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Black Female Athletes as the Ultimate Other: Breaking Free from the Controlling Images

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About the Series: The purpose of this series is to add to the conversation and dialogues occurring in sport; thus, the National Association of Girls & Women in Sport has created this series to not only inform our members but also the public about the various aspects of sport and physical activity that display the diversity and inclusive nature of women's sport. With the ultimate goal to raise awareness, we hope this addition to the conversation will indirectly lead to creating social justice and change in not only women's sport but sport as a whole.

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Abstract: This paper is as an educational tool to raise awareness of the controlling images employed to stereotype Black females. Relying on my perspective as a Black female athlete, I examine Black women as athletes in women's sport in order to lay the foundation for what can be seen as "success" despite silence and invisibility, which is articulated through a discourse of the socialization of Black women into sport. Then, using a historical lens, the nine images that have been used since slavery to control Black women are outlined, moving to the present day to discuss how these images have affected Black female athletes directly. The paper concludes with my vision of how we as Black female athletes can create new images for ourselves.

Key Words: identity, sport, Black women, oppression

Nearly two years after Don Imus's infamous comments about the Rutgers women's Basketball team, I am still unsure if it is any clearer to the American public why referring to a group of Black women as "nappy-headed hos" is not only wrong and insensitive, but is rooted in power, discrimination, and hate. Although there is no single explanation for the complexity of Black women's existence, the history of Black women— dating back to slavery— reminds us[i] that we are neither recognized "as a group separate and distinct from black men or as a present part of the larger group 'women' in this culture" (hooks, 1981, p. 7). Not only must Black women fight for the various components of our identity— race, gender identity/expression, class, and sexual orientation to name a few, we are also limited to "competitive either/or thinking, the belief that the self is formed in opposition to another" (hooks, 1985, p. 29). This insight into the binary classification system upon which our society is based (e.g., black/white, male/female, heterosexual/homosexual, rich/poor) makes it clear that when an individual deviates from these neat boundaries, the fundamental social system of our country is threatened.

In other words, the United States—a country of 306 million people (U.S. Census Bureau, 2009) just elected our first Black President after 232 years of being governed by white men, ushering out eight solid years of conservatism—places the white, heterosexual, Christian, financially secure man as the standard[ii] for which Audre Lorde (1984) has termed the *mystical* norm. And, it is this ideal that defines being American—the superiority of whiteness, which places any variation within the context of being an Other. This label of Other then creates a dynamic where any aspect of identity can be juxtaposed as opposites; thus creating binary—either/or—thinking and perpetuating stereotypes. These stereotypes—our beliefs about a group(s) of people—lead us to prejudge other human beings on a conscious or unconscious basis. However, when we put our prejudice or pre-judgments about people into action, which are often times hard to separate, then we are discriminating others. For the few of us who hold economic, political, and social power, this discrimination can result in oppression. This cycle of oppression as it often is called operates within the interlocking systems of oppression that includes yet is not limited to capitalism, white supremacy, male supremacy, and a heterosexist, gender binary system in which the desired standard is set as the mystical norm; therefore creating a need to explain how this matrix of domination (Collins, 2000), which is influenced and maintained by fear, disconnection, guilt, competition, and greed, has controlled Black women through images that in turn create stereotypical vignettes about us. It is these images that have been

used since slavery that affect Black women directly and all non-black women indirectly by being the standard not to emulate.

This paper is intended to be used as an educational tool to raise awareness of the controlling images employed to stereotype Black females and the effect it has in sport. Imagine…the numerous untold histories and stories of girls and women in sport, remembering that this is simply one story, one perspective. With that said, I will begin by addressing Black women as athletes in women's sport in order to lay the foundation for what can be seen as "success" despite silence and invisibility, which will be articulated through a discourse of the socialization of Black women into sport. Then, from a historical perspective, I will outline the images that have been used since slavery to control Black women, moving to the present day to discuss how these images have affected Black female athletes directly, and finally, concluding with a few things you can do to help break the cycle, as I audaciously hope Black female athletes will continue to create new images as Black women.

