

THESIS

THE POWER OF THE PLAYER:
EMBODIED SOCIAL ACTIVISM OF PROFESSIONAL ATHLETES

Submitted by

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In partial fulfillment of the requirements

For the Degree of Master of Arts

Colorado State University

Fort Collins, Colorado

Fall 2020

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ABSTRACT

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Designed to contribute to conversations about the political nature of sports, this thesis proposes a new type of rhetorical activism that is utilized by professional athletes. The figure of the athlete activist has a long history in United States sports culture of using their platform to speak to their fans and other audiences about social issues that occur in the lives of everyday citizens. By drawing on scholarship surrounding rhetoric, social activism, identity, and embodiment, this thesis directs explicit attention to the way that the human body functions rhetorically for professional athletes when practicing social activism. Extending Kevin Michael DeLuca's claim that the body is not inherently argumentative, I argue that given the inherent political nature of sports, the body of a professional athlete can be read as political even without intent of the athlete themselves and because of that, athletes are given opportunities to practice "embodied social activism." Representing an evolution of the athlete activist, I define embodied social activism as the way an athlete's marked body or lived experiences can be read as consequential contributions to discourses surrounding social issues. Analysis of the careers and activism of National Basketball Association (NBA) player Allen Iverson and National Football League (NFL) player Michael Bennett stands to show the ways that the athletic body can both function as argument itself and can be used as evidence to support more traditional means of social activism.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I must begin by addressing a misconception that comes from calling this project “my” thesis. I am a firm believer that rarely does an individual create something that is entirely theirs and theirs alone. I may have been the one doing the actual typing but this thesis would not be what it is without the guidance, thoughtful engagement, and support of all my loved ones who have helped along the way. In trying to name them all, I will undoubtedly leave people out and for that I apologize, but I will do my best.

To begin, I must express my appreciation to my thesis committee. I never once in this process felt they were a group of superiors closely monitoring my work. Instead, I have been fortunate enough to call these three true colleagues; people who have taken a direct interest in what I have to say and have taught me so many new things throughout the journey. To Dr. Doug Cloud, thank you for being so eager to work with me and so quick to respond whenever I have inquiries. I am very appreciative that this project has given me a chance to know you. To Dr. Julia Khrebtan-Hörhager, thank you for always pushing me to be better through your questions. I think it is safe to say I have grown so much as a scholar throughout this process and I owe much of that to your charisma and positive energy that always challenged me to look at things differently. And to Dr. Tom Dunn, thank you for everything else. I am incredibly grateful to have had the chance to work with you so closely on this project. I was able to create this thesis under these circumstances largely because of your direction, feedback, and tremendous belief in my abilities. You have become a model of what it means in my eyes to be a teacher and a mentor and I hope to inspire my future students the way you have inspired me. Thank you all.

Next, I must address the environment this thesis was built within. I have been lucky to call the Department of Communication Studies at Colorado State University my home for almost five years now. In that time, I have met so many amazing scholars and students who have helped shape me as an academic and thus made this project possible. To anyone who has listened to me ramble about sports, know that you have helped make this project into what you see today. To Allison Foust, thank you for being my closest confidant since this whole journey began. I am so blessed to have an individual as caring and protective as you in my life. Thank you for making the bad days better. To Savanna Depew, Jordin Clark, and Kira Marshall-McKelvey, thank you for giving my thoughts and ideas such direct attention. Much of what is written in this project was a jumbled mess before I had a chance to talk it out with each of you. In these ways, parts of this thesis are just as much yours as they are mine. Finally, to Jade Young and Jesús Calderón, thank you both for being who you are. I have been so lucky to get to know each of you through this process and am proud to call both of you my family. I cannot wait to see what you do in life. Thank you for helping me get through this stage of my journey.

To end, I will thank my family for all they have done. To my great-grandfather John Doggett, thank you for all your sound wisdom over the years. I have been taught since a very young age to question the way the world works and I owe that curiosity to you. To my late grandmother Becky Hattel, thank you for all the love and care you ever showed me. I wish more than anything that you could read this project. To my oldest friends Cody Olson and Freddie Aguilar, thank you both for being by my side since day one. I have so enjoyed all the laughter we shared while growing up. To my brother Michael Flores, thank you for being the one person I can turn to for anything. You have continued to believe in me when I could not do the same for myself. I love you with all my heart and cannot wait to see what we each achieve next in life.

Finally, although certainly not least, thank you to my parents Jason and Kathy Schade. Dad, thank you for all the challenging conversations we've shared about sports and politics. It is fair to say that a majority of this thesis is a direct response to the times we've talked. More importantly than that, I would not be the man I am today without your selflessness and love. You have taught me the only way I can fail is by not trying. With that type of an attitude, I hope to continue to go far. Mom, thank you for all the love and support you have always given me. I know many children believe their mother loves them more than anything in the world but with you I know that is absolutely true. Thank you for all the long talks, the laughs, the hugs, the presents, and everything else you have given me in my life. In moments when I assumed I would break down, I always knew I could talk with you and find the will to keep pushing, even through all the tears we both shed. Thank you for sharing your strength.

A written project is nothing without a reader, so thank you to whoever decides my work is worth their time. I have appreciated this journey and know it has pushed me to grow. For all who have made me who I am and this thesis what it is, thank you.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

ABSTRACT.....	ii
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS.....	iii
Chapter 1: Introduction.....	1
The Embodied Activism of Professional Athletes.....	4
Methodological Influences.....	8
Constitution of a Text.....	9
Situatedness of the Critic.....	10
Focus on “Values”.....	11
Preview of Chapters.....	13
Chapter 2: Review of Literature.....	15
Rhetoric of Sport.....	15
Social Activism.....	21
Rhetoric and Embodiment.....	30
Rhetoric and Identity.....	37
Proposing Embodied Social Activism of Professional Athletes.....	43
Chapter 3: Allen Iverson.....	51
The Career of Allen Iverson.....	52
Iverson’s Embodiment as Cultural and Resistive.....	54
Cornrows.....	56
Tattoos.....	60
“The Steptover”.....	65
Conclusion – Body as Argument.....	71
Chapter 4: Michael Bennett.....	74
The Career of Michael Bennett.....	75
Evolution of the Athlete Activist.....	79

Differences Between Iverson and Bennett’s Embodiment.....	84
Embodied Social Activism as Lived Ethos.....	86
“Dear World”.....	90
“Black Lives Matter” in <i>Things that Make White People Uncomfortable</i>	92
Bennett’s September 6th, 2017 Press Conference.....	93
Conclusion – Body as Evidence.....	95
Chapter 5: Conclusion.....	97
Embodied Social Activism Now and Moving Forward.....	100
In what ways do political athletes practice embodied social activism?.....	101
How does being an athlete intersect with other components of a player’s identity?.....	103
How do athletes across different sports use their positions as players as a platform from which to participate in this form of social activism?.....	104
Future Applications.....	106
Notes.....	110

Chapter 1: Introduction

On October 16th, 1968, sports history would be made as the world turned their attention to Mexico City to watch the 200-meter race of the Summer Olympics. The United States showed up victorious and claimed two spots on the final podium; athlete Tommie Smith taking the gold medal and his fellow runner John Carlos taking home the bronze. While their performances on the track proved impressive enough to claim victory, it was what they did after the race that truly left an impact on the world. During the award ceremony, the two men raised their fists, donned with black gloves, which became read as a symbol of “Black power” and as a means to protest alongside Americans in the Civil Rights Movement currently afoot in the United States.¹

Smith and Carlos had planned prior to the race to use their victories as a means to contribute to the fight for human rights which was brewing in the United States. Their protest took place months after the assassination of Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. and during the height of Vietnam War protests.² They wanted to take a stand and direct the attention of United States citizens (and the world at large) towards the injustices Black individuals experienced in the country. Years later, Smith and Carlos would reflect on their actions, Carlos saying that “I went up there as a dignified Black man and said: ‘What's going on is wrong,’” while Smith stated their actions were “a cry for freedom and for human rights. We had to be seen because we couldn't be heard.”³ The image of the two standing with their fists to the air is iconic and stands to this day as one of the most recognizable instances of the intersection between athletics and social activism. Using their bodies as symbolic of greater social issues, the two athletes' names would forever be associated with activism.

Professional athletes' history of participation in social/political activism is longstanding in the context of the United States. It is because of the deep history that one may be hard pressed

to find an exact “starting point” of such an intersection. Many stories that detail athletes’ history with social activism may begin with the actions of Smith and Carlos in 1968, but these efforts cannot be appreciated without paying credit to athletes like Jesse Owens, Bill Russell, Kareem Abdul-Jabbar, Muhammad Ali, and Jackie Robinson who protested before them.⁴ The list of individuals to use sports for protest after 1968 is even longer, including athletes like Craig Hodges, Mahmoud Abdul-Rauf, Billie Jean King, and Babe Didrikson Zaharias to name only a few. But as *The New Yorker* writer Hua Hsu articulates, “athletes have always been political...but until recently they rarely possessed the means to explain themselves so directly to their fans.”⁵ What one may call a “political athlete” has always existed, yet it was only until recently that their actions became so pronounced and “seen” by a U.S. audience.

In the first part of the 21st century, the role of athletes in the fight for social change has once again resurfaced before the eyes of the United States’ public. Such a resurgence of activism has been pioneered by individuals like former San Francisco 49ers quarterback Colin Kaepernick, who, on August 26th, 2016, kneeled during the U.S. National Anthem before a preseason NFL game in an attempt to contribute to the conversation about racial injustice in the United States. Much like Smith and Carlos, Kaepernick used his body to draw attention to larger societal issues that United States citizens were facing. The act has been condemned by some, praised by others, and certainly influenced the ways in which fans may consider the divide between politics and professional sports in the current day and age. Kaepernick’s protests were supported by other players across various sports and has re-ignited the role athletes play in existing political dialogues.⁶

A common quality of a majority of these athletes’ activism is how their protests require explicit written/spoken discourse and can be linked to a specific social movement. When

Muhammad Ali and fellow Black athletes gathered for “The Cleveland Summit” in 1967, Ali’s rhetoric could explicitly be tied to social movement rhetoric used by those that protested the U.S. war with Vietnam.⁷ When Kaepernick took a knee in 2016, his discourse used to justify those actions could clearly be linked to efforts by Black Lives Matter (BLM) protestors of the time.⁸ Such similarities were even enough to depict Kaepernick as “the Muhammad Ali of this generation.”⁹ In these ways, it was easy to see when an individual was a political athlete; their discourse and rhetorical choices linked to specific social causes and movements.

But does an athlete need a specific social movement to link their discourse to in order to be deemed “political”? To extend this question further, does an athlete even need discourse and “rhetoric” in a traditional sense in order to fight for social justice and change? Questions like these drive my research and fuel the arguments made within this thesis. To further exemplify what I mean, take quotes made by esteemed sports writer Dave Zirin in reference to the “activism” of athlete’s in a more contemporary moment. Zirin states:

Being a political athlete isn’t always about grabbing a microphone and doing a discourse about racism and oppression. Being a political athlete can also be about how you represent yourself.¹⁰

As Zirin’s comments highlight, sports have entered a new era of activism. Given the ever-present nature of the media in the lives of athletes, opportunities to speak out on social justice topics are more plentiful now than ever. However, athletes who are constantly in the gaze of the media and thus subjected to constant observation by fans and critics have the potential to be political simply by being themselves. These athletes represent not only a new kind of political athlete but an athlete who does rhetorical activism in a new kind of way. Unlike political athletes of the past (like the aforementioned Muhammad Ali or even Colin Kaepernick) athletes in the contemporary era do not need to utilize their platform as a member of a professional sports team to explicitly

speak on the injustices being experienced by millions of Americans. For some athletes, these hardships are embodied within them and their existence as a human on a public stage like professional sports is enough to constantly remind those who watch their play that these problems are here and real. In these such ways, an athletic body itself is rhetorical; political stances can be made through existence, refusal to conform, and the use of embodied experiences to inform activism.

The Embodied Activism of Professional Athletes

It is precisely this type of new political athlete described above and their attendant rhetorics that this thesis will explore and better understand. I argue that being a political athlete is not always limited to an athlete's explicit protest and political discourse; rather, social activism rhetoric can be an embodied experience that is highlighted by athletes through how their body is read by audiences or the effect their embodied identity has on influencing the way they protest. In these cases, social activism becomes an embodied experience in which being in the public eye due to talents within a given sport allow some athletes opportunities to conduct social activism through their honest, lived experiences. Political athletes of the past have shown what it means to use the body in moments of social protest to make an argument but this thesis extends upon that, arguing for the further understanding of what I will call "embodied social activism" to explore the way that an athlete's body *is* argument or the ways in which embodied experiences *inform* an argument.

In this thesis, I define embodied social activism as *the way an athlete's marked body or lived experiences can be read as consequential contributions to discourses surrounding social issues*. Embodied social activism shows how an athletic body is of rhetorical value in social and political discourses. Embodied social activism of professional athletes stands as a form of social

activism in which the argument of the athlete is dependent on their embodied selves; identity markers as they are read in contexts by audiences become a stance of an athlete, regardless of their intentions. An athlete may choose to call upon their embodied self and their lived experiences as a form of ethos that aids in more traditional modes of social activism, but at its core, embodied social activism is an inherent use of the body as argument, sometimes performed regardless of the athlete's intentions.

Arguing that contemporary political athletes rely on embodied social activism raises numerous questions to consider within this thesis project. These research questions include but are not limited to queries like, 1) In what ways do political athletes practice embodied social activism? 2) How does being an athlete intersect with other components of a player's identity? and 3) How do athletes across different sports use their positions as players as a platform from which to participate in this form of social activism? Questions like this help to guide this thesis project in order to further develop an understanding of how embodied social activism of professional athletes is practiced and subsequently read by audiences.

In order to answer these questions and others, this thesis conducts a critical analysis of two case studies surrounding professional athletes who have practiced this concept of embodied social activism. This thesis begins its journey with the embodied social activism of National Basketball Association (NBA) Hall of Famer, Allen Iverson. Building on the assertion made by Zirin, I argue for the ways that Iverson stands as an exemplary introduction for what it means for an athlete to participate in embodied social activism. Iverson's activism is purely embodied with no link to explicit discourse that may be tied to a social movement and in this way, his body itself stands as argument in the context of the NBA. After using Iverson as a starting point to detail how embodied social activism allows the athletic body to function as inherent argument, I

then introduce the efforts of National Football League (NFL) champion Michael Bennett to show the ways embodied social activism functions when an athlete uses their body and its embodied experiences to inform their political discourse. By looking at the ways Bennett's activism is impacted by his embodied experiences, this case study seeks to further expand how embodied social activism is understood. By reading Bennett's case alongside that of Iverson, I argue for how embodied social activism may be utilized by professional athletes to strengthen their arguments in more traditionally understood social movement contexts.

I have chosen to analyze the embodied social activism of these two individuals because such cases allow for an appropriate and reasonable scope within this thesis project. Iverson and Bennett are similar cases in many regards; both are Black men who were born and play professional sports in the United States of America. Professional sports have an international reach and such arguments about embodied social activism can likely be linked to athletes around the globe but for the purposes of this thesis, I have chosen Iverson and Bennett as they both operate within similar contexts and thus allow for a more manageable analysis. It is also important that both case studies come from similar geographical and political contexts as this will allow for the two examples of embodied social activism to be more easily compared and contrasted.

I find it pressing early on to address my own positionality as it compares to Iverson and Bennett. I am a young, white, male scholar concerned with rhetoric and the intersections of sports and culture. My fascination with sports is born purely from the standpoint of a fan, as I have never competed in any sport on a collegiate or professional level. In these dimensions concerned with my race, age, class, and career orientation, it becomes apparent that I am quite different than the subjects this thesis seeks to understand. These differences in identity markers

are precisely why I would like to make it clear that I in no way am attempting to speak *for* Iverson or Bennett as if I understand what it is like to walk in their shoes. I do not know what it means to be a Black man and I am also distanced from the challenges that come from being a professional athlete constantly in the spotlight of the media. This project is not about speaking on behalf of these professional athletes but instead amplifying their voices so that their stories may be understood by different audiences, particularly those who are concerned with the rhetoric of sports. If anything, I believe this thesis can be picked up by individuals similar to myself (being white people not involved in professional athletics) with the hopes that such audiences then understand more about the stories of Black professional athletes and the struggles they experience based on how they are represented in the media.

This study of the embodied social activism of Iverson and Bennett holds significance in a number of ways. Most presently, it contributes to conversations by sports communication scholars like Andrew C. Billings and Michael L. Butterworth as to how sports should be understood as a political arena. As I will further evaluate within this thesis project, sports should not be seen as a separate component of our societal realities. As Billings et al. assert, sports should be understood as a political space, one in which social issues are put on display for fans and audiences to consume.¹¹ This thesis contributes to those understandings by seeking to evaluate how the athletic body is also a political one and that the two identity categories overlap and influence the way sports communicate to audiences about social and political issues.

Secondly, and what I find most important about this thesis project and my research at large, is that it seeks to challenge the ways audiences may look at athletes in order to greet them with more humanity and human understanding. At its core, this thesis looks to better understand the ways that professional athletes are “read” by audiences. As will be detailed throughout this

project, the way we communicate our identity becomes largely dependent on layers. Few, if any, individuals can be reduced to a singular identity marker and based on the context in which individuals find themselves, audiences may be more drawn to particular identifications of that person than others. When it comes to professional athletes, it may be easy for fans to fixate on privileged identity markers like class and ignore other markers that are disenfranchised, like race. It is my intention through this thesis to contribute to conversations that remind us of the humanity of athletes; to use the communication of identity through embodied social activism to show that individuals who play sports are much “more than an athlete.”¹² This thesis shall demonstrate the roles athletes play in the community and remind readers that their activism is powerful and influential.

Methodological Influences

The two analysis chapters of this project will consist of rhetorical analyses of embodied political activism of Iverson and Bennet and will use textual and material artifacts to achieve such analysis. My task is to interpret rhetorical evidence of embodied activism of the two athletes and bring to the surface how they work with rhetorical consequence. Therefore, the primary method for my project is rhetorical criticism. Using rhetorical criticism as my method of analysis, this thesis also functions under methodological assumptions inspired by other rhetoricians and communication scholars. My methods of analysis in this thesis project are highly influenced by the work of rhetoricians like Raymie E. McKerrow and Michael Calvin McGee as to what constitutes a text and Edwin Black and Carole Blair as to the importance of the situatedness of the critic when performing rhetorical criticism. This thesis process is also guided by a mindset of deliberative democracy with a focus on values as detailed by Martín

Carcasson and Leah Sprain. In what follows, I will explain how I implement their approaches into my own research.

Constitution of a Text

To begin, the work of McKerrow surrounding critical rhetoric is centrally important in the development of an understanding of embodied social activism. Rhetoricians may utilize a mindset that accounts for the critical nature of rhetoric when critiquing it.¹³ As stated by McKerrow, “rhetoric...emerges with status in the analysis of a discourse of power.”¹⁴ Frontloading the critical nature of rhetoric on the part of the rhetorician allows for analysis that pays attention to power dynamics at play in the discourses that are created through rhetoric. For the sake of my analysis, embodied social activism as rhetoric to be analyzed is always critical in nature as it asks audiences to examine existing power dynamics at play. In these ways, while an instance may not be read as “political” in a traditional sense that associates the term with partisanship and formal politics, the rhetorical artifacts examined in this project are always concerned with the politics of power dynamics.

While McKerrow details how rhetorical texts may be viewed as critical and telling of power structures, it is also important to acknowledge how these texts are constituted. Influenced heavily by the idea of fragmentation by McGee, this thesis project constructs its texts by taking into account a wide array of rhetorical “fragments.” McGee famously wrote that:

We begin by noticing that rhetors make discourses from scraps and pieces of evidence. Critical rhetoric does not begin with a finished text in need of interpretation; rather, texts are understood to be larger than the apparently finished discourse that presents itself as transparent. The apparently finished discourse is in fact a dense reconstruction of all the bits of other discourses from which it was made.¹⁵

As rhetorical critics, we recognize that texts rarely come to us as a whole piece. We must place the puzzle together when looking at a rhetorical text in an attempt to see all the different lenses

of influence that exist which made the piece possible. Iverson's implementation of his body as resistance cannot be reduced to a singular moment in his career; Bennett's choice to use his embodied experiences to inform an argument cannot be understood through a single press-conference. To do so would be to lose out on all the richness that may come from piecing together such fragments of a larger narrative.

Influenced by the work of McKerrow and McGee, this project recognizes the effort that goes into understanding a rhetorical text. Even the term "text" can be used loosely, as much of the analysis of embodied social activism relies on building context from which the rhetorical moments are understood within. My goal within this project is to always remember the critical nature of rhetoric and that every instance can be read in a way that speaks to how power is functioning.

Situatedness of the Critic

While McKerrow and McGee encourage rhetoricians to consider the critical and fragmented nature of the texts they choose to critique, scholars like Black and Blair pay significant attention to the role of the critic in understanding these texts. This thesis project attributes great respect to rhetoricians like Black and Blair because without their ideas, my understanding of myself as the critic in relation to the given texts would be severely lacking. Paying attention to the work of Black, I recognize that this thesis project and my reading of the texts is unique based on who I am as an individual. No application of rhetorical criticism is ever done in the same way because no two critics are identical.¹⁶ Each researcher brings their own experiences to the table before analyzing a text, so I find it pertinent to recognize that who I am as an individual (my values, identity markers, standpoints, etc.) all influence how I will read the texts I have chosen for analysis.

