2025, https://www.nytimes.com/athletic/6889889/2025/12/15/wnba-union-labor-cba-revenue-share/; Mary Bonema, "Rethinking Revenue Sharing in the WNBA," *Brooklyn Sports and Entertainment Law Blog*, December 22, 2025, https://sports-entertainment.brooklaw.edu/sports/rethinking-revenue-sharing-in-the-wnba/; Michael Voepel, "WNBA Says it Has Offered Uncapped Revenue Sharing Proposal," *ESPN*, October 22, 2025, https://www.espn.com/wnba/story/_/id/46688961/wnba-disputes-union-claim-says-offered-uncapped-revenue-sharing-proposal.
[173] Robert Asen, "Public: A Network of Relationships," *Rhetoric Society Quarterly* 48, no. 3 (2018): 304, https://doi.org/10.1080/02773945.2018.1454216.
[174] Andrews and Silk, "Sport and Neoliberalism"; Robert Asen, "Neoliberalism, the Public Sphere, and a Public Good," *Quarterly Journal of Speech* 104, no. 4 (2017): 329-349, https://doi.org/10.1080/00335630.2017.1360507.
[175] Ashley English, "Is It a Four-Star Movement? Policy Transformation and the U.S. Women's National Soccer Team's Campaign for Equal Pay," *Social Science Quarterly* 102, no. 4 (2021): 1966-1981, https://doi.org/10.1111/ssqu.13026; Sarah Carrick, Alex Culvin, and Ali Bowes, "The Butterfly Effect? Title IX and the USWNT as Catalysts for Global Equal Pay," *Journal of Legal Aspects of Sport* 31, no. 2 (2021): 289-311, https://doi.org/10.18060/25604.
[176] Alex Culvin, Ali Bowes, Sarah Carrick, and Sarah Pope, "The Price of Success: Equal Pay and the U.S. Women's National Soccer Team," *Soccer & Society* 23, no. 8 (2022): 920-931, https://doi.org/10.1080/14660970.2021.1977280; Lindsey Gonzalez, "Equal Pay for Equal Play: How the USWNT Battle for Equality Highlights the Shortcomings of Equal Pay Jurisprudence," *Oklahoma Law Review* 75, no. 3 (2023): 661-686, https://digitalcommons.law.ou.edu/olr/vol75/iss3/8.
[177] Jürgen Habermas, *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere: An Inquiry into a Category of Bourgeois Society*, trans. Thomas Burger (1962; Massachusetts Institute of Technology Press, 1991).
[178] Robert Asen, "Critical Engagement Through Public Sphere Scholarship," *Quarterly Journal of Speech* 101, no. 1 (2015): 136, https://doi.org/10.1080/00335630.2015.999983.
[179] Nancy Fraser, "Rethinking the Public Sphere: A Contribution to the Critique of Actually Existing Democracy," *Social Text*, no. 25-26 (1990): 56-80, https://doi.org/10.2307/466240; Audre Lorde, "Age, Race, Class and Sex: Women Redefining Difference," (paper presented at the Copeland Colloquium, Amherst College, April 1980), 2.
[180] Nancy Fraser, "Rethinking the Public Sphere," 67; Rita Felski, *Beyond Feminist Aesthetics: Feminist Literature and Social Change* (Harvard University Press, 1989).
[181] Asen, "Critical Engagement," 139.
[182] Fraser, "Rethinking the Public Sphere," 66.
[183] Fraser, "Rethinking the Public Sphere," 68.

