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Capstone

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Capstone Analysis

Introduction

This analysis uses critical discourse analysis (CDA) to examine how language, framing, and representation surrounding the June 24, 2026, incident between Caitlin Clark and Alyssa Thomas reproduce or challenge broader racial ideologies within sports media. Drawing from Charles Mills's theory of the racial contract, I approach these texts not as isolated reactions to a basketball play, but as part of a larger cultural process through which racial hierarchies are maintained, negotiated, and contested. By examining word choice, descriptions of the athletes, and the framing of the incident across professional sports journalism and social media, I seek to understand how these discourses construct ideas of innocence, aggression, and protection along racial lines. Ultimately, this analysis aims to build on the racial contract by exploring how its underlying assumptions operate within contemporary sports discourse, particularly in a league whose cultural identity and history are deeply rooted in Black womanhood. I will use

Building on the Racial Contract

Mills' theory of the racial contract "can be thought of as an in-group agreement among the privileged to restrict moral and political equality to themselves, and maintain the subordination as unequals of the out-group (here, people of color)." (Mills) His theory provides a framework for understanding how racial hierarchies are reproduced through systems of power

that determine who receives recognition, protection, and social legitimacy. This paper will apply this framework to the WNBA and raise the question of what happens when the racial contract operates within a space historically shaped and sustained by the very people marginalized by the dominant racial order?

Through building on Mills, I propose that the racial contract can operate not only through the exclusion of marginalized people from dominant institutions, but also through the reorganization of power within spaces that have historically offered alternatives to that dominance. The WNBA's position as a counterspace does not make it immune to the racial ideologies that structure the broader society. Instead, the discourse surrounding Clark and Alyssa Thomas reveals the possibility that those ideologies can be reproduced within the league itself, potentially shifting the distribution of cultural legitimacy and institutional concern.

The Criminalization of Black Athletes





Figure 1 AlessandroLab @alessandrolab “How can you believe in American sports justice when, after an attempted murder, Alyssa Thomas is handed a suspension of just one game? HOW?” *TikTok,* 26 June 2026, https://www.tiktok.com/@alessandrolab/video/7655651123155602711?is_from_webapp=1&sender_device=pc

Figure 2 (Right). Burchett, Tim [@timburchett]. "The thug treatment of @CaitlinClark22 by the @WNBA is pathetic." *X*, 25 June. 2026, 8:19 a.m., x.com.

The two posts above characterize Alyssa Thomas’s actions through the phrases “thug treatment” and “attempted murder,” framing the incident in terms of criminality and violence rather than solely as a physical play within a basketball game. While both posts condemn Thomas’s actions, their language warrants closer examination, particularly in the context of longstanding racialized constructions of Black athletes as aggressive, dangerous, and criminal. We will look at each tweet separately and analyze how their language works together to create a specific narrative.

In the first post, a TikTok video by @alessandrolab, we see the incident described as “attempted murder”. The phrase is particularly notable because it attributes an implied level of intent to Thomas’s actions. Rather than describing the physical contact itself, the post invites viewers to interpret the incident through the framework of criminal culpability. This language also shifts away from the action of the play, and instead latches onto Thomas as the individual responsible for a perceived threat. Given the history of racialized stereotyping of Black athletes, using a phrase associated with criminality to describe Thomas’s actions reinforces a longstanding association between Black physicality and dangerousness. This TikTok provides an extreme example of discourse being sowed using language meant to demonize black athletes. By framing the incident as attempted murder, the post leaves little room for ambiguity or alternative interpretations of Thomas’s actions, encouraging viewers to understand the encounter through a narrative of deliberate violence. It is also important to look at the image the TikTok shows. It

deliberately freezes on the shot of Thomas' fist making contact with Clark's neck. While in regular play, this moment lasted less than a second, by freezing it and zooming in, this post is deliberately making the act seem violent and intentional.