Extending further on such ideas, an application of theoretical questions proposed by Blair also influences the way in which I perform rhetorical criticism. Blair speaks to the personal nature of rhetorical criticism in her 2001 piece “Reflections on Criticism and Bodies: Parables from Public Places” and asks her readers numerous questions about the nature of rhetorical criticism, many of which have stuck with me and guide my studies.¹⁷ The two questions I feel most strongly resonate with me are “what relationship does or should the critic have to her/his object of study” and “how do critics make their objects of study and their critical readings matter to those who read them?”¹⁸ As a scholar who studies sports, I recognize first and foremost that not all of my readers are as familiar with the context from which I pull my texts. I also recognize that as someone who consumes sports media on a regular basis, I am in some ways caught up within a culture that many may not have the same desire to invest in. With Blair’s questions in mind, this thesis project is guided by a desire to look within a culture like that of sports and see all the rhetorical value it holds. Then, if I have done my job as a rhetorical critic, I can show my audience all the benefit that can come to the field of communication scholarship if academics are to take the rhetorical analysis of the arena of sports seriously.

Focus on “Values”

As one final methodological note, I would be unwise not to mention the influence that public argumentation and deliberative democracy scholars Carcasson and Sprain have had on the way that I look at texts. Considering the impact of organization’s like Colorado State University’s Center for Public Deliberation, my approach to rhetorical criticism largely has to do with the way value judgments influence how an audience reads a text.¹⁹ The following statement summarizes the way that value judgment influences where individuals land on public issues:

In a diverse democracy, public problems inherently involve competing positive values. Addressing these problems requires making tough choices—decisions defined by the tradeoffs inherent in situations where multiple legitimate values point reasonable people in conflicting directions.²⁰

While Carcasson and Sprain's work is primarily engaged pragmatically and used in community projects that promote civic engagement, such an understanding about the ways that citizens conceptualize public problems becomes relevant in the context of sports and more broadly a landscape of media. As will be demonstrated in the analysis sections of this thesis project, I argue that the way an individual may read a text associated with an athlete becomes largely influenced by which identity marker they are valuing/privileging at that time of reading. Building upon ideas by Kimberlé Crenshaw and other identity/intersectionality scholars, the introduction of work by Carcasson and Sprain allows rhetoricians to see the ways that not only do our own values influence how we read a text, but that every audience member consuming that same text has their own unique values that influence them.²¹

As demonstrated by the included literature, it becomes clear that methodologically this project falls in line with other examples of rhetorical criticism before it. Guided by the theoretical questions posed by rhetoricians and critical cultural scholars before me, this thesis project seeks to outline rhetorical texts that when analyzed, explain the way that embodied social activism functions through athletes. To do this, in the Iverson chapter I will show the way the athletic body may function instinctually to make inherent political arguments through the way that body is read by audiences. In the Bennett chapter, I will extend this analysis further and show the ways that when an athletic body is subject to surveillance by the public due to the presence of the media, an athlete may then use these embodied instances to inform more traditional forms of athlete activism.

Preview of Chapters

This thesis project will consist of four chapters and will proceed as follows. The first chapter introduces theoretical frameworks that are necessary for understanding the projects core arguments. Scholarship on rhetoric and its relationships with sports, embodiment, and identity are introduced to build a space to discuss embodied social activism of professional athletes. The first chapter ends with a synthesis of what is meant by the concept of embodied social activism of professional activism, to address the terms scope and what it contributes to the field of rhetoric as a whole.

In chapter two, I provide my first example of embodied social activism by analyzing the body rhetoric of Allen Iverson. This chapter argues political athletes need not be limited to explicit discourse in order to be deemed political; as such, the analysis of embodied markers of Iverson's identity like his tattoos, cornrows, and the way he acted on the court are used to show that the athletic body can make arguments without reliance on traditional rhetoric means like that of written or spoken word. By analyzing moments of Iverson's career in which the rhetoric of his body became resistive (specifically his choice to wear cornrows, his featuring on *NBA Hoop & SLAM* magazine covers, and an analysis of his iconic "Stepover" Tyronn Lue) chapter two argues why Iverson is a political athlete and how he has achieved that status through his embodied social activism.

Chapter Three introduces the efforts of NFL player Michael Bennett as another case study to show how embodied social activism may be used alongside more traditional means of social activism. Bennett's activism is read in contrast to Iverson's because while both men used bodily experiences in order to participate in social activism, Bennett's embodied experiences become linked to a specific protest and political discourse while Iverson's do not. Analysis of the

activism by Bennett (with explicit attention paid to his embodied experience of being racially profiled by Las Vegas Metropolitan Police) sheds light on the ways that this new form of rhetorical/social activism can be accompanied with traditional means to varying degrees of success by the rhetor. The Bennett chapter will show how embodied experiences that have been publicized through the media may be used as ethos for an athlete when they practice activism.

The fourth and final chapter reviews and summarizes the arguments present in this project. By situating our attention on the current state of political athletes, I will show the relevance of understanding embodied social activism in a present context. Reflection on the thesis and its ideas will also be accompanied by an evaluation of what these potential interventions mean for the fields of rhetoric, activism, and sports communication as a whole.

Chapter 2: Review of Literature

While this thesis project builds itself around many theoretical concepts, at its core, the project seeks to explore the relationship between the idea of rhetoric as it pertains to sport, social activism, embodiment, and identity. In what follows, I will outline ideas necessary for an understanding of this thesis project. I will begin by detailing how the rhetoric of sport is a growing subfield for rhetoricians that deserves further exploration. Next, I will outline rhetoricians' history of interest in social activism and how such conversations have also branched into the arena of sport. I will then explain theories that investigate how the rhetoric of materiality is studied, paying close attention to how rhetoric manifests in material bodies and physical spaces, while also detailing how what I will call the "athletic body" is already a site of analysis for scholars. This section will be followed by a discussion of rhetoric's intersection with identity and will build the case for why "athlete" can be viewed as an identity marker. Finally, I will end by synthesizing what has been presented while arguing for how such theories inform and help make embodied social activism of professional athletes a possible mode of rhetorical activism.

Rhetoric of Sport

An argument for a new type of rhetorical activism practiced by athletes begins by defining "rhetoric" and the forms it takes. For many rhetoricians and communication scholars, rhetoric is best defined by Aristotle: "observing in any given case the available means of persuasion."²² Though a touch abstract, Aristotle's definition of rhetoric allows for flexibility in what could be constituted as rhetorical, as he further insists that rhetoric is not limited to any specific class of subjects.²³ Aristotle's brand of rhetoric is primarily concerned with oratory and

argues for the ways that discourse can be used forensically, ceremonially, and politically—the latter of which holds the most importance for my arguments in this thesis.²⁴ This project contributes to conversations within the field of communication and because of that, regardless of the rhetorical artifact chosen for analysis, all points made at their core are interested in how rhetoric is communicative. Aristotle's argument that rhetoric is not bound to a singular class of people or subjects is of utmost importance because as this project will detail, there are a vast range of topics and artifacts that stretch beyond traditional oratory which hold communicative value.

While Aristotle points to the ways that many subjects hold rhetorical meaning, we also must address how subjects are defined and constituted. Rhetorician Sonja K. Foss details how rhetoric can be broken down simply into how humans use symbols to communicate.²⁵ For Foss, there are three primary dimensions to this understanding of rhetoric; 1) humans create rhetoric, 2) symbols are the medium for rhetoric, and 3) communication stands as the purpose of rhetoric.²⁶ It begins with the rhetor and the creation of a message. This message is communicative and presented in the form of symbols. Rhetoric gets its depth from the fact that these symbols can take many forms; a symbol becomes anything that stands in to represent something else. For this thesis, rhetorical symbols are ever-present and can take numerous different forms.

Foss's definition of rhetoric also brings into question what may be constituted as a rhetorical artifact or text. According to Foss, the two terms are distinguishable because rhetorical acts are events performed by a rhetor for an audience that are fleeting or ephemeral while artifacts are such acts that have been transcribed or recorded for use that extends beyond a singular time.²⁷ Rhetorical acts can be turned into texts, recording, or something of the like and

then be considered rhetorical artifacts. This project at times utilizes the terms interchangeably because of the fluidity of the subject matter being examined – the body and its actions as a site of rhetorical exploration contains tenants that does not lend itself to an either/or definition.

Aristotle and Foss each provide welcomed starting points for understanding rhetoric and help conceptualize what may be considered an artifact of examination, but for this project I intend to use a definition of rhetoric more situated in the contemporary moment. In particular, Communication scholars Carole Blair, Greg Dickinson, and Brian L. Ott offer a definition of rhetoric with a scope sufficient to the question of athlete embodied social activism. For these three scholars, rhetoric is “a set of theoretical stances and critical tactics that offer ways of understanding, evaluating, and intervening in a broad range of human activities.”²⁸ In this understanding, rhetoric extends beyond discourse exclusively; rather, rhetoric can also be analyzed through actions and environments as well. For Blair, Dickinson, and Ott, rhetoric concerns itself with any event, object, practice, or discourse that is deemed “meaningful.”²⁹ As a term, “meaningful” may be seen as subjective but the three scholars argue that a rhetorical artifact or act may be considered meaningful if it is delivered in an “emotionally inflected sense” or carries “evocative, affective weight.”³⁰ For this project, Blair, Dickinson, and Ott’s definition becomes useful as it encompasses the many different forms that rhetoric may take and thus allows my scope of analysis to range across many unique forms of text.

I also choose to align myself with Blair, Dickinson, and Ott’s definition of rhetoric because of the partiality they feel is rooted at the concept’s core. Similar to the ideas presented by Foss in regards to rhetoric’s association with symbols, Blair, Dickinson, and Ott acknowledge that phenomena associated with signs always allow for partiality because signs are always left up to an individual’s interpretation.³¹ The events, objects, practices, and discourses that are

considered rhetoric are constantly “embracing some notions and despising others, willfully or not.”³² This project also puts careful emphasis on the latter portion of that statement; it must be recognized that I as the rhetorical critic will be making claims about the rhetoric I have chosen to study but that these claims are ultimately my individual readings of the artifacts and acts. Not only are these readings unique to my individual standpoint as a critic as Black would say, but that the rhetorical impact of said artifacts or acts is not always conscious or intentional.³³

Regardless of intentions, rhetoric must be considered to be consequential because of the influence it carries. Blair, Dickinson, and Ott remind us that traditional analyses of rhetoric were concerned with effect; in an oratory sense, rhetorical critics looked towards the degree to which rhetors reached their goals when giving an address.³⁴ The field has since extended further than that and now focuses on the consequences of rhetoric, whether those consequences were intended or otherwise. Specifically, when examining embodied social activism, a practice that this project will show is sometimes conscious and other times simply lived, recognizing that rhetoric holds consequences is explicitly important. There are a wide range of human activities that hold rhetorical value and the explicit weight to which this value is expressed differs from practice to practice.

One such human activity in which rhetoric plays a major role is that of sports. Indeed, Deborah Hawhee makes the case in her book *Bodily Arts: Rhetoric and Athletics in Ancient Greece*, that, at least among the people of the ancient Greek city-states “athletics and rhetoric were thus bound together.”³⁵ Pulling from arguments made by the ancient Greek philosopher Isocrates, Hawhee articulates the many ways that Greek citizens would bind together the ideas of athletics and oratory because of all the similarities the two practices shared. Oratory, the primary connection to rhetoric at that time, was deeply dependent on the connection between the mind

and the body. Delivery practices of speeches required orators to be trained in the ways of using their body to their advantage in their craft; similarly to how athletes need an understanding of the duality between mind and body in order to be skilled at the roles they hold.³⁶ At the time of ancient Greece, oratory and athletics were often practiced alongside each other and utilized similar techniques of practice and because of this, rhetoric has always found itself closely engrained in sports. Hawhee's central argument becomes pressing and leads this thesis project in many ways because it shows the inherent connection between athletics and rhetoric and thus argues that all athletic events are inherently rhetorical to some degree.

In more modern times, rhetorical scholars have pointed out that this connection between rhetoric and sports continues to this day. For instance, Communication scholar Barry Brummett argues that sports and games are "persuasive communications, texts that, intentionally or unintentionally, influence the social and political attitudes held by the public."³⁷ Sports are not just a means to produce rhetoric like we would see in allowing athletes to speak at a press conference after a game or to the media through an ad sponsorship; instead, by using Brummett's definition, sports themselves stand as rhetorical artifacts. The games, the moves, and the competition itself become communicative texts from which rhetorical analysis can be conducted. Brummett's postulations become critical for this project because it branches away from traditional reliance on discourse as the sole source of rhetorical engagement. Yes, post-game press conferences and athlete's verbal comments can, have, and will be analyzed but this project utilizes a theoretical framework that pays greater attention to the body and how it functions rhetorically.

Brummett's definition of sports and games as rhetorical should also be bridged with increasingly contemporary arguments made by sports communication scholars like Andrew C.

Billings, Michael L. Butterworth, and Paul D. Turman as to how sports are inherently political. In a section of their textbook *Communication and Sport: Surveying the Field* titled “Politics and Nationalism in Sport,” the three scholars address a common misconception held by general publics that sports exist as apolitical or an escape from the “real world.”³⁸ A closer analysis as to all the nationalistic rituals reinforced by sports or a look at the long history of protest by individuals in professional athletics shows that the arena of sports is without question political, at least in the context of the United States.³⁹ Take the national anthem as an example of nationalism that has become engrained in sports practices. Before almost all major sporting events, leagues like the National Basketball Association (NBA), National Football League (NFL), Major League Baseball (MLB), and Major League Soccer (MLS) all make sure to play “The Star-Spangled Banner” before the teams present begin the game or match. As Billings, Butterworth, and Turman articulate, in the context of the United States, sports become a vessel for patriotism; the two dependent on one another in the same way Hawhee demonstrates athletics and rhetoric are bound. Further work by Butterworth also shows the inherent nationalism and use of sports as a means for displaying and concretizing national identity.⁴⁰ As these scholars demonstrate, not only must we consider sports to be inherently rhetorical but must also address how the arena is inherently political as well.

While this project focuses on the arena of sports exclusively in the context of the United States, existing literature also addresses sports’ communicative and inherently political nature on a larger, global scale. Work by Sport and Leisure scholars Alan Tomlinson and Christopher Young investigates how global sporting events like the Olympics and the Fédération Internationale de Football Association (FIFA) World Cup stand not only as competition on the biggest stage but as a means in which global identities are communicated through sports.⁴¹

Athletes become representatives for the nation states they play for and when competing for their countries in front of the world they communicate to the world what it may mean to be from that political nation. These types of global events may seem to be about sports on the surface and while that is the channel in which they are delivered, they also carry messages about global identities and international politics with them along the way.⁴²

All the aforementioned scholarly arguments lead me to my interjection with this project. The work of scholars like Andrew C. Billings and Michael L. Butterworth shows that the rhetoric of sport is a growing subfield within the discipline of rhetorical criticism and communication studies. The catalogue of these two scholars' work is tremendous and shows the many different lenses we may apply to sports to unveil rhetorical value. This project will enter into discussions sparked by Billings, Butterworth, and other scholars of the field by operating with an understanding that sport is a rhetorical and political arena which deserves increased scholarly attention. Ultimately, this project will also push those understanding further along. To achieve this, my focus will be fleshed out in what follows; sports as it is concerned with social activism, embodiment, and identity.

Social Activism

Rituals like the national anthem as depicted earlier are meaningful examples of showing how sports are engrained with politics but I believe a stronger case as to their connection is the longstanding history of social activism by professional athletes. Before I address scholarly work on professional athletes' footprint on social activism, I will begin with a brief history of rhetoricians' interest in social and political movements. Rhetorical value derived from social movements has been a topic of interest for rhetoricians whose spark can be credited back to the 1950s. Rhetorician Leland M. Griffin's essay "The Rhetoric of Historical Movements" serves as

a starting place for the field of rhetoric to take the rhetorical value of historical movements as a serious site of analysis.⁴³ In the essay, Griffin puts forth numerous questions that the field must ask itself about the value that can be uncovered in studying historical movements, such as asking how we as rhetorical scholars may use traditional rhetorical frameworks when analyzing the value of public address that is tied to a social movement.⁴⁴ While the essay itself does not display a practice of how such analysis would function by providing any case study, Griffin's work sought to challenge the field to consider historical movements as a meaningful spot for rhetorical analysis.

One scholar to take Griffin's call quite seriously is Herbert W. Simons. The 1970 publication of Simons' essay "Requirements, Problems, and Strategies: A Theory of Persuasion for Social Movements" shows a deep investigation into how historical/social movements may be studied rhetorically.⁴⁵ Simons defines social movements as "uninstitutionalized collectivity that mobilizes for action to implement a program for the reconstitution of social norms and values."⁴⁶ Honing in on traditional rhetorical interests in orators, Simons focuses on the leaders of social movements and how they may be defined and subsequently linked to the rhetorical value of the movement. Simons deems that leadership in social movements must meet "rhetorical requirements" along the lines of 1) attracting, maintaining, and molding followers of the movement, 2) securing adoption of their message by the larger structures at play, and 3) serving as a figure who will react to resistance by the larger structure which the movement tries to oppose.⁴⁷ Much like rhetoricians before him, Simons seeks to investigate the persuasive function of the rhetorical "text" that is a social movement. By framing social movement leaders as rhetors fit for rhetorical analysis, a movement as a whole may be site of inquiry for rhetoricians.

Another rhetorical scholar to become heavily invested in Griffin and Simons' calls for exploration is Robert S. Cathcart. Building on the work of Simons, Cathcart proposed an extension to the field of rhetoric so that social movements could be studied more in depth. Cathcart calls for an establishment of a rhetorical definition of movements, so that proper lenses of analysis could be applied and a movement could be identified.⁴⁸ For Cathcart, social movements are examples of social activism and the efforts of the people to promote social change confined to set of events that meet the following criteria; 1) for rhetoricians studying movements, the movement must exist in the past, 2) movements were linear, resulting from a dissatisfaction by the people, efforts to resist and speak up, and then subsequent results and conclusions, and 3) a movement must be both historical and rhetorical.⁴⁹ Work by Cathcart also extends rhetoricians understandings of movements because it argues as to how a movement is confrontational to existing societal forms and ultimately is a symbolic act.⁵⁰ The social activism on display during social movements applies symbolic meaning to material and lived aspects of people's actions.⁵¹ Much like the earlier definitions of rhetoric referenced from Foss, Cathcart argues that a movement is built on symbolic action; it stands inherently as rhetorical and meaning is made fully based on interpretation of signs and symbols.

Assertions made by Cathcart helps pave the way for more scholars to get involved. Many rhetoricians push back on the ideas presented in order to further develop the way the field understands a rhetoric of social movements. In 1980, essays featured in the *Central States Speech Journal* by rhetoricians like Michael Calvin McGee, Charles J. Stewart, and David Zarefsky would challenge the scope of the field's understanding of a rhetoric of social movements and push scholars to think more about protestor agency and the historical ties of social movements that make them real instead of a purely theoretical subject.⁵² Such deeper

conversations about social activism and movement studies would help the subject become increasingly prioritized by rhetoricians. It is from these moments in which the field began heavily investing its time in deeper rhetorical analyses of movements and help cement the topic as a meaningful subfield in the discipline.

Conversations ignited by scholars like Griffin, Simons, and Cathcart are meaningful but look towards social movements more so as a collective rhetorical entity and pay less attention to the embodied factor of the individual voices that make such movements possible. As mentioned, the field conducted significant work on the rhetoric of social movements from 1980 onward but for the sake of this project's investigation, I will shift attention to more contemporary work.⁵³ Essays like Communication scholar Darrel Enck-Wanzer's "Trashing the System: Social Movement, Intersectional Rhetoric, and Collective Agency in the Young Lords Organization's Garbage Offensive" show the moves made within the field to highlight more of the individual agency of movement members to utilize rhetoric as a means of resisting power.⁵⁴ Enck-Wanzer's drive in the piece is to attribute credit to scholar's before him as to the work done to unveil the rhetorical value in social movements but also to remind the field of the pragmatic element necessary in studying social movements. Calling back to concerns made by McGee, Enck-Wanzer focuses on the applicability of findings and explains how the rhetoric of social movements is ultimately a tool to be used by the members of the movement itself. A movement does not exist separate from the people making and distributing the symbols for interpretation and because of this, attention can be paid to the embodied and lived experiences of the individuals in the movement as source of meaningful rhetorical value.

Remembering Enck-Wanzer's call for focus on the embodiment of the individual, I will circle back to assertions made by Simons as to the voice of leaders in a social movement. Simons

argues for how social movements are “leader-centered” and that “in an age of mass media, rhetorical utterances addressed to one audience are likely to reach others.”⁵⁵ While Simons’s arguments were made some 50 odd years ago, I believe they hold great weight for social movement rhetoric today. Work by Communication scholars Kevin Michael DeLuca and Jennifer Peeples articulates a move from an era of social movement in a public sphere to a “public screen.”⁵⁶ Building on Simons’s reminder of being in an age of mass media, the field of rhetoric must recognize that audiences are increasingly witness to rhetorical events through means of digital mediation. Social movements are broadcast over the internet and through the news and social media outlets. Leaders of social movements now have opportunities to make statements for the cause that can reach an abundance of differing audiences based on which digital sources circulate the message. For rhetoricians’ understandings of social movement rhetoric and especially for this thesis project, social activism as it is displayed digitally is of utmost importance.

