

## #NoJusticeNoLeBron and the Persistence of Messianic Masculinity in Black Athlete Activism

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This article engages the “NoJusticeNoLeBron” hashtag and Twitter discourse of December 2015 as a case study to examine the racial, gender, and sexual politics undergirding practices that will Black athletes to participate in activist movements. Scholarship on the history of Black athletes and protest illustrates communal investment in sports figures as activists, but largely foregrounds the importance of Black heterosexual men. Within #NoJusticeNoLeBron, there remains an affective investment in athletes who identify along these lines. This practice is best understood by conjoining Sara Ahmed’s theorization of willfulness with the religious studies concept of messianic masculinity, which implores Black men to sacrifice for their communities. Synthesizing these theories along with a discourse analysis of tweets, this article illuminates how Blackness and masculinity are understood in the current moment. While Twitter affords contemporary activists the abilities to coalesce around and amplify their investment in messianic masculinity, the larger Twittersphere communicates problems associated with willing Black athletes to act. Crucially, this analysis reveals the need for additional nonheteronormative voices of color in these movements.

*Keywords: race, gender, masculinity, athlete activism, social media, Blackness, Twitter*

On December 28, 2015, an Ohio grand jury declined to indict the police officer who shot and killed unarmed Black 12-year-old Tamir Rice.<sup>2</sup> In response, Tariq Touré, an essayist, educator, and activist involved with the Black Lives Matter (BLM) movement, used Twitter to raise awareness about the real and symbolic injustice of the decision. Coining the hashtag #NoJusticeNoLeBron, Touré used the affordances of the Twitter platform to appeal directly to NBA star LeBron James and indirectly to the broader public as he attempted to mobilize athletic boycotts and other consciousness-raising tactics. This article frames the #NoJusticeNoLeBron moment in relation to the racial, gender, and sexual politics undergirding practices

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<sup>2</sup> Following the lead of scholars such as Khadijah Costley White (2021) as well as AP reporting style, I have intentionally capitalized Black and not capitalized white as part of an equity-minded approach to analyzing and discussing race.

that will Black athletes to participate as activists. This lens reveals that, though activist tactics may have changed on social media platforms, Black athlete activism is imbricated with longstanding investments in “messianic” masculinity.

This study engages with extant scholarship on Black masculinity and the history of Black athlete activism to highlight how the public’s appeal for contemporary Black athletes to protest remains rooted in two related masculinities constructed in the 1960s. As the United States has denied its Black citizens basic human rights, many within or allied with Black communities have encouraged Black men of a certain stature to use their platforms to illuminate racial inequality. At the Civil Rights Movement’s peak, Black clergyman Albert Cleage (1968) popularized this appeal by publishing *The Black Messiah*. Reasserting Jesus Christ’s Black racial identity and calling for other Black men of means to follow Christ’s revolutionary teachings, Cleage urged Black men to save the Black population through “messianic masculinity.” At the same time, activists recruited Black male athletes like Tommie Smith, John Carlos, and Lew Alcindor to engage in social protest using their public platforms. This communal investment in Black male leadership might appear logical given that, as scholars of intersectional identity formation have argued, marginalized groups existing along axes of gender, sexuality, and race have achieved progress to varying degrees. However, as the #NoJusticeNoLeBron case study evidences, recent movements continue to foreground the participation of Black men despite the rising prominence of women athletes since the 1972 passage of Title IX.

This affective investment in Black male athletes is best understood by conjoining a critical-cultural reading of messianic masculinity with affective willfulness. Unlike Cleage, this article deploys messianic masculinity not in terms of a prescription for normative constructions of Black manhood as a strict corollary to Protestant Christian ethos. The analysis that follows builds on the work of scholars who have emphasized this masculinity as an idealized and discursive construct (Moses, 1982; Neal, 2013). Consequently, the present study contends that messianic masculinity operates in activist spaces as an affective desire for prominent Black male athletes to act, through personal service and sacrifice, as messianic figures who advocate for social justice on behalf of less visible Black communities. However, this concept alone does not trouble the implications stemming from communities’ affective investment in individual Black men. Thus, Sara Ahmed’s (2014) theorization of willfulness, and how will is used by and for communities often at the expense of the individual and/or other marginalized groups, is a useful adjunct. Altogether, then, this article argues that the practice of willing these Black men to act, however well-intentioned an effort it is to raise awareness on behalf of the voiceless, has the effect of further neglecting voices—e.g., queer women of color—from marginalized communities.

Since this moment of #NoJusticeNoLeBron began on the Twitter platform, this article also considers how the digital public sphere perpetuates messianic masculinity in unique ways. A large body of scholarship on platform analysis and social media communication offers useful ways to understand this distinct space and how it opens up possibilities for activist movements while foreclosing others (Everett, 2012; Florini, 2014; Jackson, Bailey, & Welles, 2020; Stanfill, 2015). Therefore, as the following analysis investigates the ideologies informing opposition to or support for the #NoJusticeNoLeBron hashtag, it synthesizes messianic masculinity, affective willfulness, and a digitally sensitive discourse analysis of the 999 tweets sent during the hashtag’s first 24 hours of use. The findings illustrate an important tension: Though Twitter afforded activists the cognitive and functional abilities to coalesce around and amplify their message to a broader

audience, the larger Twittersphere indicated that LeBron James and other messianic masculine sports figures like him are not the only Black voices that matter on matters of social justice.

As a white, middle-class, heterosexual, cisgender man, I recognize that my voice is far from the only one that matters when it concerns the struggle for racial, gender, and sexual equity. I have the privilege and congruent life experiences to make the observations and assessments contained in this essay from the position of an ally to, but an outsider from, the communities I discuss. While this article draws on and amplifies the work and words of these communities' members, my hope remains that queer and/or BIPOC scholars will engage with and critique the theories and conclusions herein to further decenter my voice.

### **Black Masculinities, Messianism, and Athlete Activism**

Scholars studying the spectrum of Black masculinities and feminisms have long called for nuanced critical analyses of the self- and mediated representation of Black men. Entertainment industries like sports and media, dominated by white male executives, have often appropriated Blackness and commodified a white capitalist understanding of Black culture while exploiting Black labor (hooks, 2004). Cultural studies scholars have specifically pointed to images of the Black athlete as being constituted by ideologies of fear and/or admiration (Collins, 2004; Leonard & King, 2011). Herman Gray (1995), in particular, points out that the contradictory construction of Black masculinities is "underwritten by definitions of manhood deeply dependent on traditional notions of heterosexuality, authenticity, and sexism" (p. 403). Consequently, Riché Richardson (2007) has advocated "the need to move away from 'one size fits all' models for analyzing Black masculinity" that render invisible the "specific and unique struggles" of the disparate communities of Black men that exist (p. 19). Similarly, by locating Black male athletes within the particular ideological frameworks of Black masculinity constructed in athletic and activist contexts, critical scholars can render legible the specific investments in these particular men as leaders of social justice movements.