[184] Monica Crawford, "'If Those Stats Make You Mad, You've Come to the Right Place': Theorizing a Women's Sports Media Counterpublic," *Communication & Sport* 0, no. 0 (2024): 1, https://doi.org/10.1177/21674795241301308.
[185] Verity Trott, "The Virtual Clubhouse: Australian Women's Cycling and Digital Counterpublics," *Feminist Media Studies* 23, no. 8 (2023): 4056-4072, https://doi.org/10.1080/14680777.2022.2149602.
[186] Fraser, "Rethinking the Public Sphere," 61.
[187] Catherine Helen Palczewski, "Argument in an Off Key: Playing with the Productive Limits of Argument," in *Arguing Communication and Culture*, ed. Thomas Goodnight (National Communication Association, 2002), 4.
[188] John Dewey, *The Public and Its Problems* (Swallow Press, 1954).
[189] Asen, "Neoliberalism," 329-349.
[190] Asen, "Neoliberalism," 337.
[191] Asen, "Neoliberalism," 342.
[192] Asen, "Neoliberalism," 344.
[193] Hannah Arendt, *The Human Condition* (University of Chicago Press, 1958), 183.
[194] Asen, "Public: A Network of Relationships," 299.
[195] Asen, "Public: A Network of Relationships," 300.
[196] Asen, "Public: A Network of Relationships," 298.
[197] "What We're Hearing on the WNBA's CBA Negotiations," ESPN, last updated January 9, 2025, https://www.espn.com/wnba/story/_/id/47011671/wnba-cba-negotiations-wnbpa-updates-latest-news.
[198] John W. Delicath and Kevin M. DeLuca, "Image Events, the Public Sphere, and Argumentative Practice: The Case of Radical Environmental Groups," *Argumentation* 17 (2003): 315, https://doi.org/10.1023/A:1025179019397.
[199] Kevin M. DeLuca and Jennifer Peeples, "From the Public Sphere to the Public Screen: Democracy, Activism, and the 'Violence' of Seattle," *Critical Studies in Media Communication* 19, no. 2 (2002): 125, https://doi.org/10.1080/07393180216559.
[200] Delicath and DeLuca, "Image Events."
[201] Fraser, "Rethinking the Public Sphere," 62.
[202] Palczewski, "Argument in an Off Key," 4.
[203] Bagley and Liao, "Blocked Out."
[204] Bagley and Liao, "Blocked Out," 61-63.
[205] Bagley and Liao, "Blocked Out," 57.
[206] Andrews and Silk, "Sport and Neoliberalism."
[207] "Pay Me What You Owe Me," *National Women's Law Center*, https://nwlcshop.org/shop-the-issue/pay-me-what-you-owe-me.html.
[208] Philip Wander, "The Third Persona: An Ideological Turn in Rhetorical Theory," *Central States Speech Journal* 35, no. 4 (1984): 197-216, https://doi.org/10.1080/10510978409368190.
[209] Napheesa Collier, "Napheesa Collier Sounds Off on WNBA Leadership," posted on September 30, 2025, by fox9, YouTube, 4 min., 19 sec., https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Bc9WA8arNZA.
[210] Alexa Philippou, "Players Back Collier in Ripping WNBA, Calling for Change," *ESPN*, September 30, 2025, https://www.espn.com/wnba/story/_/id/46440370/players-back-collier-ripping-wnba-calling-change.
[211] Frank A. Lewis, "Knowledge and the Eye Witness: Plato *Theaetetus* 201 a-c," *Canadian Journal of Philosophy* 11, no. 2 (1981): 185-197, https://www.jstor.org/stable/40231191; William Bondeson, "Perception, True Opinion and Knowledge in Plato's *Theaetetus*," *Phronesis* 14, no. 2 (1969): 111-122, https://www.jstor.org/stable/4181831.
[212] Fraser, "Rethinking the Public Sphere"; Felski, *Beyond Feminist Aesthetics*; Joan Landes, *Women and the Public Sphere in the Age of the French Revolution* (Cornell University Press, 1988); Mary P. Ryan, *Women in Public: Banners and Ballots, 1825-1880* (The John Hopkins University Press, 1990).
[213] Kimberlé Crenshaw, "Mapping the Margins: Intersectionality, Identity Politics, and Violence Against Women of Color," *Stanford Law Review* 43, no. 6 (1991): 1241-1299, https://doi.org/10.2307/1229039; Patricia Hill Collins, "Gender, Black Feminism, and Black Political Economy," *The Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science* 568 (2000): 41-53, https://www.jstor.org/stable/1049471.
[214] Patricia Hill Collins, "The Social Construction of Black Feminist Thought," *Signs* 14, no. 4 (1989): 746, https://www.jstor.org/stable/3174683.
[215] Hill Collins, "The Social Construction," 749.
[216] Collier, "Napheesa Collier Sounds Off."
[217] Collier, "Napheesa Collier Sounds Off."
[218] Bazzell is also Collier's spouse: yet another relational dynamic that should be noted here.
[219] Collier, "Napheesa Collier Sounds Off."