Acknowledging the fact that the voices of a social movement will be represented via digital spaces, I also must outline what may be considered a “leader’s voice.” The work of Simons existing at the time it did took a very traditional stance on what constituted a leader of a social movement. Thinking of individuals like Dr. Martin Luther King Jr., Malcolm X, and Stokely Carmichael to name a few, connections between the leader and their movement was explicit. Audiences that bore witness to the rhetoric of such leaders could clearly tell what movement they represented and a small outlet of channels to disseminate such rhetorics made it simpler for movements to unify. Simons asserts that leaders needed to “appear to be what [they] could not be,” taking on a prolific role to both maintain and transcend individuality; a leader

must simultaneously be a member of the oppressed group seeking change but also stand as their champion whose rhetoric transcends and mobilizes.⁵⁷

It is from Simons's claims that a leader should be transcendent in which I intend to argue the voice of the professional athlete fits such mold. Cultural studies scholars David L. Andrews and Steven J. Jackson articulate in their textbook *Sport Stars: The Cultural Politics of Sporting Celebrity* that because we currently live in a media culture, celebrated individuals are given a multitude of platforms to speak from.⁵⁸ A celebrated individual may be a politician, actor, professional athlete, or anyone who is frequently given public opportunities to be speak and is celebrated for their "well-knownness."⁵⁹ Through such celebrity status, an individual is given many opportunities to speak and within the digital culture we find ourselves, their voices are typically elevated. Andrews and Jackson articulate that famous athletes occupy this status and also argue that because of the intimacy that social media allows for through journalistic interviews and getting close with these celebrity athletes, that audiences feel like they simultaneously know these people (having heard many of their statements through interviews and social media posts) but that they also do not know them at all (having never met them or gained an understanding about who they are through means that were not mediated by a screen.)⁶⁰

In these such ways, the "celebrity-athlete" closely resembles the figure depicted by Simons. Acknowledging that sports are political, any athlete that uses their platform to speak out on social issues is in some way constructing an explicitly politically-oriented rhetoric. An athlete who chooses to use their platform to address social injustices then finds a way to be both one with the people seeking change while also having their voice elevated above that of the everyday folk; thus, modelling the transcendent quality Simons argues for.⁶¹ The celebrity-athlete may not

be *the* voice of the movement in a traditional Simonsian sense but they certainly become a voice *for* the movement.

The voices and efforts of professional athletes in social activism causes have been the site of investigation for authors in the field of communication for quite some time now. Directing attention to journalism and popular media, the work of esteemed sportswriter Dave Zirin stands as a prime example of how sports media becomes political. Zirin's 2005 book *What's My Name, Fool?: Sports and Resistance in the United States* tracks a timeline of the deep history of the connection between sporting events in the U.S. and moments of social activism.⁶² Arguing that sports are built on passion of both the athlete and the viewer, Zirin articulates that such passions translate into a space from which ideas about our society are reflected for us on this type of stage.⁶³ Remembering that sports is not apolitical, it can be recognized that the actions of a professional athlete in their place of work can reflect the same societal issues and struggles that are taking place off the field or court. It is because of this political potential that Zirin argues sports can be a "site of resistance" when athletes choose to challenge societal norms or bring attention to injustices.⁶⁴ Plentiful work like that of Zirin displays the many athletes who "have attempted to use the world of sports as a platform to advance ideas of resistance."⁶⁵

While Zirin's writings may serve as an established starting point in sports media, they are only a beginning, as there is increasing evidence of efforts by sports writers to change the way large media entities talk about social activism of athletes. Cultural critic and sportswriter Robert "Scoop" Jackson's 2020 publication *The Game is Not a Game: The Power, Protest and Politics of American Sports* serves as a stellar example of American sportswriters' push to include stories of athlete activism into media audience's everyday consumption of sporting events.⁶⁶ Jackson's piece itself is said to be a "book that protests" and uses the "prism of sports" to shed light on

issues that are inherently engrained in our society.⁶⁷ Working for ESPN, the “worldwide leader in sports,” the writing of individuals like Jackson reaches millions of sports fans across the nation.⁶⁸ More recent creations of subbranches of ESPN like “The Undefeated” which serves as “the premier platform for exploring the intersections of race, sports and culture” shows that conversations about athletes and their activism have become commonplace in recent years and have begun to carve out a space for discussion in popular sports culture.⁶⁹

Such discussions about the social activism of athletes has also been a rich subfield of study in higher academics. Sociologist Peter Kaufman explores the consequences that come from being an athlete activist, arguing that while sports may stand as a vehicle for social progression, being an athlete who speaks up comes with many negative connotations as well.⁷⁰ Kaufman addresses that a large majority of athletes choose not to be activists and that the efforts by the few who do choose to use their platform for activism become especially marked because of this.⁷¹ Resistance is typically deemed as deviant behavior and many athletes who exhibit such behavior are met with negativity from fans and audiences because of their choices to be political. Work by Kaufman and Eli A. Wolff also shows the parallels between what it means to be an athlete and what it means to be an activist.⁷² Similar experience with goal-setting, long-range planning, and degrees of fearlessness can be found present in both athletes and activists and it is connections like this which lend sports to be a necessary vehicle for social progression.⁷³

The field of communication has also adopted such a mindset when studying athlete activism. Communication scholars Danielle Sarver Coombs and David Cassilo detail the bind that celebrity-athletes find themselves in when it comes to participation in social activism.⁷⁴ Focusing on the outreach of internationally recognized stars like basketball player LeBron James, Coombs and Cassilo argue that athlete activists find must manage their activism carefully

with what they say and how they say it. Not addressing an instance of social injustice when an athlete has the status to do so can garner equal backlash to if the athlete had chosen to speak out.⁷⁵ Athlete activists find themselves in a double-bind based on their activism; forced to walk a line between stepping out of their lane and becoming “too political” or receiving scrutiny from fans for not using their platform for the good of the people.

The rhetorical value of athlete activism is also an explicit concern of scholars in the field of rhetoric. For the field of rhetoric as a whole, one of the most well-known voices on the subject is that of Abraham Khan. Exploring the way rhetoric stands as symbolic investment, Khan’s work on the athlete activist shows the influences that the rhetoric of race and class as displayed through sports has meaning in U.S. media.⁷⁶ For Khan, the rhetorical value as circulated through media outlets about an athlete becomes that athlete’s source of power when practicing activism.⁷⁷ Using discourse of professional baseball player Curt Flood as an example, Khan articulates how Flood’s explicit rhetorical choices to call himself a “well-paid slave” served as a catalyst for public discourses about injustices suffered on the part of the Black male athlete.⁷⁸ Social activism can be seen on display rhetorically based on the discourses an athlete chooses to ignite and participate in. In a very traditional sense, rhetorical value can be seen in athlete activists based on the conversations they start and the spoken discourse they choose; value that this thesis project will explore and uncover.

The work on athlete activism as rhetoric up until this point is fruitful and meaningful, yet lacks a degree of scope which this thesis project stands to extend. Scholarship on social activism as mentioned prior lays a strong base for a justification as to why the subject is rhetorical but maintains an understanding of rhetoric that is highly traditional. To truly appreciate the social activism at play by athlete activists and protestors at large, scholars can continue to develop what

is understood as rhetorical to constitute materiality (and more specifically the body) as a meaningful site for exploration.

Rhetoric and Embodiment

Rhetoric's concern with the body and material embodiment has existed since the discipline's inception. How the body exists in relation to the functions of the mind is a topic of concern for Plato in some of the earliest Greek writings of the philosophers.⁷⁹ Traditional philosophic thought looks to examine how individual's embodied experiences may be tied to higher existence through the mind or soul. As the field progressed, the body became more cemented into the canon through the work of English scholar Kenneth Burke. Detailing the way that humans use their bodies to participate in rhetoric and make sense of symbols stands as a meaningful interjection in a majority of Burke's theories.⁸⁰ Even the way that communication scholars teach about the body as it relates to everyday practices like public speaking shows a commitment to understanding the way that embodiment functions alongside rhetoric.⁸¹

While the body itself will be the site of investigation for this project, I will first acknowledge that materiality as a whole can be considered rhetorical. By materiality, I mean objects or ideas that become physically present. The material existence of something that can be seen and takes up space serves to incorporate the way the body, a material site, can then be understood as symbolic. The work of social theorist Michel Foucault has been meaningfully adopted into the field of rhetoric and serves as a serious investigation as to how power is displayed through materiality.⁸² Foucault extends traditional understandings of rhetoric as purely the art of persuasion and fixates on the ways that such persuasion is enacted and practiced in society. Power is displayed and exercised in material ways based on how bodies act or react based on power dynamics at play.⁸³ One famous example of Foucault's theory at work is the

function of a stop sign on the street when no police authority is present.⁸⁴ In this scenario, there is no physical police to enforce that a driver would stop at the intersection; however, we have been conditioned through the symbol that is the stop sign to know that when a driver sees this, they must obey. In this way, power utilizes the rhetoric of signs and symbols to enact power. The three concepts of rhetoric, materiality, and power thus become wrapped up in one another.

Physical spaces themselves then have the potential to be rhetorical. Theorist Michel de Certeau proposes an investigation into the way that seemingly banal spaces are always rhetorically meaningful.⁸⁵ Everyday spaces are not natural and thus are at some level consciously designed. These designs are produced by humans and in their own way, become signs or artifacts that we would associate as standing rhetorically. If spaces become a set of signs and symbols, they may then also be considered as a system to operate within. For de Certeau a theoretical concept of enunciation occurs which seeks to explain that an individual exists within a system and the limits of the system stand to define the choices the individual is allowed to make.⁸⁶ People are asked to “make do” and get along within systems that already exist. In all these ways, material existence in spaces becomes a rhetorical act.

Having justified that materiality as a whole is rhetorical, explicit focus can now be paid towards how the body is a rhetorically-relevant material site of interest. As mentioned prior, social activism studies in their past has not paid enough direct attention to the body itself as rhetorically meaningful. This is not, however, meant to ignore scholars who *have* fixated their attention on the material body. Work by gender scholar Judith Butler shows the ways that rhetorical choices in a traditional discourse sense have material consequences on the ways that physical bodies live their lives.⁸⁷ Arguing that bodies become “gendered” and “socially constructed,” Butler shows that the way we talk about divisions between genders then ultimately

leads to an alteration of the lived experiences of people based on biological identity markers. The spoken rhetoric surrounding men or women influence the ways that those bodies then live their lives and in such a way, rhetoric as discourse affects and becomes material rhetoric.⁸⁸ Similarly to how Foucault displays the connections between rhetoric, materiality, and power, Butler details the way that spoken and material rhetoric build off one another. The material body is both affected by rhetoric and stands as rhetoric itself.

As mentioned, the study of social activism rhetoric did not begin with a deep investigation of the body as a meaningful site of inquiry. Some of the beginning work on embodiment may be attributed to communication and feminist scholar Karlyn Kohrs Campbell, who looks at how lived experiences become necessary conditions in linking particular identities to social movements.⁸⁹ Speaking in reference to women's liberation through feminism, Campbell argues that "analysis must move from personal experience and feeling to illuminate a common condition that all women experience and share."⁹⁰ For Campbell, the personal experiences of an individual became a necessary site of analysis as it is these lived moments that gave weight to the ways in which social activism is carried out and what is fought for. Social movements cannot operate on a level of abstraction but instead rely on the lived and embodied experiences of those who are fighting. While Campbell does not utilize the term "embodiment" explicitly, her work does link material experiences of the body to participation in social movements; a link made by few during this time in the field.

For the purpose of this thesis project, understanding the body *as* argument is crucial. To do that, acknowledgment of the work of communication scholar Kevin Michael DeLuca is pivotal. DeLuca's ideas in his 1999 piece "Unruly Arguments: The Body Rhetoric of Earth First!, Act Up, and Queer Nation" revolutionize the way that the body is given attention in the

rhetoric of social movements.⁹¹ Challenging traditional understandings of argumentation, DeLuca asserts that bodies themselves through their existence, identity markers, and placement can serve as meaningful rhetorical stances.⁹² For social protests that rely on the use of the body to make a point, DeLuca shows that “their bodies are central to the force of their arguments.”⁹³ Recognition of the media spheres in which contemporary protests exists and the privilege that these channels put on the visual element necessitates that bodies must not only produce resistance through spoken rhetoric but that their own bodily rhetoric may resist as well.

It is important to recognize that DeLuca does not insinuate that bodies are inherently argumentative or resistive. As he states, “There are no a priori bodies. Bodies are enmeshed in a turbulent stream of multiple and conflictual discourses that shape what they mean in particular contexts.”⁹⁴ The body is not inherently meaningful in the same way that a sign in rhetoric does not inherently warrant meaning. Arguments can be made through the body based on how audiences read the body as a sign or place it as a symbol for something else. In the case of social activism, protestors may use identity markers on their body like race or gender to help contribute to the argument of their cause. Not only does the body serve as ethos for spoken arguments but an individual’s existence may also stand as resistive based on how their body as a symbol is read in relation to the rhetoric surrounding them. In the cases that DeLuca analyzed, the identity markers of those protesting and the positions they found themselves served as strong argumentative claims. In all these such ways, when a body is marked in a certain way based on a context, their existence becomes a form of resistance.

For the sake of this project, I rely heavily on the materiality of bodies making arguments and less on the body viewed as abstraction or a mere tool. Communication scholar Karma R. Chávez discusses the ways that the body can be viewed both abstractly and actually.⁹⁵ Scholars

have viewed the ways that bodies are theorized about or even view the body as a “vehicle for rhetorical performance.”⁹⁶ In these instances, intention is spotlighted based on the ways that the bodies become used in the act of protest. For example, critical cultural scholar Julia Khrebtan-Hörhager focuses on the activism of radical feminist group FEMEN and details the ways that protestors use their physical bodies in spaces to make explicit rhetorical arguments.⁹⁷ Bodies are painted in certain ways or marched around in the nude to convey explicit meanings about radical feminism and to draw attention to the groups cause through use of the body as signifier in ways that resist traditional norms. While this type of work is meaningful as it shows a continual extension of how the body may be viewed rhetorically, it still finds understandings tied into the intention of the person using their body as rhetorical. A protestor’s choice to position their bodies in spaces where their identities are resistive or the explicit moves have been made to mark their body in particular ways is rhetorical but can be expanded from. This project seeks to further develop what DeLuca referenced as “a priori bodies” – still maintaining that no bodies are argumentative inherently but instead creating room to understand bodies that make arguments even without conscious intervention of the rhetor.

Although I do believe that bodies can be argumentative in many spheres of life, for the sake of this project, I will be narrowing the scope of how this is displayed in the field of sports by proposing how arguments are presented through the “athletic body.” The term “athletic body” as I shall reference it is at its core any body of an athlete. The athletic body may share many similarities between that of an individual who does not find themselves in the arena of sport; one of this project’s core aims is to remind audiences that we are all human and profession or physical ability does not alter that fact of humanity. The athletic body does however come with particular privileges, such as being offered platforms in which one’s voice is hypervisible due to

the environments where athletics take place. It is because of such hypervisibility that some athletic bodies stand to be more argumentative based on how they are read in their given contexts. One such example is that of Katie Hnida and the University of Colorado football program. Hnida, a walk-on female place kicker, was described by rhetorician Michael L. Butterworth as “a rhetorical challenge to the boundaries of traditional male space.”⁹⁸ Joining a sport that was historically for men made Hnida’s female body immediately argumentative because of the challenges it presented to traditional form. During her time as a player, Hnida did not need to conduct spoken discourse about the ways in which women are capable of inhabiting spaces traditionally occupied by men; it was her body’s existence as a player on that team from which rhetorical, social, and political discourse was sparked. Butterworth goes on to argue that “presence of the body...may also carry argumentative weight regardless of a subject’s intent.”⁹⁹ As mentioned prior to challenge DeLuca’s assertions, a body does not have to make an explicit choice to use itself as rhetorical artifact. At times, the embodied existence of an athlete may serve as argumentative.

As this thesis project will use the athletic body of NBA star Allen Iverson as one of its points of analysis, I find it pressing to recognize other scholars who have also pointed to Iverson as an example of embodied rhetoric. Communication scholar Timothy J. Brown calls attention to Iverson’s body as a source of communication because of the ways his identity represents a “cultural site of struggle.”¹⁰⁰ Brown articulates that Iverson embraces the “cultural signifiers of the hip-hop generation such as cornrows, tattoos, and hip-hop music.”¹⁰¹ Brown demonstrates the ways that Iverson’s embodied self brings attention to issues that exist in communities that he belongs to. His embodiment that has deep connections to hip-hop and rap culture serve as physical reminders about where he comes from and forces audiences who watch his play to see

think about such issues experienced in said communities. In these ways, Iverson's body itself is an argument based on what identities he represents and the introduction of those cultural issues into spaces in which they had been typically ignored. As I will delve more into through my analysis, it becomes clear that standards were set in the NBA as to how a body should look and perform and Iverson's refusal to do these things and maintain his true self became a source of embodied and resistive rhetoric.

Iverson's athletic body as marked by his tattoos has also been of interest to the field of communication. Sports media scholars Betsy Emmons and Andrew C. Billings discuss the complex relationships between professional athletes with tattoos and how they are represented in the media.¹⁰² Calling explicit attention to the case of Iverson on the airbrushing scandal with *Hoop* magazine in 2000, an instance in which Iverson's tattoos and jewelry were edited out of photos and used for magazine covers, Emmons and Billings detail the binds that athletic bodies with tattoos are put into.¹⁰³ Iverson as an athlete is celebrated by many fans for his inherent resistance to white-hegemonic culture and serves as an example of an athlete who could reach peak playing performance without having to mold himself in line with what was expected of athletes in the media. *Hoop* magazine's choice to airbrush Iverson can be read not as a simple editorial choice but instead as a power structure's explicit action to suppress the identity of a body in different form than it.¹⁰⁴

The work of theorists up until this point have argued for the ways that the body is a meaningful site of analysis based on how it stands as representative. Understanding the body as rhetorical is crucial for this project but also must be recognized alongside what the body is marked with and represented by. In the final section of this review of literature, I will detail how the body becomes a marker for identity and provide acknowledgment to the many theories of

identity that are needed to continually develop an understanding of embodied social activism of professional athletes.

Rhetoric and Identity

Theories surrounding identity have a longstanding history in the field of rhetoric. For many rhetoricians, Kenneth Burke's writings on identification are a welcomed starting point to understand how rhetoric and identity are bound together.¹⁰⁵ Thinking in a traditional sense of oratory that requires speakers and hearers, Burke argues that connection between the two groups in a speech act is dependent on each group's ability to identify with one another. If a speaker is able to identify sameness with their audience members then their arguments are able to stick more easily because they have done the work of finding what kind of arguments may resonate with the group they're speaking to. Rhetoric also produces identity through difference as well, demonstrated by the famous Burke quote "A is not identical with [their] colleague, B. But insofar as their interests are joined, A is identified with B."¹⁰⁶ Identification comes from determining similarities between subjects of discussion but also places equal weight on recognizing differences. Rhetorically, subjects are able to learn as much about what they are through separating themselves from what they are not. Keeping in mind that rhetoric is dependent on our interpretation of signs, we can see that identification comes into play when subjects see connection or disconnection with particular symbols.

Focusing less on abstract applications of rhetoric, the process of identification holds significant weight in academic fields whose focus is on understanding the lived self. While sociologists have long tried to understand the concept of the human self, work by Erving Goffman holds explicit relevance to communication scholars because of the fixation it places on the performance of self.¹⁰⁷ Relying on the metaphor of theater stages, Goffman describes the idea

of self as something we identify with and perform based on circumstances. For Goffman, everyone has an identity they perform on the “front stage” to the audiences in their lives as well as a true self that exists in a “back stage.”¹⁰⁸ Thinking about one’s personal identity as performative based on context thus opens the doors for how Goffman’s theory holds relevance to communication studies. Identity as performance becomes a communicative act between the embodied self and audiences they come across in their lives.

While Goffman’s ideas are valuable as they create space to see identity as rhetorical and communicative, they are limiting in assuming that identity is stable and displayable at the discretion of the individual. Goffman wraps understandings of one’s identity up with personality traits and how someone acts, which ignores the embodied factors of identity that a subject may be unable to disclose. Someone’s race is a factor that is embodied and communicated immediately through sight and thus a rhetorical marker that cannot be easily ignored. Cultural scholar Stuart Hall also discusses in depth the ways that identity is rarely, if ever, fixed.¹⁰⁹ Hall argues that identity is constructed through discourses and because such discourses may be everchanging that the same can be said about identity, lending itself fluidity based on context.¹¹⁰ While Goffman’s theory seeks to contribute power to the individual in how they communicate their identity to audiences, Hall reminds us that the power of identification is not always on the part of the individual seeking to communicate; instead, power may lie in contexts and those who are reading the identity of said individual.

How individuals choose to constitute themselves in particular contexts is precisely linked to the power of rhetorical acts. As Burke demonstrates, the process of identification at its roots are of rhetoric’s concern because it is through rhetorical acts in which we see subjects declare what they are and what they are not. The scholarship of communication theorist Maurice

Charland takes the constitutive power of rhetoric quite seriously.¹¹¹ In extension of Burke's assertions that identification is concerned with persuasion, Charland argues for how the produced rhetoric by an individual or group can help to constitute that group's existence.¹¹² We recognize that people may exist inherently but if they are not given formal recognition in communicative realms like the judicial system or within the media (platforms based in how we interpret signs) refusal of or lack of representation can effectively negate a group's existence by not allowing them to be identified. In these such ways, the rhetoric of identification is not simply about persuading an audience to believe in a certain way about a subject but the mere presence of that subject's rhetoric then accounts for their existence. It is through our interpretations of these rhetorical acts or artifacts that some individuals' identities are understood or seen.