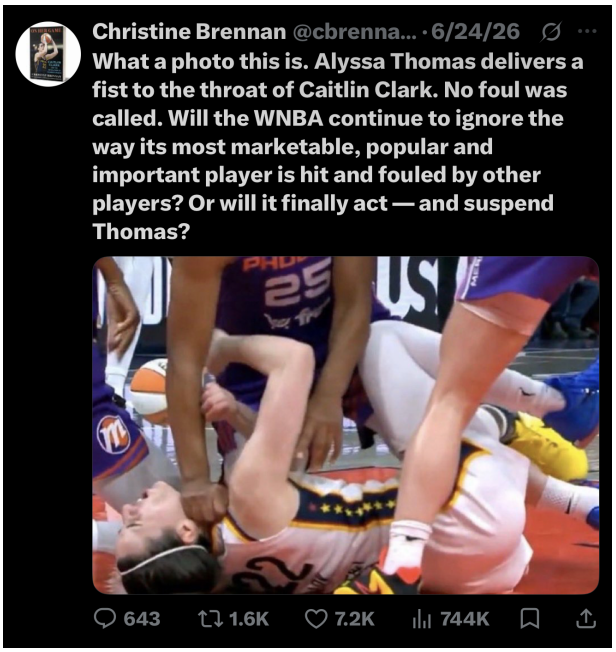
In the second post, a Tweet by @timburchett, the foul is referred to as "thug treatment". Unlike "attempted murder," which frames the incident as a criminal act, "thug treatment" relies on a racially loaded descriptor to characterize the nature of Thomas's actions. This distinction is important because it suggests that the discourse does not simply condemn a particular play but risks constructing Thomas herself as inherently threatening. The label therefore offers a more direct example of how racialized stereotypes can shape the representation of Black athletes, turning a judgment about conduct into a judgment about character. It is also important to note that this tweet was made by a Representative in Congress. The use of this language by an elected official gives the post significance beyond ordinary fan commentary. This gives the discourse an intense amount of power, as it has the chance, in the current political climate, to sow further division among races.

Together, these tweets demonstrate how the racial contract can be reproduced through everyday language that reinforces racialized distinctions between innocence and threat. In Mills's framework, the racial contract establishes and maintains a racial hierarchy in which whiteness is associated with full personhood and legitimacy, while Blackness is positioned as inferior or threatening. The descriptions of Thomas as engaging in "attempted murder" and "thug treatment" illustrate how this hierarchy may operate through the criminalization of a Black athlete, framing her as dangerous rather than allowing her actions to be interpreted within the context of competitive play. This becomes particularly significant when considered alongside the contrasting representation of Clark as a figure deserving of protection. The discourse

surrounding the incident thus raises a central question of the racial contract: whose actions are interpreted as a threat, and whose body is understood as deserving protection?

The Protection of Whiteness

While the previous examples demonstrate how language can construct Black athletes as threats, the discourse surrounding Caitlin Clark raises a complementary question: how is whiteness positioned in relation to that perceived threat? In the aftermath of the incident, representations of Clark become significant not only for how they describe her experience, but for how they establish her as a figure deserving of sympathy and protection. Examining this discourse through Mills's theory of the racial contract offers a way to consider how innocence and vulnerability may be racially distributed, and how the protection of white bodies can become a justification for heightened scrutiny of Black bodies.



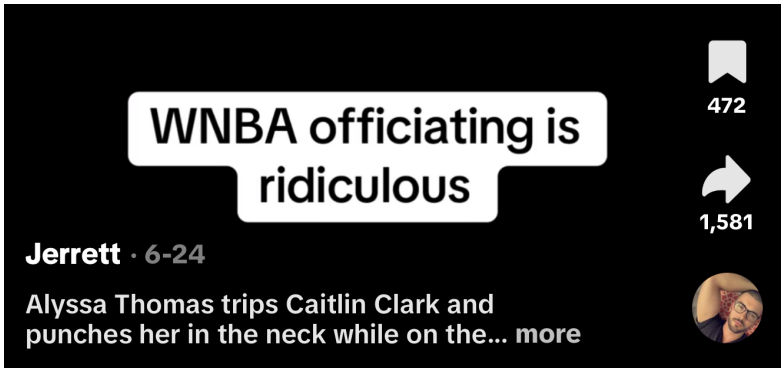


Figure 3 (Left) Brennan, Christine @cbrennansports “What a photo this is…” *X,* 24 June, 2026, 10:59PM., https://x.com/cbrennansports/status/2069993768888025598?s=20

Figure 4 (Right), jerretfranklin @jerrettfranklin “WNBA officiating is ridiculous…” *TikTok*, 24 June 2026, https://www.tiktok.com/t/ZPLAULL29/

The two posts above share a similar theme of calling for the protection of Clark. The first post, a Tweet by @brennansports, calls for the WNBA to “finally act” in order to protect “its most marketable, popular, and important player”. By defining Clark through her marketability, popularity, and importance, the tweet frames her protection as a matter of institutional necessity. Even though the WNBA is a historical space for and by Black women, this post situates Clark as the face of the league, ignoring the fact that there are players who are more substantial in terms of both accolades and monetary status. It begs the question why Clark has garnered so much attention and why any hit on her is viewed as an assault or a failure in protecting her. I argue that it is her whiteness and her fanbase attempting to uphold the racial contract that results in this discourse. Clark’s marketability may help explain the attention she receives, but the racial contract offers a framework for examining why her prominence can become a justification for prioritizing her safety and interests within a league historically sustained by Black women.