[220] Collier, "Napheesa Collier Sounds Off."
[221] Ramona Shelburne, "Source: Napheesa Collier Tore Ligaments in Thomas Collision," *ESPN*, October 1, 2025, https://www.espn.com/wnba/story/_/id/46451436/source-napheesa-collier-tore-ankle-ligaments-thomas-collision.
[222] Collier, "Napheesa Collier Sounds Off."
[223] Collier, "Napheesa Collier Sounds Off."
[224] Khan, "The Ethos of the Activist Athlete."
[225] Alexa Philippou, "Players Back Collier in Ripping WNBA, Calling for Change," *ESPN*, September 30, 2025, https://www.espn.com/wnba/story/_/id/46440370/players-back-collier-ripping-wnba-calling-change.
[226] Collier, "Napheesa Collier Sounds Off."
[227] Collier, "Napheesa Collier Sounds Off."
[228] Collier, "Napheesa Collier Sounds Off."
[229] Collier, "Napheesa Collier Sounds Off."
[230] Philippou, "Players Back Collier."
[231] "The CBA," WNBPA, accessed January 12, 2025, https://www.wnbpa.com/thecba.
[232] "The CBA."
[233] Ibid.
[234] Michael Butterworth, "The Athlete as Citizen."
[235] "The CBA."
[236] As of January 10, 2026, this action alert still appears on the union's CBA webpage.
[237] "The CBA."
[238] "WNBA Players Deserve a Higher Salary and Better Working Conditions," WNBPA, last accessed January 15, 2025, https://actionnetwork.org/letters/wnba-players-deserve-a-higher-salary-and-better-working-conditions?source=website.
[239] Andrews and Silk, "Sport and Neoliberalism," 512.
[240] Ibid.
[241] Anderson, "Neoliberal Affects."
[242] Patricia Hill Collins, *Black Feminist Thought: Knowledge, Consciousness, and the Politics of Empowerment*, 2nd ed. (Routledge, 2000): 217.
[243] Hill Collins, *Black Feminist Though,* 204.

Conclusion

Given the existing literature and the case studies that I've explored thus far, I would like to highlight four conclusions about rhetoric and activism in U.S. American women's sport leagues in the contemporary moment. First, contemporary activist movements in women's sport demonstrate unique potential for coalition building. Second, whether it be through social, political, or labor activism, rhetors in women's sport have the potential to affectively reorient spectators. Third, in paying attention to the activism in women's leagues, we find a proliferation of possible rhetorical enactments of citizenship and civic engagement. Fourth, and importantly, athletes in women's leagues and the collectives they are part of are productively positioned to rhetorically redefine what sport is and can be. I use the following pages to enumerate each of these key takeaways.

To begin, the moments of activism highlighted in the preceding case studies illuminate how activist movements in women's sport demonstrate unique potential for coalition building. In the NWSL and WNBA, we certainly witness notable and important instances of collective or communal action; in this thesis I focus on examples such as the entire Angel City FC club engaging in their contrarian response to federal immigration action, or the unified rhetorical acts carried out by the WNBA All-Stars to jumpstart collective bargaining with the league. Yet more than demonstrating high levels of solidarity with one another, the rhetoric of athletes and their collectives have the ability to pull people together *across disparate groups*. In other words, rather than siloing individual quests for social and political change both in and outside of their leagues, athletes and their unions are able to create connection between publics, resulting in more efficacious advocacy, regardless of the topic. Coalition, then, asks folks to cohere despite

differences in identity or standpoint. In this way, I differentiate between collectivism and coalition, highlighting the latter as a valuable import of women's leagues.

We see the promise of coalition building enumerated multiple times in just the text of this thesis. Beginning with the opening vignette, the unions of the WNBA and the NWSL released the joint statement addressing the contemporary political moment. This statement was unique, not only because it was a first of its kind, but also because it represented the coming together of two distinct interest groups to enact civic engagement. In chapter two, Angel City FC demonstrated coalition building through the rhetorical construction of an "Immigrant City." The campaign invited not just fans of the club, nor just attendees of the match, to gather under a new team name; rather, the club's rhetoric constituted new and diverse audiences through home- and world-making practices that contrived a hybrid Los Angeles. In chapter three, WNBA athletes and the WNBPA invited spectators to become invested participants in the labor movement, asking them to act on their behalf. In each of these examples, the rhetorical actors of women's leagues reveal their dependence on building alliances between groups in order to make change.