Black male athletes are uniquely positioned to benefit from their location within a spectrum of hegemonic masculinities that are (re)produced in sporting contexts. Nick Trujillo (1991) posits that a sporting hegemonic masculinity is naturalized through various frameworks including physical force and control, occupational achievement, familial patriarchy, frontiersmanship, and heterosexuality. It is crucial to add to these frameworks the social construct of race, for it also determines the perceived value of a sporting masculinity. Indeed, whiteness maintains its privilege in the construction of any hegemonic masculinity. Considering the spectrum of hegemonic masculinities that exist in sports would include not only attention to whiteness' privileged status, but also what Hardin and colleagues (2009) term "subordinated masculinities," which "are constructed in ways that allow them to realize dividends" (p. 184). In this sense, Black male athletes who readily perform masculinity to compete with their white counterparts might permit—albeit inadvertently—the continued marginalization of women of color. At the same time, though, these Black men become the most prominent signifiers of Blackness within the realms of sports and media. The tendency of conversations about Black athlete activism to focus on heterosexual Black men stems, at least partially then, from an outsized platform generated through the ideological construction of hegemonic masculinities in sports.

Highlighting this imbalance is not an attempt to downplay the monumental impact and the struggles that Black men have endured in U.S. sports and society but rather an effort to emphasize Black athlete activism's evolution alongside other complex and stratified struggles. Scholars of intersectional identity have long argued that race, class, gender, and sexuality produce interlocking forms of oppression that intensify when combined (Collins, 1990; Crenshaw, 1991; hooks, 1984). As this stratification plays out through the experiences of and responses to discrimination in sports, communication scholars have observed that athletes' struggles for progress occur in stages (Anderson & McCormack, 2010). Consequently, civil rights activists and the media that covered the early movement for racial equality perceived Black male athletes to be the most potent emissaries. But with contemporary activists and media continuing to draw on this notion within social justice movements like #NoJusticeNoLeBron, the need to critically assess hegemonic sporting masculinities is long overdue.

The investment in Black male athlete leadership is equally rooted in the development of an activist-minded Black masculinity. It was in the particular moment of social upheaval following the assassinations of prominent Black leaders during the Civil Rights Movement that Black Christian religious patriarch Albert Cleage (1968) prescribed a "messianic" conception of Black masculinity that should be deployed by all Black American men. Arguing that the struggle for Black equality and survival in America necessitated a "Black Church with its own Black Messiah," Cleage (1968) urged every Black man "to decide where he will stand—united with his own people and laboring and sacrificing in the spirit of the Black Messiah, or individualistically seeking his own advancement and maintaining his slave identification with the white oppressor" (p. 9). Cleage contended that righteous Black men must adhere to the virtues of messianic masculinity, which included service, sacrifice, suffering, and martyrdom.

Since its formulation during the 1960s, Cleage's concept of messianic masculinity has relatively invisibly underwritten the tactics of Black athlete activism. Religious studies scholars Wilson Moses (1982) and Ronald Neal (2013) have argued that Black messianism has shaped a harmful logic of Black masculinity that has taken root in some Black communities. Neal (2013) warns that, as an "institutionalized, celebrated and normative ethic," messianic masculinity has "evaded rigorous and critical public scrutiny [. . .] because of its connection to ultimate political goals" (p. 54). These goals could then be used to rationalize the public's emphasis on social justice as though it could only be properly enacted by particular men. Moses (1982) suggests that the virtues of messianic masculinity, though often ascribed to the actions of leaders like Martin Luther King Jr. and Booker T. Washington, were also taught through the earlier actions of prominent athletes like Black boxer Joe Louis. Activists and the media reinforced these lessons and the messianic virtues within the revolutionary shift Black athlete activism was about to make in the 1960s.

Historically, some Black male athletes like Joe Louis or Jesse Owens were activists of circumstance, figures of protest by nature of their prominent position in the white-dominated sports industry (Moore, 2017). During the Civil Rights Movement of the 1960s, however, the messianic virtues linking successful Black athletes and activism became truly pronounced. In a period defined by what Harry Edwards (1969) called "the revolt of the Black athlete," activists and the mainstream press focused on men like Jim Brown, Bill Russell, and heavyweight boxing champion of the world Muhammad Ali as emblematic of the Black athlete's more explicit inclinations toward activism. This was the same period during which new politics of Black power emerged amid the first urban uprisings occurring in northern U.S. cities (Sheppard, 2020). In

this context, activists and the media urged athletes like the outspoken Ali to assert his stances on racial injustice, especially in relation to other Black athletes less inclined toward activism. During a 1971 interview on *Parkinson* (BBC, 1971–2004), Ali remarked:

Well they'll [other Black male athletes] go down in history just being athletes. [. . .] When one man of popularity can let the world know the problem, he might lose a few dollars himself telling the truth, he might lose his life, but he's helping millions. [. . .] I just love the freedom and the flesh and blood of my people more so than I do the money. (Kurasani, 2013, 32:41)

Muhammad Ali and other Black male athletes like Tommie Smith and John Carlos, whose glove-fisted protest on the medalists' podium at the 1968 Mexico City Olympics remains a powerful image of the struggle for Black equality, were representative of a foundational shift in Black athlete activism during the 1960s. Black athletes were now more militantly demanding of justice than Black athletes of the past (Bryant, 2018). As such, activists and the public could "establish [. . .] radical credentials" by supporting the actions of Smith and Carlos, which were "clearly outside the bounds of dominant, mainstream American culture" of the time (Hartmann, 2003, p. 173). It is important to note, though, that underpinning Ali's discourse and the support for Smith and Carlos is the continued presumption that Black men who have found success and celebrity through sport need to contest broader racial inequality through personal sacrifice—the costs of which might be money, status, or even their lives. Though there can be no denying the revolutionary importance of these men's radical sacrifices, deploying Black messianic masculinity to encourage shared struggle poses very real dangers, whether in past periods or present moments.

