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Context Paper: Minorities in Positions of Power and Influence

Introduction

In this paper, I will be describing my choice of text, method and rationale for the paper. I will be covering three separate interactions that have dealt with minorities in positions of power and influence, specifically those in the sports industry. I will be looking at Coach Prime (Deion Sanders), LeBron James, and Serena Williams. These three figures have a very prominent influence around the world, as they are known globally and have millions of followers all across their social media platforms. In the case of Coach Prime, I will be writing about a certain interaction that occurred between himself and Coach Norvell ahead of their rivalry matchup in 2023. I will also be writing on an interaction that occurred between LeBron James and a Fox journalist named Laura Ingraham that took place in 2018. For Serena Williams, I am going to cover the interactions that occurred between her and Umpire, Carlos Ramos. This specific interaction occurred during the 2018 U.S. Open Women's Final.

In the field of Communication Studies, media representation and its impact on the public eye can stand as a critical spot of study. This specific research paper will be covering a significant site of exploration and analysis: the media's portrayal of prominent sports figures such as LeBron James, Serena Williams, and Coach Prime. Not only have these figures

dominated in their own respective sports, but they have also transcended the realms as well. They have all become critical influencers in extensive societal discourse involving respectability politics, race, black masculinity/femininity, gender, and racial rhetorical criticism. The significance of this research object will provide a delve into how certain narratives in the media can be constructed in the sports realms. This is a section that reflects and influences social and cultural norms heavily. By focusing on these prolific figures (athletes and coach), one is able to view the complex interplay and intersection of respectability politics, race, and gender, and gain insight into how certain factors can shape public discourse and perception. Additionally, through this analysis, a deeper understanding of respectability politics and activism will be sought out. Figures like Coach Prime, Lebron James, and Serena Williams all represent certain unique points along this discourse, where each of them bring their own special experiences and narratives that are essential in understanding the role these minorities in positions of power and influence have in societal issues.

Description and Context

In order to understand what it is that occurred in each of these interactions, it is important to know the context for each prominent figure. I will talk about Coach Prime, then about LeBron James, and finally about Serena Williams.

Coach Prime or Deion Sanders is a prolific figure in the football world. Coach Prime is a black male who got inducted into the Pro Football Hall of Fame in 2011. (PFHOF). Coach Prime played defensive back, and he returned kicks and punts as well. During his 14 year tenure in the National Football League (NFL) with over five teams, he won two super bowls and etched his

name there with some of the all time greats in the sport. He was a stud player that got drafted in the first round of the 1989 draft. He got selected 9 times to the All-Pro team, and is still considered one of, if not, the best shutdown corner to play the game. (PFHOF). Deion Sanders wasn't just known by many for his play, rather, it would be his character and flashiness that would put a spotlight on him. He would wear flashy clothes, jewelry, and he would always speak his mind, regardless of the negative criticism he received. Because the lights were always on him and he was a must watch talent, he earned the nickname 'Prime Time'. Whether it be in the NFL or the MLB, PrimeTime was always one of the best athletes to watch in the biggest of moments. After a long career of playing, Deion Sanders eventually found himself being a sports analyst for several years, and shortly after, he started to turn his focus to coaching. Coach Prime would eventually end up at the helm of the University of Colorado's football team in 2022, after having already been the head coach at HBCU Jackson State University since 2020. (Piccotti).

Making this move was significant in itself for Coach Prime. It would be an amazing opportunity to showcase his aptitude as a coach and mentor in front of millions every weekend. Coach Prime's flashiness that was always accentuated in the league, transferred over to his coaching days. Since becoming a coach, Prime has always worn a hat and sunglasses everywhere he goes; whether it be at practice, interviews, press conferences, or on the sidelines of a game. That is just a part of his "look" and style. After Coach Prime and the Buffs pulled off an upset win over a ranked Texas Christian University football team, Coach Prime and his team garnered the attention of millions around the nation. The following week, the Buffs were scheduled to take on their state rival, Colorado State University. In a weekly show that is hosted by Jay Norvell himself, the rival head coach had this to say, "And I sat down with ESPN today, and I don't care