This foundational appeal to coalition building speaks to the strategies that Patricia Hill Collins centers as focal for Black feminists and Black feminist thought. Speaking specifically to the project of Black feminism, Hill Collins locates Black women intellectuals who contribute to articulating an "autonomous, self-defined standpoint" as positioned to "examine the usefulness of coalitions with other groups, both scholarly and activist, in order to develop new models for social change."[244] I want to be specific here: in *Black Feminist Thought*, Hill Collins is interested in coalition building for its potential to bring about the intellectual and political conditions that may advance the wholistic project of Black feminism.[245] The examples of coalition building mentioned throughout this thesis do not claim, at least explicitly, this same aim as their own,

making a one-to-one connection between the coalition building of Black feminists and that of athletes and their unions fraught. However, two important points rise to the fore. First, at the risk of assuming stable identity categories, we must draw attention to the central presence of Black athletes and athletes of color, both women and genderqueer, in professional women's leagues. While these athletes may not conduct their athletic labor or activism from an explicitly Black feminist standpoint, many are nonetheless situated complexly within the matrix of domination. Thus, their standpoints may similarly allow them to see "points of connection," both to Black feminism and other social justice projects.[246] Secondly, Hill Collins reminds us that it would be a mistake to assume that Black feminist thought is relevant only for Black women, or for projects limited to Black women's experiences. Rather, the dialogue practices central for coalition building are strategies that reflect practitioners' "actual need for each other:" a need which is reflected in the coalition building of athletes in women's leagues.[247]

Khan, too, recognizes this interdependence in movements of athlete activism, naming solidarity as a key feature of the ethos of the (Black) activist athlete. Khan mobilizes solidarity in two ways: first, to describe how the ethos of athlete activists "draws its energy from collective protest," and secondly to name "how individuals and groups with dissimilar problems find in each other sources of recognition and support."[248] While both dimensions are important, I would like to discuss the latter as it relates to the strategies demonstrated by athletes in women's leagues. Specifically, I want to highlight the quality of dissimilarity named by Khan to emphasize the relevance of coalition building in discussions of ethos. The idea of coalition building, I argue, elaborates this second dimension of solidarity. Khan provides important examples of how solidarity has functioned for athlete activists, both historically and contemporarily. These examples highlight how athletes find solidarity with one another—

certainly an important quality that athletes have uniquely demonstrated to the public. The case studies discussed in this thesis, however, illuminate how athletes in women's leagues build coalition not only amongst one another (e.g. union to union) but are also able and willing to reach rhetorically outside of sporting contexts to generate alliances. In this way, with reference to the contributions of those athletes in women's leagues, we might consider the solidarity of the athlete activist as a bridge-building tool, one that expands past the arena of sport.

Coalition building is an especially important strategy of resistance in the face of both rising authoritarianism and the pervasive market fundamentalism of neoliberalism. In the United States, the proliferation of fascist rhetoric (not little of it directed at women's sport) has made a divisive era even more so, creating scapegoats of all sorts and extremizing groups, solidifying the boundaries between an ever-present, phantasmic "us" and "them." Meanwhile, regimes of neoliberalism narrate personhood as fundamentally individual, and a variety of institutions constantly reinforce this schema. In short, there is no shortage of forces that encourage people away from coalition. This thesis suggests that in some iterations of rhetorical appeal, captured in the contemporary activist movements of women's leagues, we might find an alternative force that asks something different of us. Because sport maintains an important position in the public imaginary, scholars and activists should take seriously these glimpses of collective and coalitional politics modeled by athletes in women's leagues. Future research might continue to search for specific and contextualized examples of how athletes generate coalition and look for the resources provided within the "cultural theater" of sport regarding projects that require solidarity.[249]

This brings me to a second key takeaway, which is that whether it be through social, political, or labor activism, athletes and athlete collectives in women's professional leagues have

the potential to affectively reorient spectators. In chapter two, for example, I named fannish affect as an important and powerful tool mobilized in the "Immigrant City FC" campaign, as the video transmuted fandom for the L.A. football club and its associated feelings into support for the immigrant constituency of Los Angeles. I then speculated about the potentialities of fannish affect as a unique rhetorical resource that might, in some cases, be mobilized for projects of progressive politics. In chapter three, I highlighted WNBA athletes' appeals to relationship as central in their construction of a critical public. These relational appeals were directed not just at league leadership, but at the fans and spectators of the league, with the intention of moving witnesses from a sense of obligation to a stance of action on behalf of the players and their interests. This affective dimension is not unique to women's sport—in fact, it is a notable phenomenon for sports scholars and sports fans alike.[250] Regardless, it appears as a salient rhetorical theme throughout the case studies in this thesis and, I will argue, has some important implications.