### **The Persistence and Pitfalls of Willing (Male) Black Athlete Activism**

The pitfalls of messianic masculinity are twofold. First, proponents draw on its tenets to prescribe a "correct" form of protest that places individual Black men in potential danger. Second, even as it endangers these Black men, it continues to operate as any hegemonic masculinity: reinforcing its position by marginalizing other out-groups. As these dangers persist in the context of contemporary Black athlete activism, it remains crucial to trouble messianic masculinity's continued resonance.

After a long period of relatively quiet (and overlooked) Black athlete activism, the tactics of and appeals for Black athlete activism have shifted in recent years.<sup>3</sup> Coinciding with the arrival of BLM and the increased willingness of athletes to express independence from their managing institutions in the 2010s, eminent athletes began engaging in what Harry Edwards terms a "fourth wave" of athlete activism, once again invoking explicit protests of racial injustice (Isenberg School of Management, 2017, para. 2). NFL quarterback Colin Kaepernick, with his high-profile pregame protests of police violence in 2016, has understandably garnered considerable—though confused—media attention (Sarver Coombs, Lambert, Cassilo, & Humphries, 2019). LeBron James has also been widely covered as he has engaged in public protests and advocacy for racial justice during pregame warm-ups, postgame press conferences, on social

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<sup>3</sup> For examples of Black athlete protest before the 2010s, see Amy Bass' (2004) discussion of Mahmoud Abdul-Rauf (pp. 311–313).

media, and as a speaker at other televised events. Unlike Kaepernick, though, James has frequently been cited by the media as someone who uses his unparalleled platform to bring about positive change (Sarver Coombs & Cassilo, 2017).

Notably lacking in this changing era of Black athlete activism, itself spurred on by the activist BLM movement, is increased attention to the contributions by women and queer people of color. The media has more recently taken to covering the activism of tennis superstar Serena Williams and World Cup champion Megan Rapinoe (Holland, 2018; Longman, 2019). Nevertheless, as Hartmann (2019) finds, women are still “often not embraced in the press, public, and scholarly arenas” despite that they have been “particularly active and influential [. . .] in mobilizing athletic resistance” (para. 37). It could be argued that the persistence of messianism and hegemonic masculinity within Black athlete activism makes sense given the Black male athlete’s outsized celebrity status and corresponding platform with which he can protest for social justice. However, as activists urge Black men to advocate on behalf of the voiceless, they—and the media that covers their movements—risk marginalizing voices speaking from already marginalized communities.

In many ways, the recent emphasis on Black male athlete activism stems from former U.S. President Donald Trump’s frequent invocation of sports to advance his white masculinist politics and his especially pronounced ire for “sons of bitches” like Colin Kaepernick and other Black male athletes engaged in public protests (Bryant, 2018, p. xiii; Kusz, 2019). As his attempts to emasculate these men and degrade their mothers emboldens disaffected white men to do the same, Trump’s response to Black athlete activism is not only in keeping with his white supremacist dog whistling, but also with sport’s penchant for gendered discursive framing (Falcous, Hawzen, & Newman, 2019). Indeed, even as queer white women athletes like Megan Rapinoe have engaged in protests against him, Trump (and his supporters) frequently respond on social media by decrying the “ungrateful” or “unpatriotic” actions of Black male athletes (Frederick, Pegoraro, & Schmidt, 2020). This redirected focus serves the aims of both violent white supremacy and pervasive misogyny.

But the focus on Black men also emanates from within activist spaces. Here, though, that discourse unintentionally marginalizes other activist voices. As André Brock’s (2020) research on Black Twitter has shown, after the 2016 election, the successes of Black online activism were often drowned out by “more frantic white liberal and progressive reactions” to the new Trump administration’s policies (p. 86). It is not uncommon, as Sarah Jackson, Moya Bailey, and Brooke Welles (2020) note, for allies from dominant groups (i.e., white people and/or cis-het Black men) to “respond to a viral hashtag stemming from a marginalized group” in ways that are “appropriative of the attention garnered by the group with which [they] hope to be in solidarity” (p. 181). This type of well-intentioned but unwittingly marginalizing activism keeps, in the words of BLM cofounder Alicia Garza (2014), “straight cis Black men in the front of the movement while our sisters, queer and trans and disabled folk take up roles in the background or not at all” (para. 11).

The movement- and activist-focused investment in Black men constitutes what Sara Ahmed (2014) has described as an act of willfulness becoming the “general” will. Ahmed (2014) posits that “the will is either general or it is not: it is either ‘the body of the people’ or ‘that of only a portion’” (p. 98). In this metaphor, individuals who are out of touch with the “general” will of society are charged with “willfulness” (a willing disobedience) and are in need of being pressed back toward the general will. The general will

becomes a promise to those who represent a "portion" that they might become a member of the whole body. This promise is often obfuscated, according to Ahmed (2014), by the fact that an "assumption of willfulness can protect some from realizing how their goals are already accomplished by the general will" (p. 167). In the case of activist movements for racial and social justice, it can thus be difficult to see that, by willing a very specific segment of Black communities—e.g., Black male athletes—to speak out, activists and the media reify the general will of other hegemonic masculinities.

Along with marginalizing other out-groups, activists willing athletes to protest via the tenets of messianic masculinity are also urging Black men to put themselves in harm's way. Though the preceding overviews are by no means a comprehensive analysis of the men and women who have engaged in athlete activism, they are representative of how some activists expect Black athletes to willingly sacrifice themselves. The emphasis on popular athletes like Muhammad Ali, Colin Kaepernick, and LeBron James reflects the notion that Black male athletes who have celebrity status are willed to use their platforms in service to Black communities. What is often overlooked, though, is how various communities actively encouraged these men to sacrifice their livelihoods in terms of financial and physical security, and how they were chastised when perceived as not doing so effectively. Because of this, these athletes suffer or suffered—often willingly—to become martyrs who faced, if not death, then at least "social" death (Králóvá, 2015).

In the digital era, the continued lack of scrutiny over the operations of messianic masculinity has allowed activist movements and the media to focus on the participation of Black men in the struggle for racial and social justice. As an example of digital activism that foregrounded the plight of a marginalized Black community, the deployment of the #NoJusticeNoLeBron hashtag in December 2015 is a means to understand who remains invested in messianic masculinity, what they hope it will accomplish, and how it perpetuates harmful ideologies in contemporary athlete activism.