Black Women as Athletes in Women's Sport

With black student-athletes representing nearly 24% of all student-athletes participating at National Collegiate Athletic Association's (NCAA) Division I institutions,[iii] and a little more than 52% of black student-athletes participating in NCAA Division I revenue sports[iv] (NCAA, 2004),[v] it could be argued that sport is one arena where black individuals—male and female—have found success. This assumed success is seen as a ticket out of the various circumstances that affect the lives of youth of color throughout America while maintaining the stereotypical career trajectory for black youth in particular. Although this ticket out has typically been available to young black boys, now black girls can use sport as a vehicle to higher education as a means to upward mobility and the opportunities that can result from having a college degree. More specifically, Black women represent just over 15% of NCAA Division I female student-athletes: 10, 913 (NCAA, 2006a) out of 70,885 (NCAA, 2006b). However, despite the increased opportunities of Black female athletes in women's sport, we cannot claim success when whole parts of our identity are both silenced and invisible in sporting spaces, which is consistent with the circumstances that we as Black women have and continue to face in society. As Y. R. Smith (1992) states, "...women of color have been silenced by being suppressed, excluded, and misrepresented at every level of social interaction and have been placed at the margins by the dominant culture in society and in sport" (p. 229). This dominance in sport occurs not just through race, but also gender, class, and sexuality, and can no longer be seen as

variables but must be understood as power relationships (Smith, 1992) with white heterosexual males of middle- and upper-class status typically holding the power.

Although there are numerous power dynamics at work, I point to this population of individuals—white heterosexual males of middle- and upper-class status—in order to refer to the unearned privilege asserted by the construction of white maleness as a position rather than implicating each particular white male who fits these categories. Yet, as it turns out, white males have not been the only individuals to hold us—Black women—back in society. However, "…despite obvious sexism in [the black community] during and after the civil rights movement, the African American[vi] community has been traditionally more equalitarian than the dominant culture, particularly concerning athletics for women" (Smith, 1992, p. 233). This can be attributed to values of femininity within the black community where 'the women can be strong and achieving in sport and still not deny her womanness' (Smith, 1992, p. 234) even though they are less likely to be models of femininity for non-black women. Regardless of the fact that these women are supported by their community, the harsh reality is that overt racism and hegemonic standards of femininity have impacted sport by perceiving these women as not real.[vii] Consistent with how Black lesbians are viewed within society at large, Black female athletes are also seen as masculinized and/or sexualized women that correspond to the stereotypes of Black women in general. As Collins (2004) states,

> The stereotype of women athletes as 'manly' and as being lesbians and for Black women as being more 'masculine' than [w]hite women converge to provide a very difficult interpretive context for Black female athletes. In essence, the same qualities [masculinity and sexuality] that are uncritically celebrated for [b]lack male athletes can become stumbling blocks[viii] [in terms of perceived sexuality, which affects endorsements] for their Black female counterparts. Corporate profits depend on representations and images, and those of Black female athletes must be carefully managed in order to win endorsements and guarantee profitability. (p. 135-136)

Consequently, as Black female athletes, we must balance the difficult task of being proud Black women within a society and institution—sport—that not only sees us as "less than" but also influences the sports we play.

<u>The Socialization of Black Women into Sport</u>

While the presence of Black women athletes in women's sport is critical to explore, it is just as important to understand how blacks—males and females—are socialized into sport. This socialization into sport can be seen as an intersection of gender, race, and class. Despite the increase of well-educated black people in America, the data still shows that nearly 35% (1,923,000 out of 5,530,000) of two-parent and single-parent black families live

below the poverty line (U.S. Census Bureau, 2005). Simply put, this circumstance impacts the sporting experience for black youth. Although some families are able to afford expensive lessons and/or elite sporting experiences in sports such as tennis, golf, and swimming, the majority of families cannot afford such luxuries (Smith, 1992). As Y. R. Smith (1992) states, the reality is that:

> Low socioeconomic conditions impact women of color disproportionately such that their children must participate in stereotypical, 'popular' sports such as basketball and track and field (sponsored by the schools, recreation departments, and other nonprofit agencies) or not participate at all in organized sport. (p. 236)

Approximately 32%—8,071 (NCAA, 2006a) out of 25,494 (NCAA, 2006b)— of NCAA Division I Black female student-athletes participate in basketball and indoor and/or outdoor track and field. Based on the overrepresentation of Black woman participating in these two sports, misperceptions suggest that these are the sports of choice. However, “It is evident that popularly selected agency-sponsored sports are chosen most often by ethnic females and may represent opportunity set, forced opportunity choices for participation, and socialization experiences in a limited array of available sports” (Smith, 1992, p. 236). Additionally, the socioeconomic conditions with black families, schools, and communities have contributed to a tradition of overrepresentation in basketball and track and field. Even though there is overrepresentation of Black woman athletes in these two sports, Smith (1992) has noted three factors that have been operative: (a) “…there has usually been a strong desire to participate in sports, skills, and confidence on the part of the athlete, plus an organized sport structure through which the athlete has been nurtured in the African American community and more recently in the dominant culture;” (b) “…philanthropic people such as upper middle-class professionals and sport figures have contributed and supported the development of young, aspiring elite female athletes;” and (c) many HBCUs [historically black colleges and universities] played a major role in providing sport skill development during summer sports programs and in intercollegiate athletics even before the initiation of the NCAA National Youth Sports Program (p. 237).