As a reminder, Andrews and Silk link much of the affective force of corporate sport in particular to neoliberal sensibilities, arguing that even the banal experience of watching sports works on spectators to affectively orient them both positively and negatively toward certain notions. With neoliberalism as the organizing logic at play, corporate sport cultivates affinity for things like the nation, the free market, and expressions of individualism, while simultaneously cultivating negative affect for the state, public institutions, and nonmajority collectivism.[251] Extant literature has named and critiqued these preferences for the nation, the market, and the individual in sport. Especially with the swift entry of certain women's professional leagues—namely the WNBA and the NWSL—into the mainstream machine of contemporary corporate sport, these affective orientations are sure to show up in greater force on the women's side: a

phenomenon that critics should continue to pay attention to. With the presence and reiteration of these affective orientations only growing, it is easy to begrudgingly agree with these authors that despite sporadic irritation by athlete-generated activist movements, both neoliberalism and corporate sport "plough on largely unaffected."[252] Yet I will suggest that in some cases, women's sport has the potential to cultivate alternative affective orientations that are contrarian to these neoliberal affects named by Andrews and Silk.

To think through how this might work, we might link Andrews and Silk's work on neoliberalism and corporate sport to Sara Ahmed's exploration of affective economies. For Ahmed, emotion plays a critical role in aligning subjects with or against one another (as I argue happens in the case of the "Immigrant City FC" campaign, or the WNBA CBA negotiations) and that emotions, rather than residing in an individual, are passed between bodies. In this way, Ahmed forwards an "economic model of emotion" in which the trading, the passing back and forth, of certain affects is what "bind[s] subjects together."[253] Ahmed spends time thinking through economies of fear, hate, and love, and how these economies reify relations of whiteness, nationhood, and citizenship;[254] Andrews and Silk then do the work of naming these alignments as they appear in and are upheld by corporate sport. Ahmed's work on affective economies departs from Andrews and Silk's use of Benedict Anderson and neoliberal affects in that for Ahmed, affects work to orient subjects in relation to one another, rather than orient subjects with a particular valence toward certain ideas. Thus, in the resulting orientation forwarded by Ahmed the question might shift from "how is one affectively oriented to the nation?" to "how does affect work to orient one to the national *body*?" This emphasis on bodies is clearly relevant when it comes to sport, in which bodies are centralized and spectacularized. If emotions circulate from one body to another, we might imagine sport as a highly concentrated venue for this sort of

affective exchange that Ahmed characterizes in her work, and that sporting bodies are positioned particularly well to transfer affects that align subjects to one another.

With the work of Andrews and Silk, and Ahmed in mind, I'll suggest here that the rhetoric of athletes in women's sports leagues seems to demonstrate the important potential of not just reorienting audiences in relation to certain ideas but also in reorienting audiences to one another. The preceding case studies provide examples of this dual affective function. In the case of Angel City FC, not only did the anti-fascist rhetoric of the campaign affectively reorient audiences to the nation, but also to the collective body of Los Angeles. In a reverse ordering of these two functions, WNBA athletes and their union affectively reoriented audiences to the athletes themselves and to league leadership, but we also might speculate about an affective reorientation to unionization and collective action as well. A final note about the usefulness of emotions: Ahmed argues that affect is slippery, that is has a quality of "nonresidence" which allows it to do its work.[255] On this point, she writes "it is the failure of emotions to be located in a body, object, or figures that allows emotions to (re)produce the effects that they do."[256] This ephemerality of emotion is precisely, in the case of sport, where its potential lies most. While there is certainly nothing inherently progressive about affective mobilization—Ahmed's work reminds us of this—where might we see, in the embodied performances of athletes, affective economies with progressive potential? How might rhetors in sport take advantage of affect as an ungraspable, transitory, and therefore resistive force in movements for social change? Future research might pay attention to the important role of affective impulses in sport and sporting activist movements, particularly in women's leagues.

A third key takeaway from this project is that by paying attention to women's sport leagues, we find a proliferation of possible rhetorical enactments of citizenship and civic

engagement. With this conclusion, I speak back explicitly to Butterworth, who calls for scholars to more seriously and more thoroughly consider sport as political and the athlete as citizen.[257] First, I'd like to discuss the athletes and collectives of athletes that I take up in my case studies as they demonstrate the active, artistic, and timely political judgement that Butterworth characterizes as necessary in his offering of sporting citizenship. For example, both the joint statement released by the WNBPA and the NWSLPA and Angel City FC's "Immigrant City FC" campaign demonstrate "the concentrated engagement we experience when we must act but there is no method dictating how;"[258] these collectives were not forced nor required to respond to the contemporary moment yet chose to anyways. Further, much of the rhetorical response captured in the case studies are, as I have shown, undertaken "with an eye toward fashioning something new in the world."[259] In fact, this thesis is dedicated to this very quality, to exploring the provocations and possibilities offered by the rhetoric of athletes and their collectives. Finally, the responses of athletes in women's leagues have been timely, referring both to a swiftness in response to a particular exigency, and to a thoughtfully enacted and well-timed rhetorical act. With all of these characteristics in mind, we can certainly understand the athletes of women's leagues enacting citizenship as "a creative process that is responsive to public concerns as they emerge and develop."[260]