if they hear it in Boulder. I told them, 'I took my hat off, and I took my glasses off.' And I said, 'When I talk to grown-ups, I take my hat and my glasses off.' That's what my mother taught me" (ISPN Colorado). Although Norvell didn't directly say who these comments were for, one can presumably assume that they were directed at Sanders, who coaches the rival football team. These comments were not just going to be swept under the rug nor taken lightly. Sanders responded on Buffs Primetime Radio Show stating, "I'm not going to get in front of you and change who I am just because you're here. I don't do that. I'm consistent with who I am" (BuffsTV). As the show continues, Deion then says, "I'm a grown man, you telling me what I'm supposed to wear, what I'm not supposed to wear. Please" (BuffsTV). This is the context and background for the interaction between Coach Prime and Coach Norvell.

LeBron James is an American black man who is regarded as one of, if not, the greatest basketball players of all time. He currently plays for the Los Angeles Lakers and is in his 21st season in the NBA. Coming out of high school, LeBron was one of the most sought after recruits, ever. LeBron James graduated high school and decided to forego college and head straight into the NBA. He was selected as the first overall pick in the 2003 NBA Draft by the Cleveland Cavaliers. Over the course of his 21 year tenure in the NBA, LeBron has accomplished a vast list of accomplishments. He has won the NBA championship four times, been awarded NBA MVP four times as well, and is a two time Olympic Gold Medal winner. (Biography.com). These are only a few of the accolades that James has earned over his career. LeBron is also an outspoken athlete who is known for his activism on social and political issues in the country. He has gone and used his platform to voice his opinion and speak on matters such as police brutality, racial inequality, and the U.S. political climate. James has never been shy to

chime in on what is going on in the world. In 2012, he showed support for Trayvon Martin, who was a black unarmed kid whose life was taken by George Zimmerman. James has also gone toe to toe with former U.S. President Donald Trump.

This specific example that I will be covering is the interaction that occurred between LeBron James and comments made by Fox host Laura Ingraham in 2018. Laura Ingraham is a conservative journalist who used to host on Fox News. She was in favor of Donald Trump and all that he would say/do. While on the other hand, James, not so much. Ingraham is oftentimes very critical of what athletes or celebrities have to say when they express their opinions on political agendas. She believes that athletes should not talk about politics at all. (Raf Productions). LeBron James was in an interview with Kevin Durant on the Uninterrupted program. Throughout this interview, LeBron touched on the challenges of being a black public figure in the U.S. He then started to talk about politics and criticized Donald Trump, questioning his understanding and care for the people of the U.S. On her own show "The Ingraham Angle", she stated, "Here's this barely intelligible not to mention ungrammatical take on President Trump in a new ESPN podcast" (Ingraham). James stated, "the number one job in America, the point of person, is someone who doesn't understand the people, and really don't give a fuck about the people" (James). James had this to say about Trump as well, "it's not even a surprise when he says something, it's not even surprised, it's like laughable and it's also scary" (James). James made these comments when asked about Trump's racist comments. Ingraham then responded to them saying, "seriously, look, there might be a cautionary lesson, in LeBron for kids. This is what happens when you attempt to leave high school a year early to join the NBA. And it's always unwise to seek political advice from someone who gets paid a hundred million dollars a

year to bounce a ball. Oh, and LeBron and Kevin, you're great players but no one voted for you. Millions elected Trump to be their coach. So keep the political commentary to yourself or as someone once said, shut up and dribble” (Ingraham). Not only did this incident show many that it was a very dismissive and irreverent way to treat athletes, (who are people as well) specifically black athletes, who have and will continue to use their platforms to speak and fight for activism on social issues. LeBron has always been an advocate for athletes using their platforms to be more than just an athlete. This certain interaction covers respectability politics, intersections of sport with societal issues, and racial dynamics and many more. There were a multitude of pieces and reactions to the comments made by Ingraham.