### **#NoJusticeNoLeBron: Messianic Masculinity in the Digital Public Sphere**

The #NoJusticeNoLeBron hashtag was coined by Baltimore-area essayist, activist, and public speaker Tariq Touré, in a message he tweeted at 4:58 p.m. (Eastern) on December 28, 2015. While Touré did not hold any official affiliation with BLM, Twitter users, activists, and news media immediately connected the #NoJusticeNoLeBron hashtag and its appeals to the BLM movement. Shaun King, a frequent BLM collaborator, responded to the hashtag by taking LeBron James to task for being hesitant to use his "powerful" status "to put even a smidgeon of fear" in members of the Cleveland justice system (King, 2015, para. 11). Similarly, in a *Newsweek* interview published 13 hours after his initial tweet, Touré emphasized James' influence by connecting him to other athlete-activists (Mosendz, 2015). Citing the protests by Tommie Smith and John Carlos, among others, Touré effectively doubled down on the hashtag's investment in messianic masculinity and the notion that social justice was the responsibility of Black male athletes specifically. In this respect, both the hashtag and its mediated linkage to the BLM movement affirm the tenets of messianic masculinity. In the digital and discursive space of #NoJusticeNoLeBron, Touré, King, and others are foregrounded as they in turn foreground Black men and the messianic masculine values of service, sacrifice, and suffering—all of which overshadows the persistently foundational labor of women of color in the activist movement.

### ***How Twitter Affords the Promulgation of Messages (and Messianism)***

To understand the activist invocation of messianic masculinity in social media activism, it is helpful to consider how Twitter's platform encourages certain practices. Sarah Florini (2014) notes that Twitter's microblogging model allows users to both post general messages for their followers, as well as publicly interact with other users through either direct "tweets" to another user or "retweets" of another user's posts (p. 225). This affordance is especially beneficial for activists who want to encourage the coparticipation or leadership of athletes. Not only do athletes often have Twitter accounts where they can be addressed directly, but they also tend to have "asymmetrical visibility," which correlates to higher-than-average numbers of people who see their messages (Fuchs, 2013, p. 192), Twitter incorporates these communication possibilities into its "naming, labeling, and/or site taglines and self-descriptions" as it hails users to use the platform as a means of engaging in dialogue (Stanfill, 2015, p. 1063). In doing so, Twitter encourages users—including activists—to publicly interact with others, especially celebrities (Florini, 2014, p. 232).

Activist messages disseminated on the platform can reach a public audience, which is a critical factor for groups and individuals whose voices are marginalized or altogether absent in other media. The use of hashtags offers these users access to a streamlined public. Activists can use the hashtag to organize an otherwise unstructured flow of messages into "discussion 'channels'" effective "for constituting 'ad-hoc publics' to mobilize people in relation to significant events" (Lindgren, 2013, p. 210). Activists utilizing the #NoJusticeNoLeBron hashtag did so to achieve a similar goal.

The choice of the tag itself recalls the activist chant "no justice, no peace" that was popularized during the U.S. Civil Rights Movements of the 1960s and 1970s. As shorthand for the conviction that there could be no civil peace while political and social institutions failed to provide justice to marginalized communities, the chant has maintained its capital in contemporary protests, especially those associated with the BLM movement. The chant's digital recontextualization in #NoJusticeNoLeBron similarly disseminates the message beyond the activists using the rally cry. Touré used the hashtag to call for LeBron James to "lead a collective sit out [of NBA athletes] until the [US Department of Justice] imprisons the murderers of Tamir Rice" (Zirin, 2016, para. 8). As Touré explained, "every bit of empathetic work [James] has done makes [him] the archetype for this sort of leadership" (Zirin, 2016, para. 8). It is this invocation of leadership and allegiance that can be both potent and problematic in a digital space like Twitter.

As Touré and like-minded activists singled out James, they sought to mobilize public awareness of their message not only by drawing on the superstar athlete's prominence, but also through the amplification afforded by a hashtag. As Jackson and colleagues (2020) have argued, this kind of hashtag activism "works to naturalize and center the politics of counterpublics," which are "the alternative networks of debate created by marginalized members of the public" (pp. xxxiii, 185). In this sense, because a hashtag can transcend one-to-one communication, a counterpublic message linked with a hashtag can potentially reach the entire body of Twitter users. How this wider group of users respond to the message, though, will vary. As was the case with #NoJusticeNoLeBron, a hashtag can capture the attention of users who either support or oppose the message being amplified, frequently depending on their identification along a matrix that includes race, gender, and sex. It is this intersectional identification of Twitter users that produced what was ultimately a tenuous discourse via #NoJusticeNoLeBron.



### ***Who Said What About Black Athletes, Activists, and Activism***

Anna Everett (2012) has described Twitter as a form of “the digital public sphere” (p. 148). With #NoJusticeNoLeBron exemplifying a space in which activists use the Twitter platform to struggle for social justice, the hashtag discourse reflects what Everett (2012) intimates as the resistance/reinforcement binary of identity politics (p. 149). Users negotiate this binary within #NoJusticeNoLeBron and the broader space of Twitter as the hashtag interpellates people of different experiences who constitute converging and diverging groups through their responses. During the first 24 hours of #NoJusticeNoLeBron, users tended to self-organize into one of four nebulous groups, categorized in this study as: prohashtag (supporting the direct appeal to LeBron James); antihashtag (opposing the direct appeal to James, the search for social justice, or both); amplifiers (news outlets, their reporters, or users retweeting these sources); and spectators (users on the “sideline” who expressed only curiosity or confusion about the hashtag).

Prohashtag users dominated the first several hours of the hashtag’s prevalence on Twitter. These users offered tweets that supported hashtag founder Tariq Touré and the notion that LeBron James might be a singular figure to help raise awareness about both the specific miscarriage of justice in the murder of Tamir Rice, as well as the broader social, political, and extrajudicial injustices visited upon members of Black communities. Prohashtag users also had a goal of “trending” the hashtag to raise awareness about their counterpublic message within the digital public sphere.

Amplifiers such as news media and their affiliated reporters or Twitter followers increased the probability of the trending status, not through explicitly supporting the hashtag, but instead by spreading information about the hashtag through more mainstream channels. Everett (2012) regards this practice as increasingly prevalent in a digital media ecology where old media outlets come to depend on “user-generated content” produced in newer media spaces (p. 152). The news media-supported “spreadability” of the #NoJusticeNoLeBron hashtag thus garnered more participation from Lindgren’s (2013) “ad-hoc public” (p. 210) of Twitter users, not all of whom were supporters of the hashtag.