Not only do these athletes embody the already described process of sporting citizenship as forwarded by Butterworth, but they also expand upon the possible enactments of it. Though Butterworth foundationally relies on Robert Asen's discourse theory of citizenship, which does center the performance of citizenship rather than formal nation-state associations, the practicality with which this definition is operationalized often results in citizenship performances that align with expected conventions; that is, formulated around logical appeals delivered through public

address. The case studies of this thesis reveal the diversity of argumentative modes with which athletes engage the public, construct audiences, enact political judgement, and invent rhetorically. Specifically, in chapter three, I describe WNBA athletes as relying not simply on public address as we most traditionally understand it but also using visual modes of argumentation and testimony to make their appeals to spectators. The reliance on the affective, enumerated in the paragraphs above, also reveals a deviation from traditional notions of what it means to do engaged citizenship. This set of tactics for civic engagement deviate from normative notions of citizenship. Important to notice, also, is that these are the tactics of counterpublics, or those groups who have been barred from these traditional modes of engagement. Taking seriously these expressions of civic engagement, then, is important as we work to expand what sporting citizenship may look like beyond men's leagues.

This thesis also expands upon Butterworth's conception of the athlete as citizen by forwarding a notion of collective citizenship. Though he does give an example that pertains to more than a singular rhetor (i.e. Steve Nash and the Phoenix Suns), the other two examples provided by Butterworth, and the bulk of the examples associated with engaged sporting *citizenship* (versus activism) are overwhelmingly discussed in terms of the individual. Building upon the first key takeaway that I offer about the potential for coalition building in women's sports leagues, I also want to suggest that we might more fully consider sporting citizenship as collectively enacted. Though, of course, there are instances of individuals enacting civic engagement both within and outside the purviews of this project, the case studies highlight instances of sporting citizenship that, if taken up individually, would have been far less rhetorically powerful. For example, we might consider the meaning of Angel City FC enacting a club-wide response to federal presence in Los Angeles compared to a single player donating

money to a local immigration services firm. In the case of the CBA negotiations, we might consider the entirety of the 2026 WNBA All-Stars appearing in unison in "Pay Us What You Owe Us" tee shirts, versus a single player arriving to the pregame with the tee shirt on. These examples gesture toward an enactment of citizenship that is uniquely communal. Future research might consider, especially in instances of team sports, how collective acts of citizenship are mobilized through sport leagues.

Fourth, and finally, athletes in women's leagues and the collectives they are part of are productively positioned to rhetorically redefine what sport is and can be.[261] To expand on this takeaway regarding the possibilities and constraints that engender the contemporary position of athletes in women's leagues, I start first with an encouragement from Khan for scholars to recognize the historicity of sporting activism. He forwards ethos as useful for noticing the "relationship between contemporary athletic protests and those of earlier eras."[262] With this comment, Khan is speaking to the racism that has shapeshifted yet remains ever characteristic of the U.S. American sporting landscape and an undergirding structure of society writ large. Khan sees a present bound to the past, resulting in a continual placing of "Black athletes at the center of struggles for social justice."[263] Taking this conclusion more generally, I begin with the assumption that understanding contemporary athlete activism means understanding its iterative nature, its connection to the past. This same lineage of resistance to the racist structuring of society in and through sport certainly characterizes women athletes and women's leagues, though academic literature has only recently begun to recognize those Black women who have partnered with the well-recognized male figures in this historical and continuous work.[264] In fact, Brown and colleagues remind us that "the history of women's sport has typically focused on White women and the history of racialized sport and athlete activism has focused on Black men."[265]

Thus, through a double bind of gender and race, the role of Black women and nonbinary athletes in sport history and sporting activism are more often than not erased.