Serena Williams is a black athlete who is a 23 time Grand Slam champion and has earned Olympic Gold medals throughout her tennis career. 1999 was the first year that Serena would go on and win a Grand Slam in. Since then, she went on to win four gold medals with her sister Venus Williams. (Biography.com). Serena has been at the forefront of battling racism, sexism and negative media representation since she set foot onto the predominantly white scene (tennis).

The specific interaction that I want to talk about comes a year after her last Grand Slam win in 2017. This certain interaction between Serena and an umpire took place during the 2018 U.S. Open Finals. This would've been the record tying 24th Grand Slam, had Williams won. During a match between Williams and Naomi Osaka, Williams was given a total of three code violations from Carlos Ramos, the chair umpire. (Singh, et al.). The first being for alleged coaching during the match, which isn't allowed. Williams' coach, Patrick Mouratoglou gave her a thumbs up, so that she would know to calm down. The umpire, Ramos, saw this and gave Williams a warning. She responded to him by saying, “We don't have any code and I know you

don't know that, and [I] understand why you may have thought that that was coaching, but it is not. I don't cheat to win; I would rather lose. I am just letting you know" (Williams). The second violation came after tension was rising between the two parties. After losing a set and becoming frustrated, Williams slammed her broken tennis racket on the court and that is what Ramos found unacceptable. He deducted her a point, and soon after that, Williams demanded that he apologize to her for taking jabs at her character by assuming that she was cheating. After repeatedly asking for Ramos to apologize throughout the match, Williams received her third violation for verbal abuse. This coming after Ramos stated Williams called him a "thief". (Singh, et al.). Williams was calling him a thief for taking a point away from her in such a pivotal match. There is never any drama in tennis and this was one of the biggest moments in its history. One of, if not, the biggest star in the sport of tennis calling out an umpire for treating her unfairly is impactful. Williams had this to say about Ramos, "You stole a point from me. You're a thief, too" (Williams).

Her main argument was that male players in the sport have said worse things to other umpires, but they never received such harsh penalties for their actions. This is a specific example where the media portrays one interaction in a multitude of ways, mainly negative. Some of the main media that I will be analyzing in this case, is the way how certain media coverage can show the broader societal perspectives towards women, specifically black women, who display their black femininity publicly. I will also look at this interaction through a racial dynamics lens. I will explore how race affected the way the media and public created their narratives surrounding the incident. I will look at the intersectionality between gender and race in regards to Williams and all that she has faced throughout her career as examples.

Initial Conclusions

There are several initial observations that emerge as I conclude the contextual analysis. The first being that in each of the instances or examples listed above, there is the interplay of gender and race dynamics. One can see that in the case of Serena, her treatment in the 2018 U.S. Open and the media coverage that would come out following the interaction would call attention to issues of racial stereotyping and gender bias. LeBron's interaction with Ingraham brings to light the challenges that are faced by minority athletes when they decide to voice their opinions on anything other than sports, specifically politics or any activism. In the case of Coach Prime and Coach Norvell, racial dynamics are revealed and so are professional dynamics. Can a man or woman who is acting too "black" be considered professional? Acting more "culturally black" tends to not align with the mainstream concepts of respectability. Another aspect that is key to note, is the role that the media plays in either challenging or supporting accounts around athlete activism. There is a tension in prominent figures such as athletes or coaches to determine their roles as icons in the public eye, and whether or not it is appropriate for them to chime in to broader socio-political issues. Finally, the last point that I want to address is the variety of reactions the public has to each of these incidents. These portrayals often gain more interaction and feedback on social media platforms such as X (formerly Twitter) or Instagram. Perceptions are created because the media or comments on a video/interaction influence the shaping of these perceptions. There seems to be some difference when you compare similar incidents involving athletes or figures of different genders or race, and this raises concern about the ethics and consistency of media representation.

One question that has come up is, What role does the platform the media gets posted on (social media vs. traditional) play in shaping the perceptions and narratives of these interactions?

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