The seeing of an individual's identity can be attributed to what this project refers to as "identity markers." The concept of foci or identity markers have a longstanding history in social scientific fields like that of sociology.¹¹³ An identity marker may be any categorical trait that attributes to an individual's identity. Cultural background, race, gender identity, class, religion, etc. are all examples of ways that the body can be marked and how such markings build a person's identity. The diversity of identity markers also shows that some are more easily seen than others. Building off of the earlier referenced work of Goffman, it's clear that some identity can be disclosed (i.e. not discussing your religion) while other identities are worn on one's skin (i.e. public's making sense of your race upon first seeing you.) This can be demonstrated in what critical cultural scholars Judith N. Martin and Thomas K. Nakayama refer to as ascribed versus avowed identities.¹¹⁴ Some identities are avowed and claimed by the individual, while others are placed on an individual by the systems of power that exist in certain contexts. In particular moments, a public may judge an individual more harshly for an ascribed identity without giving

much if any focus to that individuals ascribed identity. As Hall mentions, the power of discourses and contexts to influence one's identity is tremendous.

One of the fundamental theories in understanding how identity markers are read and judged is that of intersectionality. Originally coined by American lawyer, academic, and civil rights advocate Kimberlé Crenshaw, intersectionality is a theory of identity that places critical emphasis on the intersections of power at play when understanding multiple identity markers simultaneously.¹¹⁵ The theory articulates that individuals live and perform multiple identities simultaneously and because their identities are always functioning, a person may be subjected to the privileges or oppressions associated with multiple identity markers at once. Crenshaw uses the example of an intersection in the road to demonstrate how particular individuals find themselves in unique spaces based on all the identities they possess. If one road is to be seen as all the struggles experienced by Black people and another road is seen as all the struggles experienced by women, there is a unique intersection of challenges that comes from being a Black woman; where these identities overlap. Too much focus on a singular identity marker may hinder an audience from recognizing that more factors are afoot.

Scholarship that extends intersectionality is abundant and shows the many ways that such a concept can and needs to be understood. Sociologist Patricia Hill Collins's book *Black Feminist Thought* is a keystone text in cultural and feminist studies that uses intersectionality and critical race theory to further analyze society's power as it is inflicted on the Black female body.¹¹⁶ In many ways, intersectionality can be seen in the work of Chicana feminist Gloria Anzaldúa in the ways that she theorizes about *la frontera*.¹¹⁷ Anzaldúa focuses on cultures and the ways that individuals are not always neatly placed in one cultural at a time by analyzing the "borderlands," a space both abstract and physical, in which individuals belong to both U.S. and

Mexican cultures simultaneously.¹¹⁸ As Anzaldúa asserts, “the borderlands are also physically present wherever two or more cultures edge each other, where people of different races occupy the same territory, where under, lower, middle, and upper classes touch...”¹¹⁹ Just as intersectionality articulates, spaces like the borderlands become areas where individuals cannot fit into a singular culture at a time. Instead, an individual’s identity markers push up against one another and create opportunities for power structures to press into them due to the in-between space they find themselves positioned in.

Spaces like the borderlands exist for many individuals whose intersectional identity markers influence their embodied experiences. Anthropologist Victor Turner argues for the ways in which liminal spaces are created for people whose identification may be ambiguous because of membership in multiple cultures at once.¹²⁰ Turner argues that “liminal entities are neither here nor there; they are betwixt and between the positions assigned and arrayed by law, custom, convention, and ceremonial.”¹²¹ Each standpoint becomes uniquely organic to the individual and there are times in which conflicts between components of a person’s identity exist.

Communication scholar Lisa A. Flores details this further and expresses how these senses of belonging are expressed through rhetoric.¹²² Borders are not only geographically constructed but can exist rhetorically as well, forcing individuals who exist in multiple cultures at once to traverse rhetorical boundaries when trying to express identity.¹²³ Speaking from the point of view of the Chicana, Flores details how the work to identify as either Mexican or American without ample opportunities to show one’s self as both makes it difficult for a subject to sometimes feel like they belong to either category.

An individual’s standpoint from these positions then dictates the way they see the world and carry themselves through it. Work by communication scholar Bryant Keith Alexander details

the cultural practice of “passing” that Black men and other marginalized individuals must perform in order to function in the contexts that weigh against them.¹²⁴ As Alexander explains, passing is a performative accomplishment, one in which an individual tries to perform their concept of self in a way that will be accepted by contexts around them.¹²⁵ Black bodies must move themselves in ways that appear “acceptable” to white hegemonic standards if they are to avoid confrontation and the exertion of power on them. Passing becomes incredibly necessary for marginalized groups because consequences of not meeting standards may result in bodily harm or even death as is made evident by those who are victim of racial profiling or police brutality.¹²⁶

Performative acts like cultural passing shed light on the way that an individual’s identity or standpoint influences their given agency. There are many theorists who have concerned themselves with agency; Michel De Certeau’s theory of enunciation as mentioned prior shows how agency may be represented in physical spaces.¹²⁷ If we recognize spaces as systems, we also may see that individuals’ actions are limited based on what the system allows. For instance, if a body were to find itself in a physical space like a jail, the way the body is able to move and act will be limited based on how the power structures of the jail (guards, cells, etc.) restrain the body. Another example with less moving parts is language. If I am asked to express myself in English, the words I choose to produce are limited to the 26 letters I have to choose from. In these ways, my agency is contained to the system of expression in which I exist in. In the case of marginalized bodies who are subject to oppressions from the contexts they exist in, what is referred to as “constrained agency” is given.¹²⁸ Communication and feminist scholar D. Lynn O’Brien Hallstein uses the concept to describe the way women are given agency to speak but that such agency comes with inherent limitations based on their identity. In Hallstein’s own words,

“constrained agency suggests that just because subjects are constituted by discourses does not mean they are fully determined by those discourses.”¹²⁹ As the intersectional scholars have described liminal spaces that subjects are placed into based on identity, it also must be recognized that these spaces come with limitations on the way an individual is able to constitute themselves through their rhetoric.

While not an identity marker like that of race or gender, this project seeks to better understand the way “professional athlete” may be theorized as an identity category. Plenty of scholarship exists in the field of rhetoric and communication towards the way that the arena of sports becomes a platform for identity construction.¹³⁰ As it is referenced and paying attention to what Zirin has proposed, sports serves as a lens where constructions of societal identities are presented to national audiences.¹³¹ I argue though that the term “professional athlete” itself is an identity marker that packages together identifying factors and then privileges which ones become read in given contexts. As this project will uncover, identifying an individual as a professional athlete at times privileges an audience’s focus on the class of said individual and may do so at the expense of ignoring other less privileged markers like that of race. As will be made clear, these challenges then inherently push against an athlete’s ability to participate in embodied social activism.

Proposing Embodied Social Activism of Professional Athletes

The prior scholarship referenced all influences the theoretical concept of embodied social activism of professional athletes. The analysis sections of this thesis are meant to demonstrate examples of this theory at work but before that can be done, definitions of embodied social activism must be established to show what the term means and how it will be applied in the cases of Allen Iverson and Michael Bennett. To begin, I will propose a definition of embodied social

activism. For the purpose of my thesis, *embodied social activism is the way an athlete's marked body or lived experiences can be read as consequential contributions to discourses surrounding social issues*. Embodied social activism of professional athletes is a theoretical interjection that builds on aforementioned theories of rhetoric, embodiment, and identity to show how an athletic body is of rhetorical value in social and political discourses. Embodied social activism of professional athletes stands as a form of social activism in which the argument of the athlete is dependent on their embodied selves; identity markers as they are read in contexts by audiences become a stance of an athlete, regardless of their intentions. An athlete may choose to call upon their embodied self and their lived experiences as a form of ethos that aids in more traditional modes of social activism, but at its core, embodied social activism is an inherent use of the body as argument, sometimes performed regardless of the athlete's intentions.

Being the core theoretical contribution of my project, attention will be paid to embodied social activism to break the concept down in depth to show its scope and value. To do that, I will detail how embodied social activism builds on existing scholarship to argue how athletic bodies are inherently political, rhetorical, and argumentative. Next, I will justify how embodied social activism acknowledges the athletic body as symbolic and representative of larger cultural/societal qualities. I will then explain how the material embodiment of an athlete contributes to their lived experiences and thus argue why these lived experiences may also serve as examples of embodied social activism. Finally, I will address the agency of the athlete in embodied social activism, to show that utilization of one's body as credibility in socially active causes is at the discretion of the athlete.

Understanding embodied social activism is made possible by accepting the aforementioned relationships between rhetoric, embodiment, identity, and sports. As has been

articulated by authors like Hawhee, Billings et al., and Zirin, sports are an arena in our society from which we see reflections of society itself. Accepting that sports are inherently rhetorical and political, it becomes clear that athletes do not exist purely for the entertainment of the audiences who watch them. Whether a fan knows it or not, athletes stand as symbolic representations of larger societal issues. Their bodies can be seen as rhetorically valuable and their identities become representative of bigger issues we may see being discussed in the public sphere or through the public screen. The arena of sports is its own context which stands as representative, and not separate, from other societal contexts. The concept of embodied social activism utilizes understandings of all the scholarship previously mentioned and serves to extend how the field of rhetoric may view sports as political and rhetorically valuable.

Development of embodied social activism must also come at the extension of work by DeLuca. This project relies heavily on claims made in the “Unruly Argument” essay but also challenges them so that an understanding of embodied rhetoric may grow. This project takes DeLuca’s statement about “a priori bodies” seriously as I see it both as a necessary starting assumption but one that can be challenged. I agree that no material body is inherently argumentative; as Hall asserts, discourses influence how identity is understood. Echoing DeLuca’s argument, I agree that there are no bodies marked in any ways that inherently warrant an argument. Resistances and arguments are crafted through the ways that discourses and contexts read these bodies. However, I challenge DeLuca’s understanding about the intentionality of the body, at least as it pertains to the context of sports. Social activism movements that strategically situate the body are using embodiment as argumentative but the field cannot limit its understanding to a frame of intentionality. Instead, particularly in the arena or sports which has been deemed inherently rhetorical and political, the materiality of athletic

bodies are always somehow upholding or resisting societal standards. Given a context that cannot be divorced from political or rhetorical meaning, the same can be said about the bodies that find themselves in this arena. The athletic body is always somehow politically oriented and participatory in social activism by how it looks or functions, regardless of intent of the athlete.

This thesis project focuses less on the strategic intentions of protestors than has been done in more traditional scholarship on social activism. This is not to discredit the deep amount of work that has been done by rhetoricians to better understand the strategies employed by social activists. Such a lengthy history of studying social movement rhetoric has allowed the field to better understand the persuasive elements and tactics of social movements, which in total allows for academia to better recognize when movements are occurring and what their effects/outcomes may be. My purpose in this project is to show that individuals, specifically athletes who occupy positions in which all their movement in the public eye is consumed critically, can participate in social activism in a way that does not necessitate they align with movements or they contribute to discourses that are deemed explicitly political. The body can serve as argument itself and in a realm like sports which inherently possesses political weight, an athlete can participate in social activism through existence of their lived self. Myself and the audiences consuming sports media will never know the intention of the athlete in the way that they perform their identities and to that point, it must be recognized that it will never be clear as to how “strategic” or “intentioned” an athlete’s actions were. At the very least, this project hopes to extend our understanding of what it means to be socially active and argue for the ways that sparking change through discourse does not always need to be a calculated move.

Borrowing terms from scholars before me, this project intends to view the athletic body as a “cultural site.”¹³² Accepting the political and rhetorical dimensions of the arena of sports, the

athletic body then takes on a representative role for that of other societal struggles. The elevation of athlete voices based on the public screen and their position as celebrity figures thus allows athletic bodies to become symbolic for greater social issues. Not only are their voices and actions catalysts for political discussions but the visual identity markers of athletic bodies serve to ignite political conversations about culture and society. Recognizing that athlete voices carry weight and clue audiences in to issues in political and social spheres, this project also demonstrates how the body itself contributes to these conversations. The way an audience reads an athletic body based on material identity markers and how these readings spark discourses and understandings is equally as powerful as the spoken or written efforts of athlete activists.

For the sake of this project's exploration, embodied social activism also accounts for the lived experiences of athletes that have been influenced by their embodied identities. Analysis must begin by understanding the ways the material body can be read as rhetoric. It is because of this that Allen Iverson's tattoos, cornrows, and jewelry all become applicable starting points to show how the athletic body may exist and be materially present. From this though, a deeper understanding of how the material body influences lived experiences must also be developed. This project would not be rich enough if it ignored the ways that lived experiences of athletes are also considered to be embodied events. To truly understand embodied social activism of professional athletes, we must recognize that treatment by others, whether that be audiences of fans or systems of power like the police, should be accepted as embodied experiences – especially when such treatment is influenced by the color of an athlete's skin or the ways they've chosen to live and present themselves. In all such ways, "embodiment" can be substituted with "lived" to account for both the material form of the body and the physical experiences it has seen.

These lived experiences of an athlete then stand as epistemologies which contribute to their ethos in social activism causes. Just as the athletic body itself stands as argument, the lived experiences that body endures become reference points for the arguments it makes. An athlete's credibility to contribute to a social cause becomes one that is lived. This project appreciates the worth that comes from telling one's story; a story inherently influenced by one's standpoint and how the world reads one's body and their journey through such world. Embodiment becomes the form that the rhetoric takes and then because of that embodied form, lived experiences develop and serve as examples of knowing the ways in which audiences may read and interpret one's body. Credibility does not have to be cited from others; for the purpose of embodied social activism, it is lived ethos.

The application of such ethos then lies at the discretion of the athlete. Yes, I argue that all athletic bodies have potential to be argumentative or socially active. In fact, the athletic body does not simply hold potential to form an argument but instead certainly stands as argumentative due to its symbolic qualities inherent based on the nature of sports as politically reflective. Athletes are constantly judged, criticized, and read by audiences and because of that, the athletic body is in some way always taking a stand. However, some athletes may be social activists purely through their embodiment and lived experiences while others may use that embodiment as a source of credibility in more traditional forms of athlete activism. I have chosen to analyze the embodied social activism of both Allen Iverson and Michael Bennett because each represents a side of this spectrum. Iverson is an athlete who I deem political purely due to embodied rhetoric performed with no reliance on more traditional forms of athlete activism like participation in political discourses or kneeling as protest. In contrast, Bennett, who is still a cultural site for racism due to his lived experiences with police brutality, then uses his embodied social activism

as a means to strengthen his participation in political discourses and demonstrations. Both men practice embodied social activism but the application of such activism is utilized in different contexts for different purposes.

While great scholarly work has been done before this thesis project, it is clear that the field of rhetoric has much more to do. Application and understanding of embodied social activism of professional athletes is a concept that has thus far seen little to no scholarly coverage. This project reminds us that we need to do three things: 1) Acknowledge the rhetorical and political value of sports. The topic of sports is still in development within the field of rhetoric and deserves continued scholarly attention. In the case of the United States, sports is a large institution which cannot be viewed as beside or outside of our politically-oriented realities. Rhetoric needs to continue to take sports seriously as they are an abundant source of rhetorical value. 2) Scholarship on social activism needs to continually develop an understanding of the importance of the material body. Rhetoric's roots in oratory are valuable and the longtime privileging of spoken/written discourses has proved meaningful as it has helped propel the field to where it is today. However, scholars should continue to extend their knowledge of the difference the material body makes in the world. Languages are systems built on symbols and in that same way, bodies can stand as symbols in the system that is society. And finally, 3) in a world where discourses are sparked through and because of the media, the athletic body may be symbolic and political without directly calling itself such. Intentions cannot be judged from a scholarly level as it is understood that rhetorical critics through their work are performing value judgments from a position that can never truly know the motives of a rhetor. What can be assessed though is the responses by audiences to the existence of athletic bodies. The professional athlete finds themselves in an almost constant position of spotlight due to the

presence of media in our current cultural moment. Whether they intend to make arguments or not becomes irrelevant; what does matter is how their rhetoric (spoken or embodied) contributes to and is molded by discourses.

Chapter 3: Allen Iverson

Allen Iverson is one of the most memorable athletes that professional sports have ever seen. His play on the court was unmatched and proved that even with his smaller frame he could hang with the best that basketball had to offer. Not limited solely to being a stud on the court, Iverson also frequently drew attention to himself when not in competition as heads turned to hear what Iverson had to say in post-game press conferences. His spoken discourse was powerful, being deemed by many as “attitude,” as Iverson remained authentic and true to his scrappiness regardless of media expectations as to what an NBA player should say. The way he dressed also challenged these expectations, as Iverson frequently avoided the humble suit and tie look and instead flashed his bling whenever the opportunity presented itself. It was through these means of embodiment that I argue Iverson performed embodied social activism even if his actual discourse was absent of explicit political expression.

To demonstrate a practical application of embodied social activism of the professional athlete, I will look at the life and career of Allen Iverson. Serving as an exceptional case study, Iverson’s embodiment shows the ways that a player can refrain from participation in explicitly political discourse while still producing meaningful rhetorical activism through their lived experiences. I argue the way Iverson chose to present himself to the NBA/league audiences and his insistence that this presentation was *not* politically motivated but rather the act of being who he truly was is an act of embodied social activism on one of sports’ biggest stages.

In this chapter, I will begin by providing context into the life and career of Iverson, detailing his professional accomplishments and reception of his image by critics in the media. I will then build on previous scholarship on how Iverson’s embodiment was genuine and representative of larger cultural symbols. I will close by analyzing three specific moments in

Iverson's career that demonstrate his body's authenticity as a cultural site: his choice to wear cornrows, the controversial airbrushing of his tattoos, and his iconic "stepover" in the 2001 NBA Finals. Analysis of these three moments serves to show how Iverson's actions were embodied, resisted power structures/norms, and not linked to rhetorical protest in a traditional sense.

The Career of Allen Iverson

On June 26, 1996, the NBA would be change forever as the Philadelphia 76ers selected future Hall of Famer Allen Iverson as the number one overall draft pick. A guard out of Georgetown University, Iverson would go on to transform the league with persistence, dedication, and talent the likes of which professional basketball had rarely seen before him. Iverson (nicknamed "The Answer") would celebrate a decorated career in the NBA including winning Rookie of the Year in 1997, the league's Most Valuable Player (MVP) award for the 2000-2001 season, and would lead his 76ers all the way to the NBA Championship Finals in 2001 where they would come up short in a 4-1 series loss to the Los Angeles Lakers.¹³³ These achievements alongside Iverson's 11 All-Star appearances and his tenacity in finding his way to the hoop made him a household name for NBA fans across the nation. Iverson would retire from the league in 2013 after seeing playtime with multiple different teams. He would continue to make an impact off the court through charity work, camps, and his lifetime endorsement with Reebok.¹³⁴

Iverson's talent on the court was more than enough to make him recognizable to Americans across the U.S.; however, while some people chose to focus on Iverson as a player, other fans (and critics) took more interest in what he did off the court. Throughout his time in the league, Iverson frequently found himself in run-ins with the law. Barfights, domestic disturbances, accounts of possession, and felony charges following an attempted breaking and

entering are a few among the list of the crimes Iverson was charged with that helped to spin his negative portrayal within national media.¹³⁵ In fact, many fans' first introduction to Iverson was his trial for involvement in a mass bowling alley brawl during his final years at Bethel High School. The teenage star would go on to receive a sentence of 5 years in jail, eventually dropped to four months due to good behavior, notable legal efforts, and a rallying of his community.¹³⁶ Before he was drafted and entered the league, Iverson's criminal history was as prominent as his basketball skills. For many observers, it did not matter how Iverson played on the court or even how he carried himself in post-game interviews; these altercations with police were enough to paint him as a punk or thug.

As previously mentioned, sports communication scholar Timothy J. Brown argues that the media's depiction of Iverson was used to highlight a "cultural site of struggle."¹³⁷ Specifically in the Philadelphia media markets in which Iverson lived and played, the star's struggles with the law off the court became symbolic of the greater struggle of Philadelphia and other areas with impoverished Black communities. The media could use Iverson as a signifier of what their depiction of trouble was. The media's focus was not only on Iverson's actions but his appearance and how he carried himself. Still noticeably connected to his upbringing, Iverson wore clothing and jewelry that U.S. citizens (particularly those who were white) at the time—and still to this day—associated with "hood culture." Thick chains, cornrows, and a body decorated from head to toe with tattoos were enough for some journalists and fans to consider Iverson a thug, gangster, or "troublemaker who was kicked out of one neighborhood pickup game."¹³⁸ What was most noticeable, however, was that Iverson did not change who he was when he entered the league. In appearance and demeanor, he did not try to fit already existing molds for

what an NBA player “should” look like. Instead, Iverson remained unapologetically himself even in the public spotlight.

Although a sour spot for many critics, other observers found Iverson’s refusal to adjust his image to fit the league’s unspoken standards as admirable. Iconic rappers like Kendrick Lamar and Sway spoke on Iverson’s influence in the 2018 Showtime documentary *Shut Up and Dribble*, which focuses on the history of social activism in the NBA. Lamar claims that “[Iverson] is a person I can relate to further than basketball” and Sway acknowledges how Iverson showed audiences that “you don’t have to change nothing about yourself and you do not have to forget where you came from.”¹³⁹ Accounts by esteemed sportswriter Dave Zirin even argued “Iverson is the bridge between Michael Jordan and today’s political athlete.”¹⁴⁰ Iverson was a fan-favorite during his time in the NBA not just because of his deadly crossover and never-give-up attitude; he was a player that NBA fans could see themselves in, especially those fans who were young Black men growing up in struggling areas like Compton, Detroit, or Akron. Iverson was a player that through his personal image and identity resisted the established norms on basketball’s biggest stage. In such a way, while his actions did not articulate political stances in a formal or partisan sense, the way he carried himself and looked became reflective of the political nature of society’s dynamics of power.