While some antihashtag users tweeted their disapproval within the first two hours of Touré’s original tweet, the occurrences of antihashtag messages exponentially increased after news media began reporting about the hashtag. Along with messages of outright objection to the prohashtag users’ search for justice, antihashtag users expressed various different forms of disapproval. Some sympathized with the prohashtag group but took issue with the tactic of singling out LeBron James. The frequency of these tweets increased after the hashtag was highlighted in Twitter’s “Moments” feature, which also spurred a spike in the number of tweets from the spectator group of hashtag users.

Though all users fell into one of these four categories, individual users connected with each other in discourses that intersected the boundaries of their particular user groups. Examining the discursive themes that transcended user groups, particularly in relation to pro- and antihashtag users, we can see how the digital public perceived this specific act of would-be protest. Within and between the groups utilizing #NoJusticeNoLeBron, users tweeted a total of 999 messages during the first 24 hours. The content of these tweets coalesced around four “themes,” each of which reflected and refracted the values

of messianic masculinity. These themes included: celebrity stature, Black parenting, neoliberal livelihood, and community dedication.<sup>4</sup>

### ***Discursive Theme #1: Celebrity Stature***

The most prominent of the four themes included discourse about the celebrity of LeBron James and other Black male athletes. Reinforcing the messianic connections to hegemonic sports masculinity, most of the tweets from the prohashtag group used language about James' platform and power to insinuate that his successful status meant he had a responsibility to speak. Other prohashtag users also attempted to link James to other messianic masculine Black athletes who had spoken out in protest of social injustices during earlier periods (see Figure 1).

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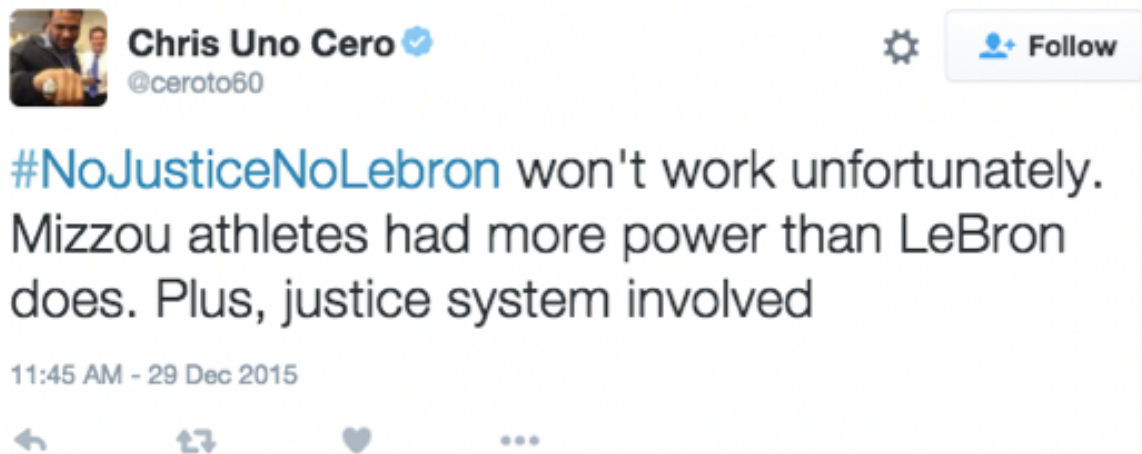
<sup>4</sup> To ensure transparency, the messages contained in the entirety of these 999 tweets are published in a digital data repository (Piper, 2019). A minority of these tweets included sentiments that were overtly racist. This article does not include any tweets that used explicitly racist hate speech so as not to reproduce, even inadvertently, the sentiments contained therein.



**Figure 1. Prohashtag users tweeted messages and images linking LeBron James to messianic masculine athletes of earlier periods (Abdi, 2015).**

Conversely, antihashtag users argued that encouraging protests by athletes and/or celebrities was not a productive solution to the present injustices. A tweet from user @DrGrantjr typified this position, expressing the view that “#NoJusticeNoLeBron is a really wack hashtag. Let’s not celebritize the movement.

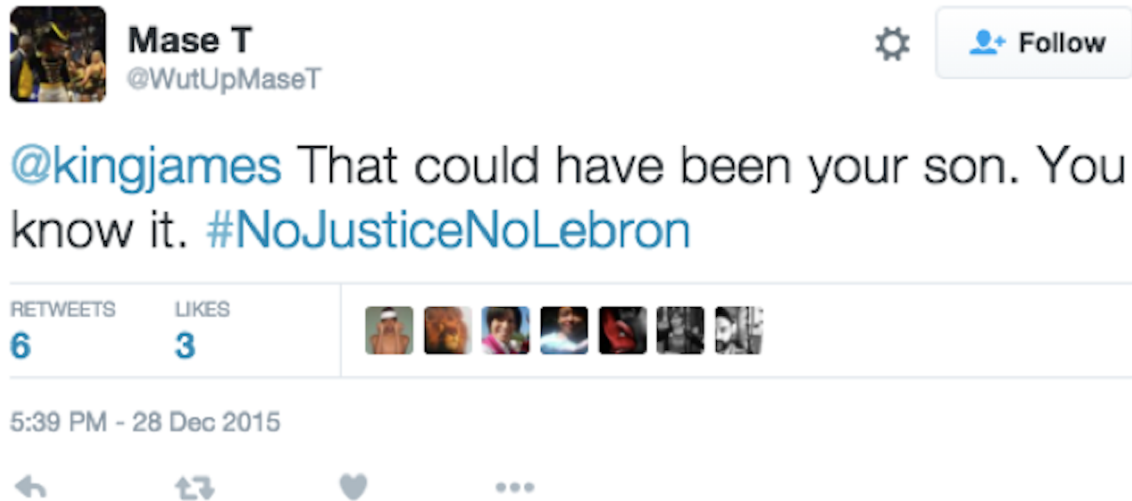
We need paradigm shifts, not gimmicks" (Grant, 2015). Both user groups also mentioned the concurrent events transpiring at the University of Missouri, where members of the university's predominantly Black football team engaged in a boycott to protest racial inequality on campus. Prohashtag users cited the positive outcome of that boycott as an example of what could happen when athletes (collegiate or professional) use their celebrity and platform to speak out. Antihashtag users, meanwhile, expressed that situation's limitations. Thus, even while expressing disagreement, users pervasively invoked the "power" held by Black male athletes (see Figure 2).