When Clark entered the WNBA, she entered a space that, in a sense, had its own racial contract in place. While Mills’ concept of the racial contract is in regards to white people as the dominant force and people of color as the marginalized, the WNBA has this contract flipped. Approximately 67% to 70% of WNBA players are Black or African American (Lapchick, 2022), meaning that they make up the vast majority of the league. The WNBA’s racial demographics do not, in themselves, establish a separate racial contract, however, they provide important context for understanding the league as a potential counterspace to the dominant racial order. Unlike many mainstream sporting institutions in which Black athletes have historically been

marginalized, the WNBA has been shaped by the athletic, cultural, and professional contributions of Black women. In this context, Clark's arrival introduces an interesting tension. Although she enters a league with an established Black cultural identity, the media attention surrounding her has increasingly positioned her as central to the league's visibility and commercial success. I argue that this shift reveals how the dominant racial contract can operate within a counterspace, potentially reorganizing whose contributions are recognized, whose interests are prioritized, and whose bodies are afforded protection.

The Mediation of Player and Coaches Responses

The responses of players and coaches following the incident offer another perspective on how the altercation was interpreted, while the media's presentation of those responses reveals which perspectives were amplified and how the incident's broader meaning was shaped.

Some important responses to note include the immediate after game interview by Indiana Fever head coach, Stephanie White. White noted that the no-call was "...absolutely egregious and utterly disrespectful…", arguing that officiating is not consistent and that Clark is a "generational talent and WNBA superstar" who is not being treated "fairly" (Voepel). This idea of fairness is something that is worth examining more closely. In White's speech, she pairs the idea of fairness ith Clark's standing as a "WNBA superstar". Though possibly unintentional, White's comments raise a question about whether fairness is being framed as a universal standard for all players or as an expectation tied to Clark's particular value to the league. This distinction matters within the context of the racial contract, as it invites us to consider whose treatment becomes a symbol of institutional fairness and whose experiences receive comparable attention. White's position as Clark's head coach also complicates the meaning of her statement. Her criticism can reasonably

be understood as advocacy for her player, yet once circulated through sports media, that advocacy becomes part of a broader conversation about Clark's treatment and importance to the league. The racial significance lies not necessarily in White's intentions, but in how her language may reinforce a discourse in which Clark's status becomes central to defining what fairness within the WNBA should look like.

It is also important to look at how certain articles use language to frame the foul. One such case is a Fox News article which refers to Thomas as "Suspended Alyssa Thomas…" and says that the foul was a "cheap shot.." (Root). The wording "Suspended Alyssa Thomas" is significant because it identifies Thomas through her punishment before readers even reach the substance of the article. Rather than simply naming her, the headline foregrounds the disciplinary outcome, positioning Thomas in relation to her wrongdoing. It immediately ensures that readers identify a "bad guy" within the situation and creates a specific narrative to the foul. Similarly, the phrase "cheap shot" frames the foul as a deliberate and unsportsmanlike act rather than leaving room to interpret it within the context of a physical basketball play. Together, these choices establish a narrative in which Thomas is defined by her punishment and presumed intent, reinforcing the image of her as an aggressor. When considered alongside the racialized criminalization discussed earlier, this framing raises questions about how professional news coverage can reproduce associations between Black athletes and dangerousness, even when the language itself appears to be ordinary sports commentary.

Reproducing the Racial Contract Within a Counterspace

The discourse surrounding the June 24 incident reveals a pattern that extends beyond individual reactions to a basketball play. Across social media posts and professional sports journalism, Thomas is repeatedly framed through language emphasizing aggression, criminality,

and punishment, while Clark is positioned as a highly valuable player whose treatment raises questions about the league's responsibility to protect her. Although these representations emerge through different platforms and forms of language, their coexistence creates a contrast between the athlete constructed as a threat and the athlete constructed as deserving of protection. Through Mills's theory of the racial contract, this contrast offers a way to examine how racial hierarchies may be reproduced within the WNBA through the distribution of legitimacy, sympathy, and institutional concern.