Iverson’s Embodiment as Cultural and Resistive

As noted in the review of literature, Iverson’s embodiment has served as a topic of interest for many authors studying professional basketball’s societal dimensions. Cultural studies scholar Thomas McLaughlin details the “white” and “black” dichotomy of basketball that was present during Iverson’s era of play.¹⁴¹ Famous white basketball players like Larry Bird and John Stockton were frequently praised by the media for playing ball “the right way” while Black

players, especially those athletes like Iverson, whose image embodied stereotypes of “the ghetto” or “the hood,” were demonized by the same media for not displaying “white values.”¹⁴² It became easy for popular media outlets to play on the racial divide in the United States by using Iverson as a model of what it looked like to be a “gangsta,” especially with his lack of image adjustment upon entering the league. As cultural scholar and sportswriter Howard Bryant also articulates, Iverson’s refusal to be greenwashed like other Black athletes before him became another source of cultural resistance.¹⁴³ “Greenwashing” is the process in which athletes conform to existing standards of dress or behavior in their field of play to appease audiences with the incentive of monetary gains through endorsements. As massive sponsorships became more available to Black athletes, less attention was paid to player’s stances on social issues like what was seen in prior eras. Instead, Black athletes like O.J. Simpson, Tiger Woods, and Michael Jordan conformed to more traditional molds of how a Black athlete should look and act on a stage presented to hegemonic (and typically white) audiences. As a result, these greenwashed athletes secured large endorsement deals that made them millions. Bryant points out that Iverson wanted to get paid but not at the cost of losing his authentic self in the process. To quote Bryant: “if the sports industry was going to scour the ghetto for Black talent, Iverson seemed to say, it would have to take the Blackness and the personality and Black culture that came with it.”¹⁴⁴

Previous scholarship opens the door for a discussion of embodied social activism of professional athletes. The ways in which voices like McLaughlin and Bryant discuss Iverson point towards embodied factors as explanation for media portrayals of the athlete and the subsequent criticism received for not fitting the hegemonic bill. These conversations point to embodied factors like Iverson’s hair, tattoos, and clothing/accessories but does not dig any deeper into how those signifiers are interpreted and thus result in the media response that Iverson

received. The work in this project fills the lack of connection between existing scholarship on Iverson and rhetorical foundational texts on embodiment. While sports sociologists and cultural scholars have discussed Iverson as a figure of resistance and even site of activism, such work rarely pairs those understandings with rhetorical theories of embodiment. Keeping the work of DeLuca in mind, my analysis of Iverson expands conversations of Iverson as a political athlete while making explicit connections to how his embodiment may be read as a type of activism. In the sections that follow, I will build upon these noted embodied factors and explore three specific moments in Iverson's career in which we see such factors contribute to his embodied social activism. In doing this, I will argue towards a greater understanding of how these discourses about resistance and culture stand as acts of social activism, regardless of Iverson's intentions. Iverson's embodiment is instinctual but given the political nature of sports, he as a figure becomes read as resistance.

Cornrows

My analysis of Iverson will begin with the inherently political nature of his hair. Lack of intent being one of the traits of embodied social activism requires observers to look towards the ways in which qualities of Iverson's embodiment are inherently political. His choice to wear cornrows becomes a component of this inherent political nature because of the deep history such a hairstyle has with Black culture. Not only is Iverson's hair itself a political symbol that ignites conversations surrounding social issues and power dynamics but his choice to wear them because of their practical applicability during travel for games and not as a means to make a statement reflect their status as factors of embodied social activism. Through this section, I will detail a brief history of Iverson's hairstyle and how this may be linked to Black culture, show

how cornrows can be rhetorically symbolic, and finally express why his instinctual motives to wear them makes such a hairstyle authentically embodied social activism.

Iverson's hairstyle was frequently used to craft his image as a "thug" in the media. During his time at Bethel High and later when he first entered the league, Iverson's hair matched that of many other basketball stars. Cut short and tight like the early days of Michael Jordan and Kobe Bryant, Iverson's hair was short and drew little attention because of how common it was. Even as his hair continued to grow into more of an afro, little attention was received because such hairstyle was also recognized in the NBA: superstar Julius Erving made big hair on the court iconic in the league in the 1970s.¹⁴⁵ Iverson's hair did not change into something resistant of traditional league styles until the 1997 All-Star Weekend, when Iverson made his first appearance in cornrows. The tight braids lined Iverson's head as he dropped 19 points and 9 assists, helping lead the West Rookie team to a victory in the NBA Rising Stars Game.¹⁴⁶

Iverson's decision to wear cornrows is emblematic of embodied social activism due to the deep cultural roots represented by the hairstyle. Historically speaking, cornrows and other forms of braids have been a part of Black culture for centuries. From ancient stone paintings depicting Black women with braids to the use of braiding as a system to send messages during American slavery; such hairstyles are engrained in Black history.¹⁴⁷ This deep history is one of the prime reasons that cornrows and braids are more than "just a hairstyle" and becomes problematic when popular white celebrities try to don them for the sake of fashion. As Kareem Abdul-Jabbar asserts, white Americans claiming to wear cornrows to pay homage to Black culture and famous Black figures is a veiled attempt to hide the truth: that white folks are appropriating historically Black hairstyles and exploiting a history to which they do not belong.¹⁴⁸

This symbolic struggle through hair becomes Iverson's gateway to practice social activism in the embodied sense. Iverson's choice to wear a hairstyle closely associated with Black culture, especially cultural moments of struggle and hardship of Black people, becomes an instance in which his embodied self becomes representative of more than simply who he was as a person. In this moment, Iverson uncovers the way that the NBA is a system and he as a player is a symbol operating within it. The larger social and political stage of the NBA stands as a place in which athletes represent different cities, states, and cultures. The changing of an athlete's hair, if that athlete is seen as symbolic, thus becomes an act of symbolic change. Iverson uses his body (his hair in this instance) to represent a culture that is bigger than just himself.

A symbolic shift of this degree matters because it forces the NBA and its fans to look at a culture they previously saw little of or at least a culture that was rarely represented on this particular stage. Iverson's embodiment can be likened to the rhetorical strategy of "directing attention" as proposed by Burke.¹⁴⁹ An audience is presented with a symbol that through its difference in comparison to the greater context in which it is found draws attention and thus promotes a reading of said symbol. As Bryant articulates through the example of greenwashing Black athletes, standards existed in sports that influenced the way that athletes should present themselves. The three-piece suit, the "professional" hair, speaking in certain ways during post-game press conferences; all serve as means to mold Black athletes in a way that would become more pleasing to the largely white audiences and white executives who produced and consumed their labor as entertainment. Whether it was said directly to Black athletes or not, there were degrees of expectations as to how they should present their bodies when entering the league. For Iverson, such expectations meant very little, as he refused to lose his true self in the new system he sought to play in.¹⁵⁰

Iverson's cornrows not only resisted hegemonic standards acceptable in the NBA, but would contribute to changing these standards entirely. As the league developed, more players would continue to choose cornrows over more traditional league hairstyles. Other 1990's NBA stars like Latrell Sprewell and Rasheed Wallace would help to catalyze the drive for more diversity in hair and Iverson's choices as to how he would style his body would usher in a new wave of NBA stars that wanted to mimic his style to be more like him. Superstar LeBron James says that he wore cornrows in high school to try and be like Iverson and in his farewell season, Miami Heat guard Dwyane Wade would wear cornrows in an effort to pay tribute to Iverson and his legacy.¹⁵¹ This embodied choice of resistance to standards shows a progression of shifts in symbolic meaning. No longer would cornrows in the NBA be seen as an outlier and talking point to discuss "hood culture" from places like the streets of Hampton. Cornrows became more than a symbol of culture that forced audiences to look outside the NBA for more reference. Instead, the hairstyle became a symbol *synonymous with* the NBA. If the league was going to have Iverson as a household name then they would also have to take his culture as well.

While it can be seen that Iverson's cornrows are embodied, what makes them embodied social activism is the lack of socially active motive the hairstyle has. Iverson is on record saying how his cornrows were purely a practical choice, stating that "I just didn't like getting haircuts...now, I just get my hair braided, and it will be good for two or three games."¹⁵² Iverson made a pragmatic choice to wear cornrows because they required less maintenance than an afro when traveling on the road for games. While the hairstyle draws attention because of the cultural significance, it is not intended by Iverson to make a cultural statement. His motive becomes one of practicality and not inherent resistance to standards. While Iverson's body is not intentionally resistive through this choice, the fact still remains that it becomes an embodied marker of

resistance, an inherent quality of his embodiment. The way audiences read Iverson's hair and the league's adoption of this style into their standards effectively builds on DeLuca's "a priori bodies" claim. Here, we see the athletic body functioning as argumentative and resistive with tangibly noticeable effects on the system but without intention of Iverson himself. Iverson is most resistive in his choice to wear cornrows because doing so is how he stays unwavering from his true self.

Tattoos

Iverson's tattoos also contributed to his "thug" image and made him a representation of Black culture at the forefront of professional basketball. Iverson's body was covered in tattoos and given the nature of NBA uniforms, were readily seen by people watching him on the court. Iverson's body art (and the controversies surrounding media attempts to censor such art) speak deeper about the ways that Iverson changed the league through his tattoos by challenging what was acceptable for athletic bodies to look like when they got to the NBA. Iverson's tattoos also would fit the embodied social activism mold as they serve a purpose other than participation in social activism while still being able to be read as effective in such a manner. In this section, I will detail a brief history of tattoos in the NBA, explain the controversy that took place when Iverson was featured on *Hoop* and *SLAM* magazine, and finally explain how Iverson's tattoos become inherently political without that being their main purpose.

Another quality of Iverson's body that receives direct attention is his numerous tattoos. Iverson's figure is covered in body art, totaling approximately 35 unique pieces.¹⁵³ To say that the athlete is "covered" in tattoos is not an overstatement, as the placement of his ink can be found on almost every part of his body, from his arms and legs, to his torso, and even on his neck. There seems to be deep meaning embedded in every one of Iverson's tattoos; each word or

sketch representative of a family member, loved one, or characteristic Iverson believes in like “loyalty” or reminders to “fear no one.”¹⁵⁴ In these ways, Iverson’s body becomes multi-layered with meaning. Symbolic images are painted across his skin and representative of larger cultural ideas in the same way that Iverson’s body itself serves as symbolic in the larger system that is the NBA.

Tattoos have had their place in the NBA before Iverson but it was his body art that changed the mainstream. Rarely had the NBA seen tattoos as excessive and pronounced on an athlete’s body. Chicago Bulls star Dennis Rodman had many tattoos before Iverson but was widely regarded as a “talented sideshow” whose persona was looked at as whacky and strange.¹⁵⁵ Iverson’s tattoos broke traditional form because of how visible they were but also shifted attitudes in the league because of how much attention he received because of his play. Iverson was a staple athlete in the NBA, leading the league in scoring 4 separate times and being crowned the league’s MVP in 2001.¹⁵⁶ His position in the spotlight made it impossible for the media and fans to ignore his image and push it to the side like they may have done with Rodman. Iverson was not sidelined in the NBA; at many times, he *was* the league.

Iverson’s position at the forefront of the NBA made the league’s attempt at censoring him all the more pronounced. In early 2000, Iverson was given an opportunity to star on the front of the NBA’s official magazine, *Hoop*. Iverson’s opportunity to make the cover of *Hoop* came with attempted image alteration though, as would be made clear after editors airbrushed away his tattoos and jewelry when polishing his photoshoot pictures before sending them to print. Iverson would make the January 2000 cover of *Hoop* with the following alterations:

[Iverson] appears without tattoos. Apparently, the magazine airbrushed them off...The background of the photo is red. But Iverson's diamond earrings are nowhere to be seen. Also not seen are his diamond necklace and the tattoo on his neck. His left arm, which also has tattoos, was covered with white and yellow type.¹⁵⁷

Faced with backlash, the NBA quickly regretted their decision. NBA Senior Vice President of Communications Brian McIntyre would apologize and claim that the airbrushing should never have taken place, reminding audiences that the NBA was now “running [Iverson] in his full glory...we’re promoting him.”¹⁵⁸

Regardless of the apology, what cannot be taken back is the fact that figures of power that represented the league blatantly attempted to censor Iverson’s body. The airbrushing incident with *Hoop*, a case written about at length by sports communication scholars Betsy Emmons and Andrew C. Billings, is evidence of a system of power working to oppress the communicative qualities of one of its members.¹⁵⁹ The NBA did not have regulations about whether or not an athlete could have tattoos. They did have rules about wearing jewelry when being photographed but this regulation only applied to photoshoots on gamedays.¹⁶⁰ This type of body policing was not seen in the league at the time and thus the NBA could not silence Iverson as a cultural site by forcing him to cover up his tattoos. Instead, when presented with an opportunity to alter Iverson’s image to fit what was more “appropriate” for the league, the NBA jumped and took action. Calculated editing choices cannot be passed off as accidental and McIntyre’s apology accepts blame, claiming that the league made the wrong decision in airbrushing Iverson.¹⁶¹ Such a move sheds light on the power dynamics present between the NBA and their athletes. If Iverson’s body is understood as rhetorical, the choice to change the way his body is presented carries the same weight as if the league had chosen to change the words he said without his consent. If Iverson’s body is viewed as argumentative because of the culture it represents then censorship of his body image effectively works to silence a cultural signifier. Iverson’s body image made political/social conversations possible because of the media

buzz around the way that he looked. If *Hoop*, an appendage of the NBA system, was to alter Iverson's body image then it may have effectively worked to quiet those conversations.

The *Hoop* magazine controversy looked especially oppressive thanks to other opportunities Iverson had in different media outlets. *SLAM* magazine stands as one of the top media outlets for basketball in the United States and their mission has always been motivated to empower the players and resist the status quo. In March of 1999, Iverson would be featured on *SLAM*'s cover (Fig. 1) but in this instance, would be highlighted as his genuine self. Iverson posed in a similar stance to that of iconic Philadelphia 76er Julius Erving, complete with the classic red, white, and blue basketball and his hair picked out into an afro. The cover would also feature Iverson's large gold chains and his tattoos clear in all their glory.¹⁶² The image was meant to push up against figures like Erving who the league once knew, as Tony Gervino, top editor for *SLAM* in 1999 stated that, "*SLAM* always operated in opposition to what the NBA was doing. We wanted to juxtapose Iverson with a classic NBA image."¹⁶³

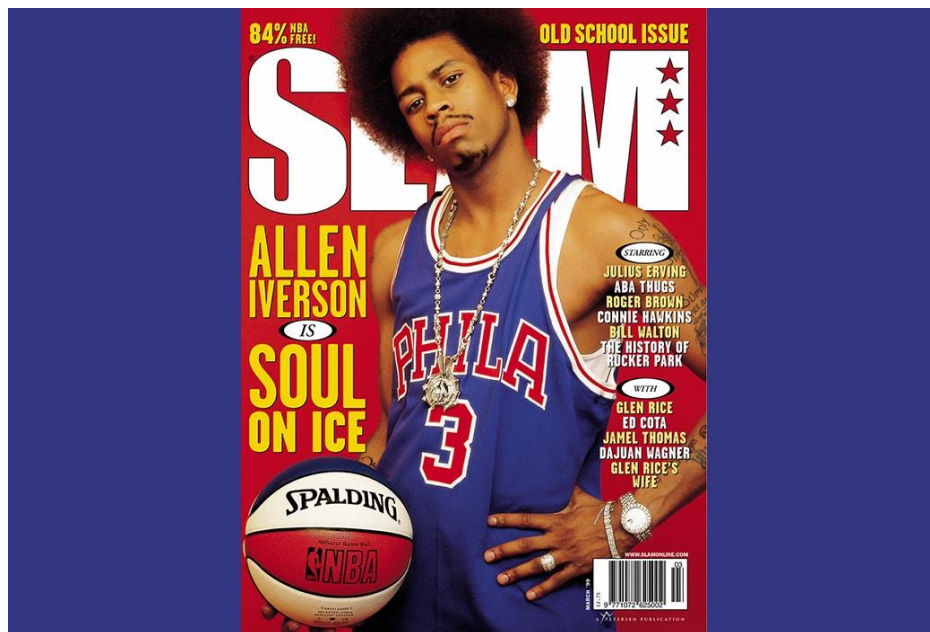


Fig. 1. "Allen Iverson is Soul on Ice" cover for *SLAM* Magazine, March 1999.

Iverson's image on *SLAM*, unaltered and unapologetically himself, viewed in contrast to his image on *Hoop*, stands as an act of embodied social activism. Being featured on *SLAM* was a way for Iverson to use his body to spark discourses about what it means to be him and show where he comes from. A magazine cover is an explicit example of embodied rhetoric, as the image on the cover becomes symbolic as to what the issue will be about. The *SLAM* cover uses Iverson's body as a symbol of resistance and change. At the time, Iverson had become one of the main faces of the league and the media portraying him as who he authentically was became a signification that the league would be challenged. The Ervings and Jordans of the past no longer stood as the mold that all players must model themselves after, especially because those models typically came at the cost of what Bryant would call, their "Blackness."¹⁶⁴ *SLAM*'s cover would go on to become an iconic piece of basketball culture, as it represented a shift in norms. Iverson was successfully challenging structures with his own personal image. *Hoop*'s blatant censorship also shows that Iverson's image was a point of tension and instead of letting him be who he was, the league was working to craft him into another three-piece suit athlete of the past. The stark differences between these two covers is evidence of embodied resistance and potential for discourses to ignite because of such resistance.

Maintaining that embodied social activism can be inherent and unintentional, Iverson's reaction to the *Hoop* airbrushing also contributes to how this act was resistive. When asked to respond to the airbrushing, Iverson stated the following:

I just wish the NBA wouldn't use me [as an example]...They could have used somebody else if they didn't want to accept me as a whole. This is who I am. It kind of hurts, because I've got my mother's name on my body, my grandmother's name, my kids, my fiancée. That means something to me. Airbrushing them, that's like a slap in my face. Use somebody else who doesn't have tattoos. I wouldn't suggest them taking any tattoos off of somebody else...But [my tattoos] mean something to me.¹⁶⁵

Iverson's response shows that the tattoos "mean something" to him because they are representative of bigger people and ideas in his life. By choosing to permanently add these names and figures to his own skin, Iverson is making claims that they are a part of him. In this response, Iverson shows he was genuinely hurt by the situation. His tattoos are resistive to traditional NBA norms but they were not made with the intent to resist. His body art is not linked to any specific protest movement and while his tattoos may be read as symbolic representations of Black culture, their first purpose is to represent his family. Iverson's tattoos are symbolic of who he is first and become representative of culture secondarily. In all these ways, it is Iverson's body that makes a resistive statement without his direct intent of doing so.

"The Steptover"

Iverson's famous "steptover" may be considered the most impactful moment of his professional career. When NBA fans think of Iverson, they think of that moment from the NBA Finals. The moment also stands for much more than a simple basketball move and has gained traction as one of the greatest signifiers of resistance seen in professional basketball. I argue though that the steptover is even more than that still, standing in as a representation of Iverson and his embodied social activism as a whole. As I will demonstrate in this section, the iconicity of Iverson stepping over Tyronn Lue represents a shift in NBA standards and can be viewed as a visual moment in which Iverson was no longer an outlier in the league but instead the face of the system and a source for other players to copy.

The final and most iconic moment of embodied social activism in Iverson's career was his infamous "steptover." On June 6th, 2001, during Game One of the NBA Finals, Iverson would put up 48 points, 6 assists, and 5 steals – leading the Philadelphia 76ers to a 107-101 victory in overtime over the Los Angeles Lakers.¹⁶⁶ The victory came as a shock to fans of basketball

everywhere, as Iverson and the 76ers would hand the Lakers their first and only loss of that year's playoff run; ending a 67-day winning streak from 2001's most dominant team in the league. The most talked about moment of that game was Iverson's stepover of Lakers' guard Tyronn Lue. Iverson would cross Lue over and make a contested shot. Upon the make, Lue fell to the ground in front of the Lakers bench and before returning to the opposite end of the court, Iverson would step over Lue in a supreme act of defiance. While the 76ers would go on to lose the series, fans of basketball would talk about the game and that specific moment for years to come.

"The Stepover" would go on to become symbolic of hard work, determination, and overall defiance in the face of adversity. Many NBA fans consider the stepover to be one of the most disrespectful taunts in the history of the league and a way for Iverson to dismiss anyone who doubted that the 76ers had a shot against the Lakers in that series.¹⁶⁷ Race and popular culture scholar Todd Boyd recognizes that the 76ers were simply outmatched and went into the Finals with little to no hope of beating NBA Hall of Famers Kobe Bryant and Shaquille O'Neal in their primes. Because of that, Iverson's stepover Lue would become "the image of defiance."¹⁶⁸ With this one move, Iverson captured his never-give-up spirit and forced the NBA and all watching to eat their words for doubting that someone like him could get this far.



Fig. 2. Allen Iverson Steps Over Tyronn Lue in the 2001 NBA Finals from <https://ballislife.com/iverson-step-tyronn-lue/>, accessed on June 8, 2020

The image itself rhetorically represents all facets of Iverson's embodiment that made him who he was; symbolic of what it meant to be a cultural site of defiance. In the image, Iverson's cornrows are explicitly present and shown off in a way that pronounces them as he shifts his head down to look at Lue. While a shooter's athletic sleeve almost fully covers one of his arms, Iverson's tattoos still make their presence known as they can be seen on his right shoulder, entire left arm, and neck. Even though he is shorter than everyone in the photo, Iverson's persona is large and draws the most attention when fans look to the image to remember the iconic moment. During the stepover, audiences watching were reminded that even if the league had wanted to

change Iverson, they had ultimately failed and here he was, during the biggest series of his career, continuing to perform his true self without ever wavering. It is from this moment that Iverson's body shows it does not need to be changed to fit standards that the NBA had set and that he was going to succeed and achieve greatness in his own way or not at all.