This preceding sentiment illuminates a critical reality that informs the final conclusion in this thesis, which is that gender, alongside race, functions as a critical organizing logic that has influenced both historical and contemporary activism in women's sport leagues. Though experienced differently by different bodies,[266] athletes on the women's side have faced significant barriers to participation and legitimacy in organized professional sport in the United States. This history is made manifest in a variety of conventions, both noticeable and banal. One quintessential example is the sports broadcasting giant, ESPN, Inc., which in 2010 launched a subsidiary extension—espnW—to cover women's sport.[267] This separation between the two platforms functions to establish sport generally as men's sport, and women's sport as something noticeably different, something in need of marking, something *other*. Played out in multitudinous venues—and most obviously displayed in the separation of men's and women's leagues—this distinction leaves athletes in women's leagues firmly positioned outside of sport in its most normative form. Summarized well by Travers, "sport is simply assumed to be a male prerogative unless an exception is noted."[268]

It is under these conditions of exclusion—importantly, both gendered and raced—that the ethos of athlete activism has developed within women's leagues. There are two important implications that follow from this argument. First, though the contemporary moment of popularity and profit around women's sport might tempt us to believe otherwise, the deep-rooted sexism, racism, and heteronormativity that has structured the experiences of athletes has not disappeared. Instead, like Khan draws our attention to, these forces in their symbolic and material manifestations are a changing same.[269] Considerations of contemporary women's sport

must, then, embody the skepticism of Messner and other critics; the current role of women's sport in the zeitgeist is "not without contradictions and ambiguities."[270]

A second implication is that by being positioned as something other than "actual sport," athletes in women's leagues may be able to use this positioning as a rhetorical resource. Less constrained by hegemonic understandings of what sport is and does, athletes and athlete collectives in women's league are less beholden to the articulations that bind sport to particular permutations of nation, citizenship, and gender. Yet simultaneously these same athletes are, indeed, athletes; they play their sport, some of them at the highest competitive levels, regardless of exclusionary logics that deem their labor less than. Thus, athletes in women's leagues may be able to generate alternative notions of sport, and to rearticulate sport in a variety of ways. Through the examples provided in the preceding case studies we see athletes and athlete collectives doing just this kind of work.

There are contemporary instances beyond the case studies contained in this thesis that point to this rearticulation of sport and its promises. We might consider the whistleblowing of professional soccer player Sinead Farrelly and others, whose individual and collective testimony of grooming and sexual abuse from coaching staff triggered a major restructuring of the NWSL, or what NWSLPA executive director Meghann Burke called "the beginning of a reckoning;"[271] temporally closely linked with the athletes of the NWSL ratifying their first CBA, this instance suggests a future in which workplaces adjust to the demands of its laborers. Unrivaled, the three-on-three league cofounded by WNBA athletes in 2023, provides another place to look for alternative sporting practices. Born out of experiences of unjust compensation and unresponsive leadership, Unrivaled has shifted its approach, with each participating athlete owning equity stake in the league; this financial relationship reflects a new way of moving forward in women's

professional sport, giving power to the athletes of the league rather than centralizing that power in the hands of a few. Or consider the Black Women's Players Collective, a non-profit composed of athletes across four international professional soccer leagues (the NWSL, USL W League, NSL, and Premiére Ligue), which seeks to address and change the barriers for athletes of color within the sporting world of soccer;[272] the collective signals yet another example of the coalitional politics, in which disparate groups are united for common purposes. Not without their complexities, each of these examples serve to suggest a starting point for future research.

Outside of the WNBA and the NWSL, scholars are bringing to light further examples of this de- and re-articulation work in sport. Zoe Tzanis, for example, investigates professional endurance athletes' digital labor, introducing the athlete-creative as a distinct theoretical framework to describe the figure who sits at the "intersections of sport and cultural production."[273] Reluctant to dismiss athletes' digital labor and online engagement as only a "means of survival within gendered, neoliberal systems," Tzanis wants to take seriously the roles that athletes play in cultural production, investigating their story telling and self-presentation practices as meaningful—though not without their pitfalls. Reflected in this investigation of the athlete-creative is the kind of nuanced negotiation that allows for the consideration of both the possibilities and pitfalls of a quickly morphing sporting environment, especially for women athletes. We might also think about Linghede and Larsson's figurations of queering acts in sport, in which the authors investigate not only how "sex segregation and gender norms in sport can serve as conditions of possibilities," but also use participant stories to "queer the notion that (athletic) subjects" have fixed sexual identities in the first place.[274] Especially as anti-trans rhetoric proliferates and becomes increasingly violent in sporting spaces in the United States, work that investigates the queer potential of sport serves as a particularly essential space for

future research regarding how counterhegemonic rhetorical approaches to sport can be used to imagine new futures. As with all things, there are certainly limits to the way that sport might be used. However, I end this project with a conviction that sport has untapped rhetorical potential for projects of progressive politics. Future research, my own and others', might look further for the ways that sport overall, and women's sport in particular, can help us begin to imagine, strategize, and enact antifascist or gender-inclusive futures, both within sport and beyond.