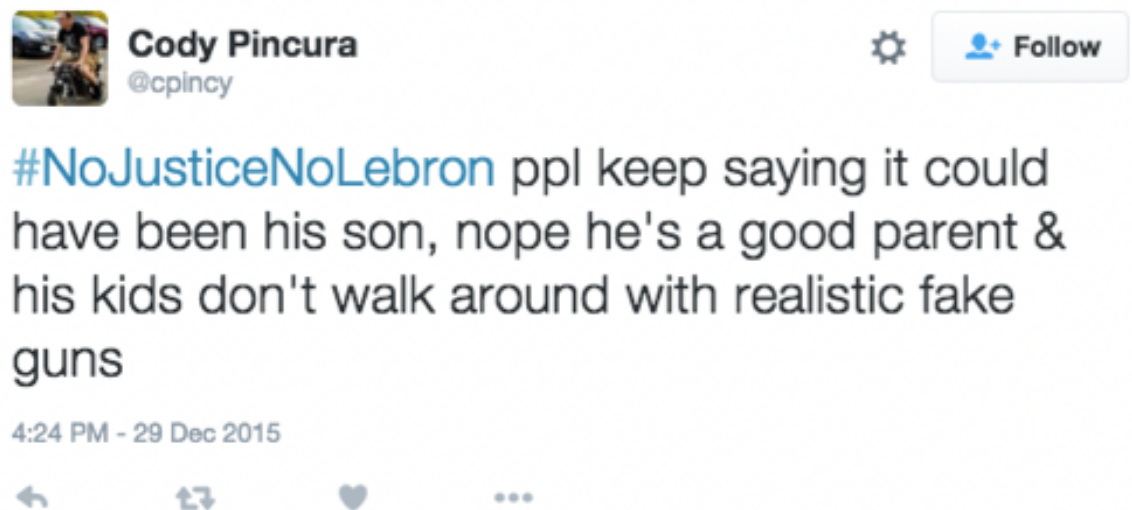
**Figure 2. Pro- and antihashtag users both invoked the "power" of Black male athletes. One antihashtag user suggested that the predominantly Black University of Missouri football team had more influence because they sought to affect change at the campus level (Cero, 2015).**

### ***Discursive Theme #2: Black Parenting***

A second field in the #NoJusticeNoLeBron hashtag comprised discourse about Black parenting and Black children. Many hashtag users mentioned Tamir Rice's youth to emphasize or criticize the tragic nature of his death. Several prohashtag users explicitly connected this to LeBron James, who, as a father himself, had a son who was the approximate age of Tamir Rice (see Figure 3). Users in the antihashtag groups drew connections between Rice and James' children; however, their discourse situated James as a "good" father in opposition to Tamir Rice's parents (see Figure 4). As such, both user groups reinforced patriarchal masculinity. In the case of those willing James to act, his status as patriarch became a reason to sacrifice for others.



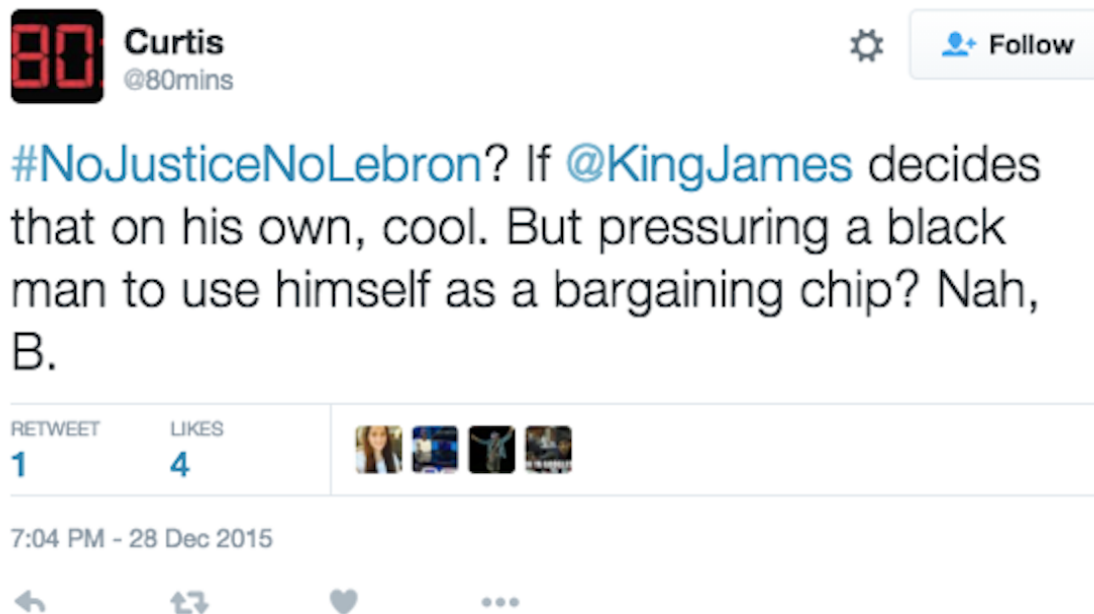
**Figure 3. Prohashtag users tweeted messages invoking James' position as a father to encourage his protest (T, 2015).**



**Figure 4. Antihashatg users invoked James' patriarchal masculinity, suggesting it made him a better parent than Samaria Rice and Leonard Warner, parents of Tamir Rice (Pincura, 2015).**

### ***Discursive Theme #3: Neoliberal Livelihood***

Neoliberal discourse about economics constituted the third field in the #NoJusticeNoLeBron hashtag. Most of these tweets originated from the antihashtag group of users and propagated the idea that a boycott by James would jeopardize his career, and therefore, his livelihood. One user decried the hashtag using this rationale, but did so while reinforcing the notion that James, as a Black superstar athlete, was better positioned to make a statement than most: "This is crazy. That's his job. Yes he has influence but would you sit out of your job til it's resolved?" (Dub, 2015). Prohashtag users responded to this discourse by ridiculing the notion that a "job" might be more important than the pursuit of social justice. With the messianic virtues of service and sacrifice undergirding these tweets, users directly appealed to James to "choose conscience over commerce" (Wingo, 2015). Some antihashtag users, however, implied that this was a false binary, maintaining the issue was not that James should choose one response over the other, but that he be allowed to determine his own response (see Figure 5).