Lue's embodied image also speaks to Iverson's cultural impact because of the parallels drawn between the two. In this rhetorical moment, Lue is representative of a system that Iverson had tangibly changed through his embodiment. The two men juxtapose one another; Iverson, the authentic figure, towering over Lue, the league's copy. Lue wore cornrows just like Iverson and has attributed Iverson's success as one of his motivations. In an interview for sports media company Thuzio, Iverson speaks towards the ways that Lue idolized him and that during that series, Lue made it a point to guard Iverson as hard as he could so that he could prove himself to the other Lakers.¹⁶⁹ Journalist Mark Babb would write the following about how Lakers coach Phil Jackson would train Lue:

During Finals prep, [Jackson] assigned Lue, a little-used, twenty-four-year-old guard with quickness and determination, to *be* Allen Iverson. Though Lue wore cornrows, he was seen as sort of an anti-Iverson...His role during practices was to portray Iverson...¹⁷⁰

Lue was not simply another NBA player who Iverson had crossed over and beaten to the basket; Lue was the establishment's embodiment of Iverson's impact. When Iverson had entered the league, no one looked like him and if they did, they were encouraged to change themselves. Now however, through the stepover, audiences are shown that the league no longer resists Iverson's embodiment, but instead seeks to mimic him. The stepover Lue was not simply another move in a game; the act can be viewed rhetorically as the moment in which Iverson's refusal to be anything other than himself resulted in a tangible change to the league. Iverson was no longer standing out through his embodiment; instead, the league was trying to *be* him.

The Stepover itself serves as an embodied moment in which the league had shifted. Iverson had an impact on the game bigger than almost anyone else. He may not have won championships like Michael Jordan or LeBron James but he changed the way the league looked so that more players could be unapologetically themselves too. Future Hall of Famers like guard Chris Paul credit Iverson as an inspiration, saying that players coming into the league wanted to be like him more than anyone else.¹⁷¹ Before Iverson, athletes wanted to model themselves after players like Jordan – the classic “Be Like Mike” Gatorade commercial stood as a model for what aspiring players could look up to eventually be.¹⁷² After Iverson though, the model shifted. Rookies no longer had to wear suits to press-conferences and cut their hair a certain way to fit into the league’s standards. Iverson proved you could be successful without ever losing your true roots in the process.

Iverson showed that an athlete’s roots could also be inherently political and that this was not a negative thing. The hair Iverson wore, his tattoos and chains, and the friends he still hung out with that critics deemed as a “posse” were all symbolic representations of what it meant to be a young Black man growing up in a struggling area.¹⁷³ The image of Iverson’s stepover is a deeply political one because it serves as a symbolic representation of what many Black men at that time looked like. This time however, instead of depicting men who wore cornrows or had tattoos as thugs, gangsters, and vandals in a negative sense, Iverson’s body put a positive twist on an existing narrative, standing as an argument for how you could look just like him and still be incredibly hardworking and successful. Iverson in this moment not only sparked discourses across the nation about what it looked like to be a Black man growing up in struggling areas but instead shifted the entire league to make that image one that people appreciated and wanted to emulate. Iverson’s body stood as an argument about social issues that not only catalyzed

conversations about what it meant to be Black in the United States but elevated such an image to the point that it was mainstream.

As I have argued with the cornrows and tattoos, the stepover also would not be considered embodied social activism if it had not been for the instinctual nature behind the act. Many NBA fans and media personalities question Iverson about his iconic stepover and build into the narrative of this being the most defiant act in professional basketball history. These readings of Iverson's stepover as symbolic serve narrative purpose for inspiring younger generations of players but Iverson himself wants fans to recognize that the stepover was never an intentional act, it was simply him playing basketball and his body reacting naturally. In an interview with ESPN reporter Rachel Nichols about the stepover, Iverson said that, "I didn't even know I did it. I was in the moment...I didn't remember that. I was just playing."¹⁷⁴ When asked to recreate the stepover during advertising photoshoots, Iverson has stated that, "I don't know how I did it when I did it. You know what I mean? It was just a reaction. I didn't know I did it."¹⁷⁵ The choice to stepover Lue was not a calculated one in which Iverson meant to disrespect his opponent for the sake of sending a greater message. Instead, he was intensely focused on playing the game and giving his all. What happened was not a planned reaction and purely a product of an athlete deeply connected to doing their work. In these ways, Iverson's embodied actions become read as symbolic inherently and without his explicit articulation for them to be received as such.

The lack of strategic intent behind the stepover is symbolic of his total impact on the league; instinctual and purely an athlete trying to be their true self. Iverson successfully changed the face of basketball. He was the shortest and lightest player to ever win the Most Valuable Player award and did so while dressed in baggy clothes, thick chains, and covered in tattoos and

intricate cornrows. He set a new standard for what the next generation would try to be; instead of wanting to “Be Like Mike,” many up incoming athletes would want to “have braids like AI.”¹⁷⁶ The biggest stage for basketball now welcomed players who served as cultural sites for struggles in the United States. Athletic bodies were not policed through criticism in a way that ostracized them for their tattoos or choice in hair. These same bodies now received credit for trying to model themselves after one of the game’s greatest players. Iverson’s embodiment helped change perceptions of Black men in the United States and effectively altered what the NBA would look like and it all became possible because of a man who simply did not want to be anyone other than himself. This is not to say that because of Iverson, discrimination against young Black men stopped altogether. I would argue that negative portrayals of Black men as thugs and gangsters are still alive and well today. However, Iverson’s impact on the world of basketball and the subsequent conversations that take place because of that game cannot be denied. The United States as a whole was not changed because of Iverson’s embodiment but such embodiment did have an impact on the way particular social issues were presented through the lens of basketball.

Conclusion – Body as Argument

As illustrated through the highlighted examples, Iverson’s image and experiences become clear examples of embodied social activism. Through the life and career of Iverson, two major challenges to traditional athlete activism are made. One, Iverson’s embodied social activism shows that a player can make political statements and contribute to political conversations without a reliance on written or spoken rhetoric. While Iverson rarely participated in political discourses through press conferences and interviews like other athlete activists before him did, his body as argumentative more than compensated for a lack of spoken rhetoric. Iverson’s body was political and rhetorical, challenging and changing the league by being a version of himself

that represented Black culture. Second, Iverson's embodiment showed that you could be an athlete activist in an era not typically associated with outspoken player activism. While a majority of other players of the 90s/2000s "stayed in their lanes" in pursuit of sponsorships and contributed less towards political discourses, Iverson's image showed that an athlete could still be an activist even in a moment of United States history where athlete activism was less common.

While the embodied social activism of Allen Iverson extends conversations surrounding athlete's participation in social issue discourse, the concept itself can be applied beyond a singular case. Iverson's embodied social activism opens the door for discussions about how the athletic body makes arguments but is limited by how inherently symbolic Iverson's embodiment was. Not every athlete needs their body to be as deeply symbolic and representative of entire cultures as Iverson's was. Iverson's embodied social activism is also limited due to the lack of room for intentionality in using the athletic body as credibility in more traditional forms of athlete activism. I argue that embodied social activism is more common than may appear and that many athlete's use their embodied experiences as ethos in order to participate in traditional forms of athlete activism like deliberate kneeling or calculated speeches/written discourse. In these ways, credibility can come from the broadcasting of embodied experiences of the athletic body; the media catching moments of a body caught up in injustices become ethos for the written/spoken activism an athlete participates in. In a cultural moment where the professional athlete is documented on camera through the media now more than ever, the use of embodied social activism occurs more frequently. To demonstrate this, in the next chapter I will detail the career and activism of NFL champion Michael Bennett to show the ways that embodied social activism can be influenced by lived experiences based on embodied factors of an athlete's

identity, reflects evolution of the ways a political athlete is deemed credible by audiences, and can aid in more traditional forms of athlete activism like planned protests and written/spoken discourses.

Chapter 4: Michael Bennett

The use of personal experiences to inform arguments in the field of sports is far from a new concept. Press conferences with players and coaches have a long history of allowing the fans of a sport a peek into the more personal sides of players. Audiences are able to hear of stories from a player's past that has made them who they are today through press conferences and media interviews. Some moments that get brought up when addressing the press are those of racism and other social injustices.¹⁷⁷ These experiences become valuable when addressing sports media as athletes are able to use their platform of communication to show their humanity and draw an audience's attention to important social problems. Given a world where media's presence heavily saturates the life of an athlete, these experiences can be more than just a spoken reference and instead may be captured on camera as well. NFL champion Michael Bennett is an outspoken supporter of the Black Lives Matter movement and frequently uses his position in the media to perform activism and speak on social injustices. However, Bennett is different than other athletes before him because video documentation of his own experiences with social injustice lends his activism a layer of credibility that other athletes may not have. For Bennett, his body's own suffering as captured by police body cam footage becomes evidence he calls upon in his written and spoken activism.

To extend my application of embodied social activism, I will look at the life and career of Michael Bennett. Building on ideas proposed in the Iverson chapter, Bennett's embodiment shows the ways that embodied social activism can function beyond the instinctual. For Bennett, the media documentation of his body in distress becomes a source of credibility for his explicitly articulated activism – the body in this case serving *as evidence* for Bennett's political stances. I argue that a moment in Bennett's career in which he was caught on camera being victim of

police violence then becomes visual and embodied evidence Bennett uses to inform his social activism. By drawing on an instance of embodiment (one specifically that was confirmed through footage) Bennett is able to enact embodied social activism in a way that is new and unique based on his era of play and the abundance of media presence that comes with it.

In this chapter, I will begin by providing context into the life and career of Bennett, paying explicit attention to an incident with the Las Vegas Metropolitan Police Department (LVMPD) in which he was racially profiled. By focusing on this case, I will explain how the Bennett era of athlete activism differs than older eras like that of Muhammad Ali due to the increased influence media presence has on the way an athlete is read by audiences. I will then detail how Bennett's brand of embodied social activism builds upon and differs than that of Iverson's. Finally, I will close by analyzing three instances of Bennett's activism in which he used his embodied experiences to inform his arguments: his "Dear World" tweet after being racially profiled, a section of his memoir *Things that Make White People Uncomfortable* which gives a narrative retelling of his racial profiling, and a press-conference with Seattle media in which he responds to the incident with police. Analysis of these three moments serves to show the way that Bennett participates in activism with a written/spoken approach but that these traditional means are still informed and made possible by embodiment.

The Career of Michael Bennett

Michael Bennett did not share the same immediate placement in athletic stardom as Iverson. After playing college football at Texas A&M, Bennett would not be immediately drafted by any NFL teams. Instead, he would sign as an undrafted rookie in 2009 briefly with the Seattle Seahawks before being claimed off waivers by the Tampa Bay Buccaneers. Bennett would play defensive end in Tampa Bay until 2013 when he was re-signed by the Seahawks. It

was his time in Seattle where Bennett would most notably shine, collecting 39 quarterback sacks, 3 Pro Bowl selections, and a 2014 Super Bowl Championship across his 5 seasons with the team.¹⁷⁸ Bennett would be integral in the 2014 Super Bowl victory and cement his place as a member of the “Legion of Boom” – the nickname given to the Seattle Seahawks defensive unit that is widely considered one of the best defenses in NFL history.¹⁷⁹

While regarded as an impressive defensive threat, Bennett is more widely known in sports for his consistent participation in social activism. Bennett is president and lead chairman of “The Bennett Foundation” – an organization that seeks to educate underserved communities in Hawaii, Washington, and Texas on how children and families can live a more active lifestyle and incorporate nutrition into their daily routine.¹⁸⁰ Bennett’s activism goes further than charity though, as he frequently uses his position in the media spotlight to speak out about societal issues like racial injustice and police brutality. Bennett states, “I just want to see people have the equality that they deserve. I want to be able to use this platform to continuously push the message of that and keep finding how unselfish we can be as a society.”¹⁸¹ Bennett is not afraid to use his body when taking stances as well, as is demonstrated by his choices to wear “Hands Up, Don’t Shoot” t-shirts during television interviews or his decision to kneel during the National Anthem before NFL games.¹⁸² Such actions show reliance on more traditional means of using the athletic body to protest; the articulation of the body for explicitly political demonstration.

For the sake of this project, it becomes meaningful to mention that Bennett’s activism is part of a moment of resurgence for the athlete activist, especially as it takes place in a sporting arena that has historically lacked activism. As mentioned in the introductory chapter, the 2010s have seen a rekindling of an old type of relationship between professional sports and activism

which was more common in the 1960s and 1970s. Kaepernick's choice to kneel during the National Anthem before NFL games as an act of peaceful protest can be viewed as a return to athletes more actively participating in social movements. If we are to look at the era of the 1980s, 1990s, and early 2000s, this is not to say that athletes did not protest. NBA stars like Craig Hodges and Mahmoud Abdul-Rauf frequently used their platforms as athletes to speak out against injustice, even if it came at the cost of their careers.¹⁸³ However, as mentioned in the Iverson analysis, much more attention was placed on an athlete's ability to gain financial sponsorships and thus less attention was placed on speaking out for the sake of activism.¹⁸⁴ This has been of particular relevance to the NFL, a league that has seen significantly less political efforts by athletes than that of the NBA. This distinction in era and league becomes crucial when comparing the activism of Iverson and Bennett because while I will argue both conduct embodied social activism, the form it takes will look different based on the context in which each athlete is being judged. For Iverson, the athletes of his era were rarely articulate about their political affiliations and thus embodied readings of an athlete would not typically accompany political statements or explicit protest efforts. For Bennett, the political athlete of the 2010s and onward increasingly is asked by media for comment on their stances on social issues and thus, activism is more frontloaded and easily visible.

Bennett's activism has been pronounced and forthright throughout his 11 years in the NFL but a particular event with law enforcement has served to greatly influence the way he practices his advocacy. On August 26th, 2017 in The Cromwell and Drai's Nightclub in Las Vegas, Nevada, Bennett would be detained by officers from the LVMPD when the location was investigated in relation to an alleged active shooter situation. Many patrons of the nightclub fled the scene, including Bennett, who was singled out by officers in their attempt to identify

potential threats. Bennett was forced to the ground, cuffed, frisked, and detained. Although unproven as bodycam footage that was not filming at the time, Bennett claims officers put their knee in his back while he lay on the ground and stuck a gun to his head, threatening to “blow his fucking head off” if he failed to cooperate.¹⁸⁵ Body cam footage did capture Bennett pleading to know what he did wrong as he sat handcuffed on the ground before being placed in the back of a police cruiser. Bennett would prove his innocence to the officers by convincing them to Google him, in which it became clear that he was a famous football player and not a “thug, common criminal or ordinary black man.”¹⁸⁶ While the interaction lasted no more than 10 minutes from beginning to end, the event would be spun into a media spectacle when Bennett threatened to pursue legal action against the LVMPD, claiming the incident was an act of racial profiling in which officers used excessive force.¹⁸⁷

The incident itself would go on to amass significant media attention and bifurcated interpretations as it relates to Bennett’s credibility. The LVMPD held a press conference in which all security and body cam footage was reviewed in front of the press to show that the officers’ actions toward Bennett were justified and not racially motivated, even making claims that because one of the officers involved was Hispanic that this could not be an instance of racial bias towards a Black man.¹⁸⁸ The lack of evidence that Bennett was threatened with a handgun as he claimed and his choice to run from the scene instead of dropping to the ground as officers ordered became arguments made to discredit the fact that Bennett was actually a victim of racial profiling and justified the actions of the LVMPD. For the sake of this project, my goal is not to assess whether Bennett’s claims are absolutely truthful. Evidence exists that supports claims of both Bennett and the LVMPD so the choice to call the event “racial profiling” may be up for interpretation. While I believe actions of the officers may have been racially motivated due to a

history in the United States with racial profiling practices, I also acknowledge Bennett's choice to flee a scene in which many other patrons (who were both Black and white) chose to drop to the ground also creates suspicion when looking for an alleged shooter.¹⁸⁹ The severity of this particular situation can be interpreted differently based on who is asked to judge.

What cannot be refuted is the impact the moment had on Bennett and how such an incident would go on to change his social activism. Following the experience with the LVMPD, Bennett would go on to release a tweet on September 6th, 2017 that contained a one-page letter that opened with "Dear World," in which he would detail the events that transpired that night in Las Vegas.¹⁹⁰ The letter expresses Bennett's fears during that moment and relates his experiences to those who died at the hands of law enforcement like Trayvon Martin and Michael Brown. The tweet would only be a starting point though, as Bennett would expand on such discourse with the release of his book *Things that Make White People Uncomfortable* on April 3rd, 2018.¹⁹¹ Co-authored with sportswriter Dave Zirin, *Things that Make White People Uncomfortable* stands as a personal memoir intended to detail Bennett's experiences as a Black athlete in the United States. The book covers many events in Bennett's career that have influenced his activism and contains an entire section where he details incident with the LVMPD and how it changed his life.¹⁹² Bennett would also use the experience to inform his spoken activism, as he would devote his media press conference on September 6th, 2017 to discussing the events that transpired and reflect on social injustices.

Evolution of the Athlete Activist

To begin, I shall detail the key differences between the Muhammad Ali and Michael Bennett eras of athlete activism. It deserves mentioning that while I'll call it the "Ali Era" there are plenty of athletes from that time that could be referenced as being "their era" – I have simply

chosen Ali as a representative figure of what the athlete activist looked like in the timeframe of the 1940s-1970s; an era in which an athlete activist was easily identified through their explicitly political discourse. This chapter articulates the way that Bennett uses digital documentation of his embodied experiences as evidence in his activism but such a point should not devalue the influence of the body in older eras of athlete activism. It is not that the Black bodies of someone like Muhammed Ali were not rhetorical, but it is the witnessing of the athletic “Black body in pain” and experiencing injustice that is unique and made possible by cam footage, media reports, and Bennett’s retelling through his platform.¹⁹³ The Bennett era of activism requires an athlete to traverse a media landscape quite different than the one that existed for athlete activists of the 1960s and prior. The athletic body of this contemporary era is surveyed more than that of early athlete activists. Not only does this allow athletes more opportunities to speak out on injustices and perform intentional activism but the saturation in media also allows for more chances of injustices towards the athletic body to be captured digitally. The drive of athletic activists from earlier eras to now is not all that different; in fact, many athletes in the 2010s and onward are fighting against the same injustices that athletes in the 1960s/1970s fought against. What then warrants attention is the shift in available platform and context from which the new generation of athletes speak. The athletic body itself is “seen” far more now than it was when social/journalistic media was less developed.

Given this constant presence in the media, individuals who are identified as “professional athletes” find themselves in a double bind when it comes to the way their activism is received by audiences. Professional athletes are given the platform from which they may speak about personal experiences, especially ones about racism or injustice when practicing activism. At the same time, their wealth and fame places them in a stratum of society which becomes distanced

from a majority of the citizens they are speaking towards through their platform. This position “above” the common citizen then is used by those who doubt the claims of a professional athlete in order to devalue their experiences. Bennett’s release from LVMPD custody after his detainment is credited to his status as a professional athlete. In his book, Bennett details that “...the officers, at my insistence, Googled my name and saw that I was in fact a famous football player...and they let me go.”¹⁹⁴ Footage from LVMPD body cams also shows the officers looking at their phones and expressing that they’ve heard Bennett’s name before and recognize the man in the pictures before ultimately using this as justification for his release.¹⁹⁵ This moment of the encounter reveals the unique privileges that come from being identified as a professional athlete. An avowed identity like an individual’s occupation in this scenario carries more weight as credibility towards Bennett’s pleas that he was not involved in the alleged shooting.

The incident with Bennett and the LVMPD was ended because of his status as a “professional athlete” but as his book further details, the identity marker also comes with consequences. As Bennett expresses in *Things that Make White People Uncomfortable*, the celebrity status associated with being a professional athlete frequently constrains the statements he is “allowed” to make. Bennett writes, “people have said to me that, as an athlete, given the money and fame that comes with this life, I have no business speaking out...it’s like Jackie Robinson said: ‘People tell me I’ve got it made because I have fame and some money in my pocket...’”¹⁹⁶ This alludes to constraints in Bennett’s agency because of his status as a professional athlete. In the incident with the LVMPD, he was able to use this identity marker to save himself from potential violence that may have been brought on had he been less wealthy but as the book mentions, when it comes to the media and those who seek to criticize Bennett for

speaking out, they will use the same identity marker as justification for why his statements are not credible. Such line of argument is frequently used against Black professional athletes, as many fans and audience members will say that their position in a higher-class bracket than most United States citizens displaces them from knowing what “actual” struggles for everyday people are like.¹⁹⁷ In these ways, the prioritization of class when reading an athlete’s identity actually comes as a disadvantage because it serves to discredit the lived ethos that comes from being Black in the United States.

Athletes of today who find themselves constantly in view of the media thus face challenges that are unique to this era as opposed to earlier times. Struggles received for being labeled a “professional athlete” who practices social activism cannot be compared to the disenfranchisement of other identity categories like race or gender; to say these markers are on the same level of oppression is untruthful and problematic. I recognize that “professional athlete” is a label that represents an occupation which can be removed and lost unlike other markers that cannot be abandoned. That being said, it is important to look at the way professions as identity categories influence the ways that individuals are read by audiences, especially individuals like professional athletes who are constantly in the spotlight of an ever-critical media base. When a profession positions an individual in the public eye consistently, such a title then contributes to packaging the way audiences read that individual. As is made evident in this chapter’s case of analysis, Bennett’s activism becomes a source of criticism because audiences use his profession as a point of communication about his identity; privileging the reading of class before that of race. No individual can be reduced to a singular identity marker but the case with Bennett details the ways in which a profession as identity category may take dictate which qualities of a person’s identity are considered first.