This contrast becomes more significant when considering how these narratives circulate across different forms of media. On social media, descriptions of Thomas as engaging in "attempted murder" or distributing "thug treatment" explicitly invoke criminality, while sports journalism can construct a similar narrative through more conventional descriptions, such as labeling the foul a "cheap shot" or identifying Thomas by her suspension. These phrases are not interchangeable, nor do they necessarily carry the same racial implications. However, when considered alongside coverage that emphasizes Clark's marketability, superstar status, and need for protection, they contribute to a broader discourse in which the two athletes occupy opposing positions. Thomas becomes associated with aggression and wrongdoing, while Clark becomes a symbol of the league's value and its responsibility to protect its most prominent player.

The significance of this pattern lies not in any single word or statement, but in the relationship between these representations. Through Mills's theory of the racial contract, the distinction between the threatening Black athlete and the protected white athlete can be understood as one way racial hierarchy may be reproduced through sports discourse. The language does not need to explicitly mention race to participate in racialized patterns of

representation. Instead, the repeated associations of Thomas with violence and aggression and Clark as innocent and desired invites examination of whose actions are condemned.

Clark is not a historically clean and kind player. Throughout her career, incidents involving her interactions with officials and other players have resulted in technical fouls and criticism of her on-court behavior. Yet the discourse surrounding Clark's own physicality can differ significantly from the language used when she is on the receiving end of physical contact. For example, during a playoff game against the Las Vegas Aces, Clark fouled out following a highly physical and competitive matchup. Rather than focusing on the fouls she committed, some social media commentators characterized Clark as having been "beat up" while officials watched. Others alleged that the game was "rigged," with the WNBA supposedly favoring Black athletes over white athletes.

Beyond on-court incidents, discourse surrounding Clark has also extended to alleged tensions between her, her teammates, and her coach. How these tensions are described and attributed matters. The coverage that portrays Clark as isolated, mistreated, or unsupported may reinforce her position as a figure deserving of sympathy, while accounts that emphasize conflict within the team may shape perceptions of the league's broader culture. Examining this discourse alongside representations of Thomas raises the question of whether Clark's conflicts are framed primarily through her individual experience, while Black players involved in controversial incidents are more readily characterized through their perceived threat to others. This framing is particularly significant within a league historically shaped by Black women, as it can cast Black players not as athletes navigating the same competitive environment, but as beneficiaries of an institution supposedly working against white players. The result is a reversal narrative in which a white athlete's perceived disadvantage becomes evidence of anti-white discrimination,

potentially obscuring the broader racial dynamics that shape how athletes are represented and valued.

Taken together, these examples demonstrate that the discourse surrounding Clark and Thomas extends beyond the June 24 incident itself. Whether through the criminalization of Thomas, calls for Clark's protection, the framing of officiating decisions as evidence of unfair treatment, or narratives about Clark's relationships with her teammates and coach, these representations contribute to an ongoing negotiation of each athlete's place within the WNBA. Clark's actions and experiences are often interpreted through questions of her vulnerability, value, and treatment by the league, while Thomas's actions are framed through the language of aggression, criminality, and punishment. Even when Clark's own on-court behavior complicates the image of her as a passive victim, some public commentary continues to position her as the disadvantaged party. The significance of this contrast lies not in whether either athlete is entirely innocent or culpable, but in how the language surrounding them shapes the terms through which their actions are understood.

What is the Significance?

The significance of this research extends beyond the controversy between Caitlin Clark and Alyssa Thomas. As women's basketball continues to receive increased public and commercial attention, the ways athletes are represented in sports media become increasingly important to understanding how cultural narratives about race, gender, and power are produced and circulated. Sports are not separate from the social and political contexts in which they exist; rather, they provide a space in which broader cultural assumptions are expressed, negotiated, and contested. Examining the discourse surrounding this incident therefore offers an opportunity to

understand how racial ideologies can operate through seemingly ordinary discussions of athletic performance, sportsmanship, and fairness.

This research also contributes to conversations about race and representation within sports, particularly the representation of Black women in institutions where their athletic and cultural contributions have historically been underrecognized. The WNBA presents a particularly important context because Black women have been central to the league's identity and development, yet the league continues to operate within a broader media environment shaped by existing racial hierarchies.

Ultimately, this project builds on Charles Mills's theory of the racial contract by examining how racial hierarchies may be reproduced within a cultural space historically shaped by Black women. It demonstrates the importance of studying not only explicit expressions of racism, but also the everyday communicative practices through which certain athletes become symbols of innocence, value, or vulnerability while others are associated with aggression and wrongdoing. By analyzing these patterns within contemporary sports discourse, this research contributes to a broader understanding of how media representation shapes whose experiences receive public sympathy, whose actions invite condemnation, and whose interests are positioned as central to an institution's success. These questions extend beyond basketball, making this case a useful lens through which to examine the relationship between communication, racial power, and cultural representation.

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