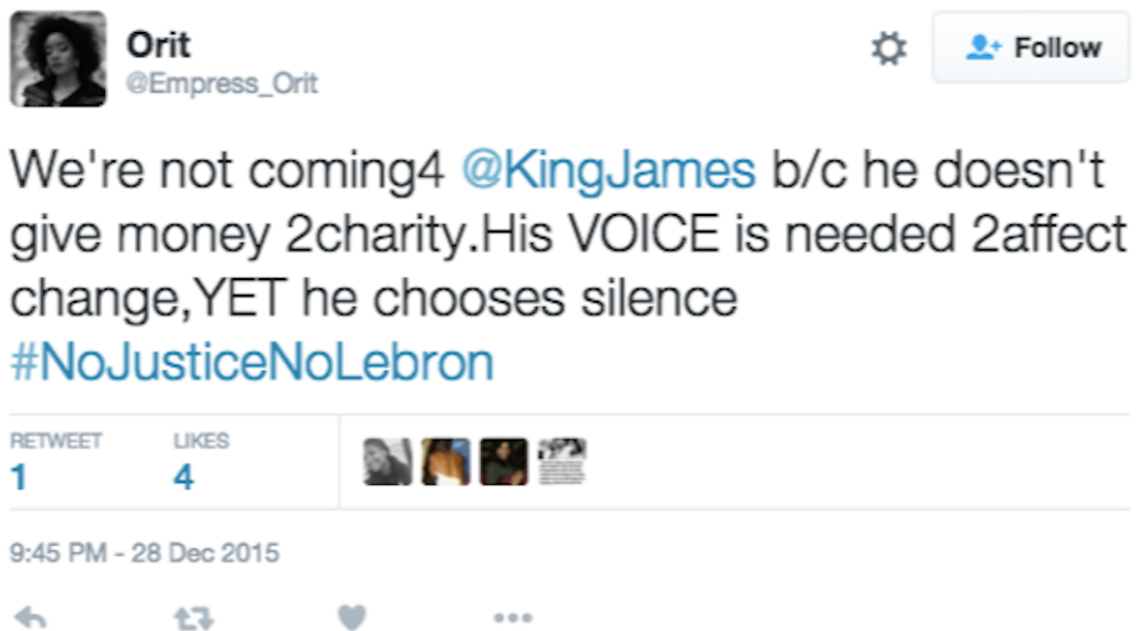


***Figure 5. Some hashtag users supported a boycott but insisted others not will James into doing so (Curtis, 2015).***

### ***Discursive Theme #4: Community Dedication***

The fourth and final discursive theme focused on marshalling the role of an individual within the broader community. This was a discourse within which antihashtag users were heavily divided, tweeting one or more of three distinct sentiments. Some contended that though James might have a commitment to Black communities, so too did all players in the NBA, where most players were Black men. Other antihashtag

users felt this responsibility extended beyond the NBA, declaring that all people had a responsibility to protest. Most antihashtag users engaging in this discourse insisted that James was ultimately an individual and he, especially as a Black man, should be afforded the opportunity to make his own decision about boycotting. When confronted with these criticisms, prohashtag users defended their tactic by citing their belief that James, as both a Black man and a Cleveland-area citizen, had a responsibility to speak out. Many of these users, like Tariq Touré, linked this responsibility to the service and financial sacrifices James had already endured on behalf of Black communities (see Figure 6).



**Figure 6. Prohashtag users noted James' financial contributions to various communities and suggested his ability to raise awareness might be another tool to support these same communities (Orit, 2015).**

#### **Implications of Invoking Messianic Masculinity and Willing Athletes to Act**

The tactic of willing Black male athletes like James to use their "platform" to speak for others is troubling in activist spaces, whether physical or digital. Moya Bailey (2015) has argued that Black women use digital spaces as platforms to "transform everyday digital media into valuable social justice media magic that recodes failed dominant scripts" (para. 5). Consequently, when hashtag activism like #NoJusticeNoLeBron and its organizers focus on willing prominent Black men to act, then it potentially renders less accessible an otherwise transformative space for those who do not belong to communities of prominent Black men. Bailey (2015) describes the importance of these spaces for "not simply [. . .] creating new representations but [a]s a practice of self-preservation" (para. 30). Consequently, by centering its resistance on the importance of Black male voices, the #NoJusticeNoLeBron hashtag marked the platform

of Twitter as a space of digital activism that, however inadvertently, continued to prioritize men's voices over those of women of color.

The reinforcement of messianic and hegemonic masculinities through contemporary sports branding practices also complicates the pursuit of social justice in this particular instance. Sporting myths about local heroes organically rising from the citizenry to give back to the community in which they were raised certainly manifest in hashtag users' willing of LeBron James to leverage his celebrity platform. Lisa Guerrero (2011) has discussed James' connection to northeastern Ohio communities, and the longstanding perception that he might redeem the economically disadvantaged city of Cleveland by raising its cultural and financial capital "as only a modern-day, basket-making Moses can" (p. 135). The ideological investments in myths of the local sports hero have perhaps never been stronger than they are in the contemporary moment, when economic constructs binding athletes to their communities are quickly collapsing. It is in this context that "the ties of gender, of masculinity, become increasingly important" (Burstyn, 1999, p. 25). Thus, while James' privatized charity work within the community emboldens his status as a hometown hero, it is his nonfinancial service and sacrifice—his messianic masculine relationship to the local community—that makes him a figure to be willed by others into acting the part of social justice hero in this case.

James has frequently demonstrated a willingness to engage issues of social justice. A year before #NoJusticeNoLeBron, James was one of several NBA players who donned a T-shirt emblazoned with the words "I CAN'T BREATHE" as he participated in pregame warm-ups, acting in solidarity with the family members and activists seeking justice for the police murder of New Yorker Eric Garner. More often, James demonstrates this willingness to speak and act for social justice and racial equality when they directly relate to the specific community in which the team he plays for is located. Following the murder of Florida teen Trayvon Martin in 2012, James and his then Miami Heat teammate Dwyane Wade arranged for a team photo of the Heat players wearing hoodies to be posted to Twitter with the hashtag #WeAreTrayvonMartin. In October 2015, after James returned to play for the Cleveland Cavaliers, he once again took to Twitter to offer his sympathy for the family of Aavielle Wakefield, a five-month-old killed in a drive-by shooting in Cleveland. In each of these instances, to the extent that James voluntarily addresses each injustice, he represents a Black athlete who uses his prominent position to advocate on behalf of his local community. As such, James willfully signifies the virtues of messianic masculinity.