Bennett's case then becomes unique because it represents what the effect of embodied evidence has on strengthening the case of an athlete activist. Athletes may find themselves in an in-between space in which they desire to use their embodied experiences brought on by their race to inform their points but are criticized for doing so as if their current wealth status would negate their ability to know what it is like to Black in the context of the United States. Similar to ideas presented by Flores or Anzaldúa about individuals that exist in-between cultures, "professional athlete" then becomes a marker of identity in which an individual is positioned between two categories – in this instance class and race – and finds they cannot easily fit into both or either. Black athletes also struggle in this case because if there is no explicit evidence that an individual was subject to social injustices then the audiences hearing their arguments may write these stances off as false simply because "if I cannot see your body struggling then it must not have happened." This is where the case of Michael Bennett becomes exceptionally unique because for one of the first times in this era of activism, audiences are given video evidence of the body in question suffering at the hands of the system. The documentation of Bennett's body in distress then adds a layer to his activism not possible in earlier eras like that of Ali. Fans do not have to simply "take his word for it" but instead, Bennett has visual evidence of his body in stress that he uses to aid his written/spoken activism.

Professional athletes ultimately find themselves in a double bind that discredits them for not having tangible evidence for arguments. The athlete activist has always spoken out against social injustices and to do so, uses personal experiences to guide their claims. However, in the new age of social media in which so much of an athlete's life is publicized, audiences who are able to watch these lives unfold then may find it hard to believe an athlete when they claim they have been a victim. The lavish life of a professional athlete is frequently the attention of U.S.

media sources to show off an athlete's home, their wardrobe, their contract earnings, and other visible representations of wealth. The noticeability of wealth reinforces the class identity marker of a professional athlete. A lack of visualization of the effects of social injustice on the athletic body then is used by particular critics to discredit an athlete when they seek to discuss personal experiences with racism, sexism, etc. The case of Bennett thus presents a potential turning point for the athlete activist as audiences are now witnessing a time when the pain applied to an athlete's body through systems of power becomes as visible as their wealth. Visual evidence of these injustices then lend credibility that athletes may use in a way that prior generations of activists did not have access to.

Differences Between Iverson and Bennett's Embodiment

Before I begin my analysis, I find it pressing to address how Bennett's body is different than Iverson's and thus makes arguments in different ways. Iverson and Bennett have more difference between themselves than similarities. Bennett is physically much different than Iverson; approximately 3 inches taller and 110 pounds heavier. Bennett also does not have any noticeable tattoos, cornrows, or other articles of clothing that represent "hood culture" as explicitly as Iverson does. The context in which their bodies are read also differ. Iverson plays basketball; a sport with fewer men on the court at a time which makes his body more easily visible. Bennett is part of a defensive unit made up of dozens of men and as he only plays on one side of the ball, his time on the field is noticeably less. Even the difference in uniforms between the NBA and NFL allows for basketball to show more of a player's skin than if they played football. The context of sport also matters because different fanbases and audiences lead to different readings of the body. The NBA is predominantly Black with white American athletes making up a small minority of the league's player base.¹⁹⁸ The NBA also embraces bonds with

rappers, hip-hop, and other art forms that are attributed to Black culture and its creators while the NFL has at times attempted to silence rap's influence on football.¹⁹⁹ While Black men make up the majority of players in both leagues, the fan base of the NFL is much more white than that of the NBA.²⁰⁰ Off the court/field, Iverson and Bennett maintain their differences; Iverson posed as an eccentric celebrity with fancy jewelry and pronounced attitude while Bennett is displayed in a more humble manner, more conservative with his celebrity image and instead focused on his activism.

The differences between contexts matters because it influences the way embodiment becomes a factor in each athlete's case. For Iverson, his body itself was symbolic and representative of a larger culture. In many ways, he became the symbol of factors that were typically associated with negative stereotypes of Black citizens. The cornrows, tattoos, and jewelry/baggy clothing were all caricature-like qualities of Iverson that United States citizens could look to and link to the way that media sources negatively painted individuals with those types of qualities. Iverson's body is able to make an argument because of his ability to be the best, defy expectations, and do it all while his body looks exactly like the "thugs" that the media spoke down upon. Iverson's body itself and the way he carried himself is deeply symbolic of a bigger culture which I argue is rare to find in an individual. Not everyone so perfectly embodies a culture or idea in the same way that Iverson does and if we are to only look at him as an example, it would become difficult to see any other athlete's practicing embodied social activism.

This is why attention needs to be paid towards the common and lived experiences of an athlete when considering how their activism is embodied. Social activism can call on embodied factors like how an athlete positions and places their body (i.e. kneeling, raising a fist, etc.)

Those practices of activism are valuable and make up a bulk of what is understood as athlete activism. Such practices can, however, be expanded upon to incorporate more of the inherent embodiment of an individual. Maintaining the “body as evidence” line of logic, I argue that race itself is an identity quality much more applicable to a wide variety of athletes and that if we consider the way race influences an athlete’s lived experiences, we can see the way that choices to reference embodied moments then become embodied social activism. In these ways, I argue how race shapes/drives an athlete’s social activism. Although underrepresented in sports like golf and hockey, Black men make up a majority of the population of professional athletes in large United States sports programs like basketball and football.²⁰¹ The material identity quality of race itself is an embodied factor that impacts an athlete. The experiences an athlete has lived because of the color of their skin then hold weight on their social activism.

Embodied Social Activism as Lived Ethos

For this chapter’s analysis, I will make the differentiation between a body making an argument and a body as evidence within an argument. Iverson’s body itself *is* argument. He practices social activism by being different than the mold and thus creating change through his being, sparking political discourse through his embodied stances. As addressed prior, this means that a body may make an argument unintentionally. Bennett is different because his activism comes in forms more traditionally associated with social movements. He participates in planned kneeling events, speaks to the press about Black Lives Matter, and writes posts/books that speak directly to the injustices he stands against. Driven by intention, Bennett’s activism on the surface appears no different than past athlete activists before him. However, Bennett’s choices to highlight embodied moments of struggle (i.e. his incident with the police) shows that embodied experiences can contribute to an athlete’s activism by providing credibility to the points they are

making. For Bennett, he does not need to point towards hypothetical examples of police brutality or use any of the many Black citizens who have been recorded dying on social media to strengthen his arguments; Bennett's arguments hold weight because there is media evidence of *his own body* experiencing these injustices. While previous athletes may have referenced experiences of injustices to back their activism, Bennett is a unique case because of the video documentation of his body's suffering. The fact that such an event became a media spectacle makes Bennett's claims hard to ignore or write off as exaggerated. Bennett allows for an expansion of what the term "embodied social activism" may stand to represent; Iverson shows that an athlete's body can make arguments unintentionally but Bennett shows that embodied experiences, especially ones captured and displayed by the media, can be used as ethos in an athlete's practice of social activism.

Bennett's embodiment is what becomes cause for his involvement in the incident with the LVMPD. If we are to accept that the LVMPD racially profiled Bennett, then it is the color of his skin (a noted embodied factor) that lead to the event taking place. This embodied factor not only becomes the reasoning as to why Bennett was detained but it also creates connection between Bennett and so many other Black U.S. citizens who have been involved in police altercations. In his book and tweet, Bennett expresses the fear he felt when being detained, stating that "I am going to die for no other reason than I am Black and my skin color is somehow a threat" before listing other instances of individuals who the system has failed because of their race.²⁰² His lived experience with police that Bennett links to his race then become a connection between himself and so many other individuals who were victims or fighting against injustices. The list of Black individuals who have been victimized by United States police presence is long and the fact that Bennett is now connected intimately to that group due to an embodied experience shows that his

racial profiling has strengthened his activism by giving it another layer. No longer are issues discussed secondarily but instead can be seen directly through what his own body went through. In these ways, Bennett's case extends what is known about embodied social activism previously through Iverson. Embodied social activism does not need to be as intricate as full body activism in which pieces of an athlete's body symbolically represent cultural ideas. While there are numerous factors of Iverson's embodiment that contribute to his position as a cultural site, Bennett's embodiment shows that an athlete only needs one factor – one as common as race – in order to see an effect on their activism.

The fact that race is an embodied factor which contributes to an athlete's ways of knowing extends on the scope of embodied social activism. In this sense, the cases of Iverson and Bennett then become a progression of what the body is capable of in athlete activism. The 1960s/1970s era of activism saw beginning instances of the body being used to make arguments by doing explicit protest moves like raising fists. Then, as mentioned, the case of Iverson shows the ways a body can be read as argument, standing symbolically as inherently political. While a useful reading of how the body protests, it may also be seen as narrowly applied. A human body as completely symbolic of larger cultural issues is rare and if this was necessary for all embodied social activism, the term itself could only be applied in select cases. It is from this point that the activism of Bennett expands on the concept's scope. Race is a common factor, one that all humans represent to some degree. Many citizens share Bennett's race and they use their positions as a given racial identity to inform the way they see the world and live within it; race becoming a factor in their given standpoint. Embodied social activism then requires taking into account the way that lived experiences (especially ones made possible due to an individual's embodied factors) can be considered as meaningful ways that the body informs arguments. The

concept of embodied social activism can be widely applied then to encompass individuals who have used their lived experiences to contribute to arguments made in their activism explicitly. Material identity markers create embodied experiences which then serve as ethos to social activism in more traditional forms like written/spoken discourse, making this activism inherently embodied as it relies on the body to make its assertions.

Taking Bennett's embodied experiences as ethos, this project also should address the contribution a media-centered world plays on supporting such credibility. Statements can be falsified and there are no regulations that say Bennett must have been truthful in his tweet, book, or any other time he decides to discuss what happened with the LVMPD. It is from this point in which the media-saturated nature of a professional athlete's life aids in Bennett's favor. Footage of Bennett being detained as provided by the LVMPD and other news outlets prove the legitimacy of Bennett's statements. In these conditions, the video documentation of structural violence against Bennett becomes his ethos. His embodiment in those moments caught on film stand to lend credibility to his statements. In these ways, Bennett's credibility builds on itself and becomes multi-layered. His foundational activism is backed by written statements in his book/tweet, which are backed by his lived experiences, which are then backed by the evidence that such experiences did occur as was proved by video footage. With embodied social activism at its center, layers of credibility develop around Bennett's cause.

Although Bennett's activism takes traditional rhetorical forms like that of written discourse, following a chain of logic proves that such activism is embodied. Bennett is a Black man; an identity marker that is material and embodied. He carries such an identification on his skin and it becomes lived. The racial category Bennett is avowed to then becomes the cause for his involvement with law enforcement. Many citizens experience similar injustices with police

due to their race and Bennett became one of the many during the incident in Las Vegas. This incident became an experience from which Bennett could reference as a point of knowledge. Instead of relying on other examples of racial profiling when making statements, Bennett now had his own to reference – a personal experience that he lived through which could be justified based on the documentation it received by the media. This experience then becomes ethos for Bennett’s written forms of activism. Following this line of thinking, the written texts Bennett produces are by definition examples of embodied social activism, as the words he wrote could not stand without the backing of his embodied experiences. It is because of this line of thinking that I argue Bennett’s activism, although traditionally rhetorical in form, is an example of embodied social activism. Thinking of Foss’s definition of rhetoric, Bennett’s incident with the LVMPD itself is a rhetorical event and holds rhetorical value. The symbolic value derived from this event is best translated to traditional rhetorical form in Bennett’s “Dear World” tweet, a select chapter of *Things that Make White People Uncomfortable*, and his press conference following the incident. These moments of written discourse shed light on the ways that the embodied factor of race has influenced Bennett’s activism stances. To prove this, I will now analyze the three referenced texts.

“Dear World”

The entirety of Bennett’s “Dear World” tweet is a retelling of an embodied experience. As mentioned, the tweet itself is a screenshot of a one-page letter in which Bennett addresses the world to detail what happened with the LVMPD on the night of August 26th, 2017. A majority of the letter explains the gravity of the situation, Bennett’s motives, and what he was subjected to by the officers involved. Much of the letter is quite detailed claiming that the force used by the officers was “unbearable” and at many points, Bennett explains that the only reason he was

receiving such harsh treatment was because he was “doing nothing more than simply being a black man in the wrong place at the wrong time.”²⁰³ This tweet then serves as an instance of embodiment translated into written rhetorical form. The details behind what happen and the fact that Bennett says he was just “being” a Black man further supports the ways that the rhetorical incident was embodied and now reproduced here digitally in words.

Bennett’s “Dear World” tweet becomes social activism when he aligns the LVMPD incident with his existing activism efforts. The following is a whole section from Bennett’s tweet in which he references how he already protests:

I have always held a strong conviction that protesting or standing up for justice is just simply, the right thing to do. This fact is unequivocally, without question why before every game, I sit during the national anthem—because equality doesn’t live in this country and no matter how much money you make, what job title you have, or how much you give, when you are seen as a “Nigger,” you will be treated that way.²⁰⁴

Here, Bennett is able to use the instance to unveil complications that come from his identity markers as both a professional athlete and Black man. As Bennett describes it, while the two identity categories exist together, he will always be a Black man in the United States and this experience with the police shows that from that identification, struggles are inherent.

From this point, Bennett has made the choice to relate his racial profiling incident to his existing protest efforts. Using what happened that night in Las Vegas, Bennett is able to link an embodied experience as ethos to strengthen the cause he already fights for. In this way, traditionally accepted efforts of athlete activism like kneeling or sitting during the National Anthem become supported by Bennett’s embodied experiences. Bennett may use his body to make an argument on the field by sitting while everyone else is standing but he also uses his embodied experiences to inform his written activism. Without the embodied points of reference,

the “Dear World” tweet carries less substance. Bennett let’s his material experiences strengthen his activism, making this tweet an instance of embodied social activism.

“Black Lives Matter” in *Things that Make White People Uncomfortable*

The section of *Things that Make White People Uncomfortable* that references the LVMPD incident takes a similar form as Bennett’s tweet. In a chapter titled “Black Lives Matter” that immediately follows a section dedicated to mourning Black individuals who died in police encounters, Bennett provides a narrative retelling of his experience with LVMPD. Considering more space is given in his book than the tweet, this section provides more detail into Bennett’s thought process during the event but ultimately reaches the same conclusion – he feared for his life in that moment and felt like he was going to die at the hands of the police due to his race. The book section as a whole can be seen as an extension of Bennett’s activism, as he is using such a space to explain why he believes in and actively supports the Black Lives Matter movement. Bennett’s choice to include the names of black individuals who were killed by the police also shows an embodied connection to the movement. People like Trayvon Martin and Michael Brown are symbolic for the greater Black Lives Matter movement, frequently referenced as examples of Black people who the system failed. In this embodied event of being detained, Bennett’s connection to those names with his own experience links the movement to the moment. This section of his book then exists and holds meaning because of the lived ethos experienced by Bennett, once again, demonstrating an example of embodied social activism.

Bennett’s reliance on his body’s subjection to injustices follows a similar line of argument already present in the field of rhetoric. Communication scholars Christine Harold and Kevin Michael DeLuca use the famous case of Emmett Till and the dissemination of vivid images of his mutilated body to show the rhetorical power present in visual witnessing.²⁰⁵ The

point is made through Till's body that witnessing the violent products of racism become a means of articulating arguments about injustices. Audiences did not need to theorize about the affects of racism in the United States but could instead look to Till's corpse as evidence that racism is violent and has material consequences. In Bennett's case, he uses rhetoric to allow his audience to see and feel the violence enacted on his Black body. Here, Bennett utilizes similar tactics with his own body that Till's mother used with Till expect we see the application of the strategy in a new context of sports; largely different because Till was deceased and Bennett still alive and capable of using his body intentionally. Given the context of sports, Bennett is already allotted witnesses to his argument due to the platform he is allowed to speak from. This choice to spotlight the way his body is treated through a media example then demonstrates the progression of the athlete activist from earlier eras. Made possible by the abundance of media coverage, Bennett has visual evidence of his body in distress that he can point to when making claims that other athlete activists of earlier times did not have access to.

Bennett's September 6th, 2017 Press Conference

Bennett's activism as influenced by the incident with the LVMPD was not limited to written discourse and also was reflected in comments he made during interviews with the media. Many sports media and general news media outlets questioned Bennett about his night in Las Vegas but his retelling of the incident is most clearly linked to his activism during a Seahawks press conference held on September 6th, 2017. Bennett refrained from getting too in-depth with specifics about the incident as to avoid legal complications but did field questions about his raw emotions experienced on that evening before ultimately leaving the podium holding back tears after the questioning became too intense. During the press conference that only lasted about 6

minutes, Bennett explicitly linked his embodied experiences to his activism to show how the incident strengthens his drive to be an athlete activist.

To begin, Bennett explicitly links his experience with the LVMPD with his kneeling efforts on the field. In response to questions about the incident, Bennett details how his position as a Black man makes him fearful about what can happen to him. Bennett states:

As a black man, you fear sometimes what could happen to you...and you wish that everything that Martin Luther King said...and you hope that you'd be judged by the content of your character and not the color of your skin but sometimes you're judged on that. That's the reality I live in. When people ask why I sit down [during the National Anthem], this is why. This is the things that I go through and the people that look like me.²⁰⁶

This response is frontloaded with connection to Bennett's embodied experience as one that is common amongst Black men in the United States. Reminding audiences again that his status as a Black man carries more weight than his status as a professional athlete, Bennett demonstrates the intensities of racial injustice and how they may affect any Black person, regardless of other privileges. Bennett also uses this statement to explicitly tie his experience and the press conference at hand to existing activism. By mentioning that this incident is one of the reasons that he sits out during the National Anthem, his deliberate activism has now been rhetorically connected to his embodied experiences. In this way, the spoken discourse at the press conference becomes a product of embodied social activism.

Another key moment of the address is when Bennett is questioned as to how common this type of situation is. The news reporters present were largely interested to know the exact details of the event and at one point, asked Bennett, "Has anything like this happened to you before?" Bennett responded:

At this magnitude of being racially profiled? No, not this but I've seen a lot of people I know been through more traumatic things. People who have been through the same situation who are not here to tell their story...This is an [unjust] situation. A lot of people of color have dealt with this before and I hate that it had to happen to me but I'm lucky to be in the situation to have the platform to continuously speak on injustice and the platform to keep pushing forward for people of color...I think that's the thing that's good coming out of this.²⁰⁷

This particular response reflects the evolution of what the athlete activist is capable of in an era of constant media attention. Bennett recognizes that an injustice to this degree has never developed in his life but if he is pressed to find a silver-lining, he shows that benefits come from the documentation of such struggles and the platform he has to discuss them through. Athlete activists of the past could reference moments in their lives when they experienced racism but may have found trouble articulating such struggles in a way that could be understood by audiences. For Bennett, a traumatic experience was caught on camera, providing explicit visual evidence of his material body in distress. In these ways, Bennett progresses how the body may be used as evidence when making arguments because it is the documentation of his body in an instance of injustice that strengthens his activism. Uses of the body as evidence are made more readily available in Bennett's era of activism and represents the growth of both the body as argument and the strategies used by athlete activists.

Conclusion – Body as Evidence

As demonstrated through the efforts of Michael Bennett, embodied social activism is heavily prevalent in the newest wave of athlete activism. As Bennett's incident with the LVMPD details, embodied experiences of an athlete can stand to inform and strengthen the credibility of claims made in more traditional forms of written or spoken activism. In these ways, written/spoken activism attempts become embodied in nature as they rely on lived experiences to enhance the arguments being made. Bennett as a case study shows that the athletic body is not

limited to making embodied arguments inherently as was seen with Iverson; instead, an athlete may intentionally use their embodied experiences to influence the form in which their traditional activism functions.

The case of Bennett also reveals the increasing need to consider sports as a meaningful realm for rhetorical and political engagement. The constant media presence brought on by the profession of star athletes shows that embodied experiences are then frequently captured and disseminated to larger audiences. This transition represents the evolution of the athlete activist from the earlier eras to what occurs now. Media presence cannot be ignored and while athletes are asked to participate through spoken discourse now more than ever, the documentation of their bodily experiences on an almost constant basis introduces a new layer for how activism may function. The struggles of a professional athlete that relate to larger social issues become broadcast to the public as well. In these ways, professional athletes serve as representatives of larger social issues whether this is intentional or not. They may then use their embodiment and the experiences brought on because of their material identities to inform their position as social activists. While some audiences may desire to split sports as separate from reality and hope to not make things “political” this is simply unavoidable. The social issues that weigh upon athletes in their everyday lives will almost certainly influence how they behave and what they say when in their place of work.