---

[244] Hill Collins, *Black Feminist Thought*, 37.
[245] Hill Collins, *Black Feminist Thought*, 38.
[246] Hill Collins, *Black Feminist Thought*, 37.
[247] Barbara Smith, "Introduction," in *Home Girls: A Black Feminist* Anthology, ed. Barbara Smith (Kitchen Table Press, 1983): xxxiii.
[248] Khan, "The Ethos of the Activist Athlete," 166.
[249] Hartmann, "Retheorizing the Cultural Politics of Sport," 40.
[250] For example, the joy I felt when the Seattle Seahawks beat their 2026 divisional rivals—the Los Angeles Rams—to head to Super Bowl LX, carried me through the writing of this conclusion.
[251] Andrews and Silk, "Sport and Neoliberalism"; Anderson, "Neoliberal Affects."
[252] Andrews and Silk, "Sport and Neoliberalism," 527.
[253] Sara Ahmed, "Affective Economies," *Social Text* 22, no. 2 (2004): 119, https://muse.jhu.edu/article/55780.
[254] Ahmed, "Affective Economies," 117-139.
[255] Ahmed, "Affective Economies," 119.
[256] Ahmed, "Affective Economies," 124.
[257] Butterworth, "The Athlete as Citizen," 868.
[258] Nola J. Heidlebaugh, *Judgement, Rhetoric, and the Problem of Incommensurability: Recalling Practical Wisdom* (University of South Carolina Press, 2001): 25.
[259] Heidlebaugh, *Judgement*, 26.
[260] Butterworth, "The Athlete as Citizen," 871.
[261] The phrase "productively positioned" is inspired by Patricia Hill Collins, who argues that Black women are "better positioned" to notice and create interrelationships and alliances. I use this phrase in chapter 3 as well as throughout the conclusion.
[262] Khan, "The Ethos of the Activist Athlete," 175.
[263] Ibid.
[264] For every mention of a figure like Wyomia Tyus, I found triple fold the work on Muhammed Ali, John Carlos, Tommie Smith, or Colin Kaepernick. The comparison isn't even close.
[265] Brown et al., "A Perfect Storm," 1; Letisha Engracia Cardoso Brown, "Post-Colonial Feminism, Black Feminism and Sport," in *The Palgrave Handbook of Feminism and Sport, Leisure and Physical Education*, eds. Louise Mansfield, Jayne Caudwell, Belinda Wheaton, and Beccy Watson (Springer, 2018): 479-495, https://doi.org/10.1057/978-1-137-53318-0_30.
[266] Cooky, "Women, Sports, and Activism."
[267] Isabelle Lopez, "espnW Debuts New Brand Campaign 'That's a W'," *ESPN Press Room*, October 19, 2021, https://espnpressroom.com/us/press-releases/2021/10/espnw-debuts-new-brand-campaign-thats-a-w/.
[268] Travers, "The Sport Nexus," 84.
[269] Khan, "The Ethos of the Activist Athlete," 175.
[270] Messner, "Sports and Male Domination," 198.
[271] Meg Linehan, " 'This Guy Has a Pattern': Amid Institutional Failure, Former NWSL Players Accuse Prominent Coach of Sexual Coercion," *The Athletic,* last updated August 6, 2025,

https://www.nytimes.com/athletic/2857633/2021/09/30/this-guy-has-a-pattern-amid-institutional-failure-former-nwsl-players-accuse-prominent-coach-of-sexual-coercion/.

[272] Black Women's Players Collective, last accessed February 17, 2026, https://thebwpc.org.

[273] Zoe Tzanis, "The Emergence of the Athlete-Creative: Negotiating Boundaries in Digital Sports Media," *Communication & Sport* 0, no. 0 (2025): 3, https://doi.org/10.1177/21674795251408024.

[274] Eva Linghede and Håkan Larsson, "Figuring More Livable Elsewheres: Queering Acts, Moments, and Spaces in Sport (Studies)," *Journal of Sport and Social Issues* 41, no. 9 (2017): 296, https://doi.org/10.1177/0193723517707700.