But sporting ideologies and sports branding practices have also made LeBron James a ready-made symbol of messianic masculinity. Scholars have shown that James' messianic identity is simultaneously a narrative construction by various advertising partners and is also the result of James' autonomous, brand-savvy efforts to appeal to young Black culture without alienating white audiences. "This convergence," MocarSKI and Billings (2014) argue, "allows James to toe the line between multiple subjectivities, including hegemonic masculinity, God, and hip-hop" (p. 20). While James' hegemonic masculine credentials have made his crossover appeal a more bankable commodity, this branding also works to reinforce James' connection to a more specific *messianic* masculinity. Though James' service, sacrifice, and suffering have achieved important progress, these values have repeatedly been invoked throughout history to will Black men like James to mobilize in particular ways.



Consequently, the literal platform of Twitter becomes linked in this form of activism to the Black male athlete's proverbial "platform." Gillespie (2010) has outlined the discursive configurations undergirding the multitude of ways in which platforms have been conceptualized in both physical and digital spaces, arguing that the term itself "suggests a progressive and egalitarian arrangement, promising to support those who stand upon it" (p. 350). By encouraging James to use his asymmetrical visibility and social media presence to "stand upon" this digital platform, Twitter thus represents a contemporary iteration of the 1968 Mexico City Olympics podium, a space on/in which the Black male athlete is urged to become a symbol for Black struggle. However, this need not occur at the expense of other members of Black communities who might also use this digital platform to stand up. By foregrounding a direct appeal to LeBron James and an indirect invocation of the messianic masculinity historically linked to "powerful" Black athletes, the #NoJusticeNoLeBron hashtag nevertheless continued to deemphasize the voices of queer BIPOC women and others who have likewise been foundational to these revolutions.

Assessing the democratic possibilities and limitations of social media like Twitter, Christian Fuchs (2013) contends that these platforms, "do not necessarily and automatically support/amplify or dampen/limit rebellions, but rather pose contradictory potentials" (p. 206). Fuchs maintains Twitter's contradictions stem from the platform's disproportionate focus on entertainment rather than politics, and by doing so, he intimates the potential of a hashtag like #NoJusticeNoLeBron. Insofar as this movement capitalizes on Twitter's usefulness as a source primarily for accessing information and entertainment, prohashtag users can raise awareness for their cause among other users who, while sympathetic, might not be politically inclined. Fuchs (2013) is indeed correct that acts of consciousness-raising "cannot replace collective protest action and experience" (p. 186), but it can certainly represent a first step toward larger conversations about change.

Digital activist movements would thus benefit from a path forward rooted in a politics of solidarity. As Sara Ahmed (2014) suggests, "Activism might need us to lose confidence in ourselves, letting ourselves recognize how we too can be the problem. And that is hard if we have a lifetime of being the problem" (p. 170). It becomes crucial to underscore that these politics must be just as focused on gender and sex as they are race. Florini (2014) reminds us that there is no universal community in digital or real spaces, but instead millions of Twitter users "networking, connecting, and engaging with others who have similar concerns, experiences, tastes, and cultural practices" (p. 225). This is especially apparent in the #NoJusticeNoLeBron hashtag, where issues concerning racial injustice intersect with markers of gender and class and tend to overlook markers of queerness. As activists readily mark powerful Black male athletes like LeBron James as possessing the will power to make the necessary stands, BIPOC women and queer people of color are overlooked despite that members of these communities like Patrisse Cullors, Alicia Garza, and Opal Tometi have demonstrated their leadership and tenacity time and time again.

### **Conclusion**

Twenty-four hours after the initial #NoJusticeNoLeBron tweet had been sent, LeBron James publicly addressed the hashtag for the first time. During a postgame interview, James opined, "This issue is bigger than me; it's about everyone. And gun violence and tragedies and kids losing lives at a young age, some way, somehow we need to understand that that matters more than just an individual" (McMenamin, 2015,

para. 10). The issue of social justice has clearly elicited the potent possibilities and participation of Black male athletes since the early 20th century. James represents a recent iteration of a long and important lineage of Black athletes who have been urged to advocate for social justice movements. As outlined above, the investment in willing these Black men to act is uniquely rooted in both the civil rights era concept of messianic masculinity and sports' ideological construction of hegemonic masculinity. Though activists and the media have continued to urge these Black men to use their perceived status to serve, sacrifice, and suffer on behalf of broader Black communities, these tactics of willing ultimately undermine both the Black male athlete's autonomy as well as the suffering and sacrifice endured by Black women and queer women of color.

Like #NoJusticeNoLeBron, the BLM movement originated as a hashtag. Cofounders Alicia Garza, Patrisse Cullors, and Opal Tometi built the infrastructure to "mov[e] the hashtag from social media to the streets," and soon the public, media, and corporate institutions adapted and appropriated the movement's platform in ways that appeared to alter BLM's core principles (Garza, 2014, para. 3). One such principle concerns the movement's commitment "to building a Black women affirming space free from sexism, misogyny, and male centeredness" (Black Lives Matter, 2016, para. 6). This pledge was obfuscated by the #NoJusticeNoLeBron disposition toward "powerful" Black male athletes and the insistence by activists that these athletes use their platform so speak out. Garza (2014), addressing "the charismatic Black men many are rallying around these days," cites the public interest in these individuals as further evidence that "being Black queer women in this society (and apparently within these movements) tends to equal invisibility and non-relevancy" (para. 8).

To counter this trend, future studies into the politics of race, gender, and sex in spaces of digital activism need to consider those movements and/or hashtags founded by Black and/or queer women. As Jackson and colleagues (2020) observed in their analysis of hashtag activism, "from popular culture trends to activist politics, what they [Black women] say and do is repeated and copied" (p. 196). Following their scholarly lead, researchers foregrounding the labor of BIPOC women might produce work that assesses the ways in which the messianic virtues of service, sacrifice, and suffering have been adapted or rearticulated in less specifically hegemonic masculine contexts. Moreover, examining social justice movements that invoke or urge the participation of Black and/or queer female athletes might reveal the productive aspects of athlete activism for resisting patriarchal and masculine constructions of sports, race, and gender in the digital age.

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