Chapter 5: Conclusion

On May 25th, 2020, a Black man and Minnesota resident named George Perry Floyd was killed by Derek Michael Chauvin, an officer of the Minneapolis Police Department. Accused of using a counterfeit bill while at a local grocery store, police were notified and arrived on the scene to confront Floyd. Chauvin declared Floyd under arrest and attempted to place him in the back of a police cruiser. Floyd was eventually forced to the ground, his cheek pressed against the pavement, as Chauvin kneeled on Floyd's neck for approximately nine minutes. In that time, Floyd pleaded that "I can't breathe" and "my stomach hurts, my neck hurts, everything hurts" before ultimately going silent once he lost consciousness. Floyd's outcry fell on deaf ears as he became another instance of a Black man who lost his life at the hands of law enforcement in the United States.²⁰⁸

Videos and images of Floyd's body in pain would catalyze one of the loudest moments of activism the United States has ever seen. Similar to the protests and riots in Ferguson, Missouri following the fatal shooting of Michael Brown in 2014, Minneapolis would enter its own state of unrest following Floyd's death as the public took to the streets to have their voices heard. Protest action would not be limited to Minnesota alone though, as hundreds of thousands of citizens would join rallies nationwide protesting police brutality and racial injustice.²⁰⁹ "Black Lives Matter" chants would reach around the globe as well, as the outcries for justice could be heard just as loudly in other countries as it was in the U.S.²¹⁰

Although sparked because of the violence against Floyd, the movement would go on to become about more than just what happened on that morning in May. Other Black individuals who died at the hands of police like Breonna Taylor and Elijah McClain were also marched for, in hopes that the officers who killed them would be held accountable for their actions.²¹¹ The

movement would also become about more than police brutality, as citizens marched for Ahmaud Arbery, a 25-year-old Black man who died at the hands of a white father and son in South Georgia.²¹² Voices of the public refuse to be silenced and the continuous stream of protests occurring at the time I write this shows a desire by U.S. citizens to force change and stand against police brutality and racism in the country.

While a majority of protestors are everyday U.S. citizens, celebrities have used their platforms to speak up on recent racial injustices as well. Though some “statements” have been deemed hollow and merely an attempt to save face in hopes of not receiving backlash for silence, many individuals have used their positions of power to truly educate and mobilize the movement.²¹³ Actress and musician Selena Gomez allowed critical race scholars and known activists like Kimberlé Crenshaw, Ibram X. Kendi, and Killer Mike access to her Instagram account so that messages about racism and how to fight it could reach her audience of 180 million followers.²¹⁴ Celebrity activism has reached beyond the screen as well as actors and musicians like Halsey, Jamie Foxx, and John Boyega joined citizens in the streets to stand in solidarity with Black Lives Matter efforts.²¹⁵ Using their bodies as rhetoric, these influential voices in current U.S. popular culture showed that their support would not be limited to digitally written words. Instead, they would mobilize and join the efforts by putting their bodies amongst those of the public.

Arguably the most present celebrity figures at recent protest events have been professional athletes. Athlete turn out in support of Black Lives Matter has been immeasurable as superstars like LeBron James in assistance with other NBA stars have worked to form organizations to address social injustices as loudly as possible.²¹⁶ Athlete voices have been heard across social media but what is truly impressive is their physical presence at rallies. Former NBA

champion Stephen Jackson has fallen into an activist leadership role during this moment in his life. Jackson played basketball in the NBA for 14 seasons and even won an NBA championship during his time with the San Antonio Spurs but what he may be more recognized for now is his position as a leading voice for current Black Lives Matter protests. A close personal friend with George Floyd, Jackson's devastation upon hearing the news of the killing ignited a drive to stand up and be vocal. Jackson's presence at rallies is noticeable and as athletes continue to mobilize for change, they find themselves looking towards Jackson as a model for how to do so. Perhaps now more than ever, athletes find themselves not only conducting activism on the field/court or during press events but instead are elbow to elbow with their fans in the cities they play for, marching for change. NBA and WNBA stars like Trae Young, Giannis Antetokounmpo, Stephen Curry, Russell Westbrook, and Liz Cambage are only a few off an enormous list of athletes who have taken to the streets to position their bodies amongst the fight against injustice.²¹⁷ In these moments, activism has become so much more than just words said by an individual and instead are reflected in the embodied arguments made by countless athletes when they choose to stand with their people.

These athletes who stand also call upon their embodied experiences to justify their choice to fight for a better system. During a Juneteenth protest called "Together We Stand" in Washington D.C. as lead by members of the cities professional NBA and WNBA teams, superstar guard Bradley Beal addressed crowds to give a speech about why he and his teammates stand against racism.²¹⁸ In a brief interview following that speech, Beal detailed his own experience with social injustice, claiming that an officer pulled him over and upon discovering Beal was a professional athlete said "I can f-up your Monday headline on ESPN by arresting you right now."²¹⁹ Beal's position as a leader of that march was about standing together with his

community and shows how such statements reflect how his own experiences have influenced his fight for change and given strength to his choices to be an activist. Not only does Beal's body serve as an argument by marching with his city but the statements he makes are then backed by embodied experiences as well.

Embodied Social Activism Now and Moving Forward

George Floyd's tragic death mobilized activism in the United States and made possible the showcasing of what embodied social activism can really look like. Individuals like Stephen Jackson and Bradley Beal are only a few of the many professional athletes who have stood up against police brutality and racism and used their platforms for positive social change. However, unlike athlete activists before them, their embodied presence at protests and choices to use embodied experiences to inform claims represents a shift in what the athlete activist of today looks like. No longer do athletes simply speak to their audiences through screens and draw on hypothetical instances of injustices to make points; they can now be found speaking directly to and with their people, naming their own experiences to show an embodied connection with struggles.

In many ways, this thesis documents an evolution and progression of what constitutes an athlete activist. Social activism of professional athletes has come a long way from the days of John Carlos and Tommie Smith to the era of Jackson and Beal. Through that time, there have been meaningful shifts in the ways in which athletes could perform activism, many of which called upon explicit use of the athletic body to illustrate points. To articulate this evolution, I will reflect upon guiding questions asked in the introductory chapter:

In what ways do political athletes practice embodied social activism?

As addressed in the analysis chapters, this project has presented two unique extensions of athlete activism that require the use of embodiment. The case of Allen Iverson shows the ways that an athletic body can be read as argument. Iverson's cornrows, tattoos, and jewelry/clothing stood as cultural signifiers of the community he came from. Through his position as one of the greatest basketball players of all time, Iverson drew attention to his body which served to remind audiences of the struggle people who looked like him faced on a daily basis, standing as a representative of the Black community in impoverished areas. The case of Michael Bennett then presents the ways an athletic body in pain/stress as captured on video can be referenced as evidence to strengthen written/spoken activism. Bennett's incident with the LVMPD and its documentation through video footage became a reference point for Bennett's already outspoken activism. In that case, embodied experiences made claims of activism possible.

Both cases of embodied social activism reflect the growth in argumentative opportunity present for athlete activists. Trailblazers referenced early in the project like Muhammad Ali or Bill Russell were considered athlete activists but performed their activism in different ways than that of Iverson and Bennett. Ali, Russell, and other activists of the 1950s-1970s relied heavily on written and spoken rhetoric to articulate their position as social activists. A lack of media saturation in that time period focused more attention on what could be said by an athlete instead of how they were physically visualized. Iverson and Bennett challenge tradition forms through their activism by showing the power that may come from directing audience attention to the athlete's literal body to make an argument. For Iverson and Bennett, the definition of political athlete itself may have changed and encompasses more performance of one's image than prior generations.

A key difference as explained in the analysis sections was the degree of intentionality an athlete has towards participating in embodied social activism. With Bennett, the choice to draw attention to his embodied experiences was a deliberate one and his practice of embodied social activism required explicit connections between his material experiences and traditional rhetorical activism. Iverson however represents the inherent political nature of athletes and shows how an athlete's authentic embodiment can be a source of activism instinctually and without explicit intervention by the individual themselves. This quality of embodied social activism reflects Billings, Butterworth, and Turman's claim that sports are inherently political and cannot be considered an "escape from reality." Both cases of embodied social activism referenced in this thesis stand as evidence that the lives of athlete's through their constant broadcasting across social media inherently makes the lives of an athlete political.

A greater understanding of the function of the body in athlete activism opens the door for more theorization to come. As this thesis has highlighted, athlete activism becomes a product of the way that athletes are read by their audiences. Traditionally, this has relied on written and spoken discourse that was explicitly partisan and highlighted particular individuals as "political athletes." Iverson and Bennett are clear cases where the body is read politically but I believe embodied social activism has the potential to stretch even further than these two cases. In fact, given the assumption that all professional athlete's who have a high level of stardom are closely monitored by the media, embodied social activism will only continue to become more applicable and seen. The more audiences are able to understand the political dimension of sports, the more athletes will be considered political athletes simply based on the way that their personal beliefs about society inform their actions. The current moment of social media means that those with large platforms are expected to speak on issues and professional athletes fit that description. I

believe more professional athletes will contribute to social activism by using their bodies because of the harsh reprimands that occur when being partisan. I cannot speak for athletes or anyone other than myself but feel that showing your body helping the community or marching with protestors may send a stronger message in this moment than a traditional speech could. In these ways, embodied social activism only has room to be utilized by more and more until the concept itself becomes commonplace.

How does being an athlete intersect with other components of a player's identity?

The understanding of an athlete's life as inherently political segues into answering the next guiding question. When asked to look at how different components of a player's identity intersects with their status as an athlete, it becomes clear that all such identity markers cannot be separated. Iverson's position as an NBA MVP could not be separated from his status as a Black man who grew up in the ghetto. Even under pressures from critics and the league itself to change his image, Iverson's determination to stay his authentic self represents the ways that being an athlete does not stop him from being Black and from the hood; Iverson's activism forced audiences to take all of him for who he was or to not take him at all.

Bennett's identity markers and their complexities are laid out even more clearly when we consider the ways audiences judge him based on which quality is privileged at a given time. Bennett's status as a professional athlete is ultimately what he attributes his release from LVMPD detainment to and without that component of his identity, he may have had his life ended like so many other less fortunate Black individuals. At the same time, it is his status as a professional athlete and the wealth/fame it carries that also serves to discredit his calls for activism, claiming that he cannot know what it's like to "truly struggle" because of all the privilege his occupation carries.

For both Iverson and Bennett, the identity quality of “athlete” makes their activism possible. Given the character of these men I would not doubt that they would carry themselves in similar ways regardless of their occupation and that professional athlete or not, they would find a way to contribute to social change. However, they are able to enact embodied social activism because of the attention given to their bodies based on their position as professional athletes. Extending again upon DeLuca’s “a priori bodies” claim, Iverson and Bennett’s bodies can inherently make arguments because of the line of work they are involved with. The inherently political nature of sports allows for their bodies to be symbolically charged and thus activism is possible through the media attention they are given.

How do athletes across different sports use their positions as players as a platform from which to participate in this form of social activism?

This final question links the efforts of Iverson and Bennett to one another while representing the tremendous progression of the athlete activist. As mentioned, Iverson and Bennett perform their activism in different ways and because of different motives. One is the example of a body as argument while the other uses their body in distress as evidence for his arguments. The cases are different applications of material rhetoric but still both achieve the status of embodied social activism.

What truly marks progression is the way that Iverson and Bennett show a normalization of the use of the body to make social activism function. Remembering the words of Dave Zirin referenced in this project’s introduction, classification as a political athlete no longer needs to solely be associated with what an athlete says or the protests they plan to participate in. Activism is no longer as formal of a process as what Simons and earlier rhetoricians described. I would wager to say that if Bennett had not chosen to say he supported Black Lives Matter, this lack of

alignment with an explicit movement would not have made his spoken activism any less powerful. Iverson's body as argument itself is proof that an athlete does not need a specific movement to tie their efforts to. In both cases, Iverson and Bennett represent the progression of an athlete activist to a point where existence itself can become political. No longer are we in the days in which an athlete is only deemed political because of their stance on partisan social issues. Instead, the current state of the U.S. and constant audience attention towards the lives of professional athletes makes those individuals lives inherently political. Athletes do not ask to represent our society in the same way that elected political officials' campaign for their positions but regardless of how they got there, athletes serve as role models for the public.

Iverson and Bennett serve as only two examples among many of this progression of expectations of contemporary professional athletes. I argue that in today's age, it is impossible to hold a position as influential as that of a professional athlete without being political. Sports themselves are reflections of society and all the issues that come along with it so an athlete by design is in a position to represent larger cultural and social problems whether they want to or not. Iverson's era may have been one of the last moments where an athlete could completely abstain from political interaction. From the Kaepernick era onward, I see professional athlete's participation in activism as something that only has room to grow and that audiences now are expecting. Silence in this contemporary moment is seen as violence and those who are given large platforms to speak have expectations by their fans and critics to say something in regards to social issues, even if what they say is deemed "wrong."

Sports are a political arena and the acceptance of this stance will open up doors for what audiences can learn from watching them. Entertainment that is purely for entertainment's sake is valuable but has never existed in sports and such an outlook only serves to limit what we can

learn from watching our favorite athletes in person or on TV. In days of the past, it may have been easier to simply watch the game, enjoy the competition, and choose to avert one's eyes when athletes like Jackie Robinson chose to speak out against racial injustices. I am sure there are many fans of Muhammad Ali who loved his abilities as a boxer but did not feel the need to listen when he spoke up against social injustices. Iverson and Bennett along with a new wave of individuals like that of Kaepernick, Jackson, Beal, and so many others show that the public watching sports does not have the luxury to look away when athletes choose to act like "more than an athlete." Embodiment speaks in ways that may be inaccessible to the written or spoken word. For the athlete activist, *being* itself has become an act of resistance and now more than ever, embodied rhetoric allows for a type of social activism unlike what has been common in eras before.

Future Applications

The ideas presented in this thesis hold potential for growth of understanding in the fields of rhetoric, activism, and sports communication. In terms of the rhetorical discipline, this project pushes scholarship to continue to incorporate embodiment into what scholars view as rhetorical. As the literature suggests, embodiment continues to be a growing section of importance in rhetoric but that much more is left to be explored. Most explicitly, this project pushes upon DeLuca's "a priori bodies" assertion and challenges the theory to further develop. Along with DeLuca, I maintain the belief that no material body is inherently argumentative but that bodies develop meaning based on the contexts they are read in. That being said, through the cases of Iverson and Bennett, it becomes clear that if a context a body exists in is inherently political (like that of sports) then bodies may be read as arguments regardless of the individual's intent. Rhetoricians need to continue to theorize around the ways that human bodies can be interpreted

as cultural identifiers, especially in a contemporary moment when embodied experiences are recorded and projected to millions of people through social media and the internet. Bodies do not just put themselves into positions to be read; sometimes it is an individual's career like that of professional athletes that necessitates media focus and thus brings with it constant audience interpretation.

This brings me to the next application of this project which is the further development of what it means to be an activist. The landscape of social media makes the life of those with platforms to speak from more difficult to traverse when it comes to how political they can be. Abstaining from discourse on social issues has become increasingly difficult for those with celebrity status as an abundance of media corporations may seek to know a professional athlete's opinion on even the smallest of topics. It is because of this influx in expectation of the political-savviness of an athlete that so many individuals may find themselves participating in activism to even the slightest degree. This project challenges these expectations because it pushes back on the idea that an athlete is only political when they are participating in spoken discourses about partisan ideas. The case study of Iverson reveals most clearly that an athlete can be political without ever aligning themselves with a specific political party. The politics of Iverson become less about formality and more about power as his body stands in as a source from which political discourse can emerge. Activism then relies on the reading of an individual's body in a way that was not absent in prior historical moments but which certainly warrants more attention given the way bodies are constantly interpreted in today's media landscape.

The case of Bennett then also progresses what it means to be an activist. Lived experiences have a long history in informing arguments made by activists so in such a way, Bennett's reliance on his experience with police is not unique. However, the capturing of this

lived experience on video and its subsequent dissemination through the media and to audiences across the globe does reflect changes in what is possible for the contemporary athlete activist. No longer do athletes find themselves in a space in which audiences must simply “take their word for it” when making arguments about how social injustices have personally affected them. The blinder that is an athlete’s class privilege weakens the more audiences are able to actually *see* a body in pain. Much like with Iverson, the constant monitoring of Bennett’s body through the media then allows for a new layer of ethos to be added to his activism. Recognition of this emersion in social media contributes to the evolution of the athlete activist; a body repeatedly surveyed has more opportunities to use its experiences as evidence in arguments.

As a final point, this project reflects growth that can come to sports communication and those within the subdiscipline. Whether one is considered an academic, critic, athlete, or fan, this project addresses key understandings needed to approach sports communication in what I would deem an ethical way. Sports are entertaining, we cannot deny that quality about them. Leaving our understanding of sports as pure entertainment is where we begin to falter. This project contributes to conversations by other sports rhetoricians and pushes audiences to see the inherent political value that comes from watching sports. Politics in their formal capacity may still make viewers uncomfortable and receive pushback yet even if we never again saw athletes calling themselves Democrats or Republicans, it must be understood that sports would still remain political due the way it reflects societal workings of power. From here comes my last takeaway and reminder about the humanity of athletes. An individual is not born an athlete, no matter how popular that saying might be when witnessing greatness. Professional athletes excel in their craft but are ultimately people before anything else. They live through hardships, they struggle, and through their privileged platform show audiences what can be achieved through hard work and

dedication. Athlete activists serve as another reminder about the layers of an athlete and that once they are given the platform of stardom, this does not take away from the other components of their identity that are oppressed. This project and those it is in conversation with serve to develop theories of rhetoric and activism but most importantly, demonstrates that those legends we watch on television or see on the field/court are much more than an athlete.

Notes

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² Erin Blakemore, “How the Black Power Protest at the 1968 Olympics Killed Careers,” *HISTORY*, accessed March 27, 2020, <https://www.history.com/news/1968-mexico-city-olympics-black-power-protest-backlash>.

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⁴ Jacob Weindling, “The 20 Most Political Athletes in U.S. History,” *Paste Magazine*, last modified July 19, 2019, <https://www.pastemagazine.com/politics/sports/the-20-most-political-athletes-in-us-history/>.

⁵ Hua Hsu, “The Political Athlete: Then and Now,” *The New Yorker*, accessed March 27, 2020, <https://www.newyorker.com/culture/cultural-comment/the-political-athlete-then-and-now>.

⁶ For more on the subject, see Johan Lindholm, “From Carlos to Kaepernick and beyond: Athletes’ Right to Freedom of Expression,” *The International Sports Law Journal* 17, no. 1 (2017): 1–3, <https://doi.org/10.1007/s40318-017-0117-4>; Samuel H. Schmidt et al., “An Analysis of Colin Kaepernick, Megan Rapinoe, and the National Anthem Protests,” *Communication & Sport*, August 22, 2018, 216747951879362, <https://doi.org/10.1177/2167479518793625>.

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¹⁰ David Zirin, *Shut Up and Dribble*, by Gotham Chopra (SpringHill Entertainment, November 3, 2018), <https://www.sho.com/shut-up-and-dribble>.

¹¹ Andrew C. Billings, Michael L. Butterworth, and Paul D. Turman, *Communication and Sport: Surveying the Field* (SAGE Publications, 2017).

¹² The phrase “More than an Athlete” has been adopted and branded by NBA superstar LeBron James as a means to communicate how athletes are positively influential to their communities in more ways than just their talents within sports. This thesis project seeks to contribute to those conversations. For more, see Mike Trudell, “LeBron James: More Than an Athlete,” *Los Angeles Lakers*, accessed July 2, 2020, <https://www.nba.com/lakers/news/061220-lebron-james-more-than-an-athlete>.

¹³ Raymie E. McKerrow, “Critical Rhetoric: Theory and Praxis,” *Communication Monographs* 56, no. 2 (June 1989): 91-111, <https://doi.org/10.1080/03637758909390253>.

¹⁴ McKerrow, “Critical Rhetoric,” 109.

¹⁵ Michael Calvin McGee, "Text, Context, and the Fragmentation of Contemporary Culture," *Western Journal of Speech Communication: WJSC* 54, no. 3 (Summer 1990): 274–89, <https://doi.org/10.1080/10570319009374343>.

¹⁶ Edwin Black, *Rhetorical Criticism: A Study in Method* (Univ of Wisconsin Press, 1978). xii.

¹⁷ Carole Blair, "Reflections on Criticism and Bodies: Parables from Public Places," *Western Journal of Communication* 65, no. 3 (Summer 2001): 271–94, <https://doi.org/10.1080/10570310109374706>.

¹⁸ Blair, "Reflections on Criticism," 288.

¹⁹ For more on the aims/goals of the Center for Public Deliberation, see "About Us - Center for Public Deliberation," *Center for Public Deliberation*, accessed April 24, 2020, <https://cpd.colostate.edu/about-us/>.

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²¹ Kimberlé Williams Crenshaw, "Demarginalizing the Intersection of Race and Sex: A Black Feminist Critique of Antidiscrimination Doctrine," *University of Chicago Legal Forum*, 1989, 139–67.

²² Aristotle, "Rhetoric," translated by W. Rhys Roberts in *The Rhetorical Tradition: Readings from Classical Times to the Present*. 179-240.

²³ Aristotle, "Rhetoric," 181.

²⁴ Aristotle, "Rhetoric," 185.

²⁵ Sonja Foss, "The Nature of Rhetorical Criticism," in *Rhetorical Criticism: Exploration and Practice*, 5th ed. (Long Grove, IL: Waveland Press, Inc., 2018), 3–9.

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- ³⁴ Blair, Dickinson, and Ott, *Places of Public Memory*, 5.
- ³⁵ Debra Hawhee, *Bodily Arts: Rhetoric and Athletics in Ancient Greece* (University of Texas Press, 2004).
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- ³⁷ Barry Brummett, *Sporting Rhetoric: Performance, Games, and Politics* (Peter Lang, 2009). 11.
- ³⁸ Billings, Butterworth, and Turman, *Communication and Sport*, 38.
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- ⁴⁰ Michael L. Butterworth, *Baseball and Rhetorics of Purity: The National Pastime and American Identity During the War on Terror* (University of Alabama Press, 2010).
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⁵⁹ Daniel Joseph Boorstin, *The Image: A Guide to Pseudo-Events in America* (Vintage Books, 1992). 19.

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