I highlight these three factors due to the fact that one or a combination of all three could be potential reasons for why so many Black female athletes have chosen to participate in the sports of track and field and basketball. Ultimately, I am of the same opinion that Smith (1992) eloquently explains as needing to be addressed – the fact that Black female athletes are overrepresented in two sports. She states:

> …unless schools, community agencies, and national sport organizations increase their commitment and range of sports offerings to youth, as well as increase the diversity of sport leaders, only limited access to a wider range of sport opportunities and limited elite sport

> achievements by ethnic minority girls and women may be expected at lower income levels. Members of ethnic minority communities continue to struggle with depressed economic conditions, which make certain sport experiences inaccessible regardless of the athletic potential of the individual. (p. 238)

Therefore, to change and improve our conditions as Black women, we all—Black and non-black women alike—must be familiar with the historical context in which we have been bounded by while simultaneously understanding our personal connection to this context in order to know what we are breaking free from. Such an understanding will be possible with the help of Collins (2000), Davis (1981), hooks (1981, 1985, 1989), and Springer (2005) as Black women writers writing and telling the stories of Black women.

The Images Used to Control Black Women over the Years

This section describes the nine main images that have been used to oppress Black women since slavery. These images are described in depth as follows: (a) Pre-emancipated Black women: Standards of new womanhood; (b) The myth of matriarchy; (c) Black women's paid work: The site of intersecting oppression; and (d) Additional controlling images: An overview.

Pre-emancipated Black women: Standards of new womanhood

In the opening chapter of Davis' (1981) book, *Women, Race, & Class*, she discusses how the "special situation of the *female* slave remain[s] unpenetrated" (p. 3) by scholars who examine the 'peculiar institution' (p. 3) of slavery. Despite the neglect of other scholars, Davis devotes an entire chapter to examining how Black women during slavery had to manage the power structure of subordination through the use of controlling images, which led to these Black women developing strategies of resistance and ultimately new standards for Black womanhood. However, the new standards of Black womanhood were seen as deviant to the evolving nineteenth century ideology of femininity that was based on the cult of true womanhood—a "true" woman possessed the four cardinal virtues of piety, purity, submissiveness, and domesticity. This ideology of femininity was accompanied by the traditional family ideal, which was "defined as a natural or biological arrangement based on heterosexual attraction…a state-sanctioned, heterosexual marriage that confers legitimacy not only on the family structure itself but on children born in this family" (Collins, 2000, p. 47).

As slaves, Black women had to navigate three controlling images that were prominent during their time. First and foremost, Black women were seen as genderless until they could be exploited as women. As Davis (1981) states,

> …when it was profitable to exploit them as if they were men, they were regarded, in effect as genderless, but when they could be exploited, punished and repressed in ways suited only for women, they were locked into their exclusively female roles. (p. 6)

The domination these white men had over Black women and the multiple ways they were exploited is in my opinion sickening. More specifically, when these women were exploited, punished, and repressed as women it meant that as slaves they were vulnerable to all forms of sexual coercion with rape being the most prominent form. "Rape, in fact, was an uncamouflaged expression of the slaveholder's economic mastery and the overseer's control over Black women as workers" (p. 7). Although slaveholders used rape to evoke terror to not only diminish the Black slave woman's will to resist but also to keep the slave woman in her place. Most women resisted these advances and fought back, yet fighting back led to other forms of abuse such as flogging or mutilation, which addresses how Black women have been silenced throughout history since it is uncommon knowledge that these women indeed fought back.[ix]

Furthermore, another form of sexual coercion used by slaveholders was to take advantage of Black women's reproductive capacity to replenish and increase the slave population for the slaveholder. This leads to the second controlling image of Black slave women, the image of the "breeder." The "breeders" were

> …animals, whose monetary value could be precisely calculated in terms of their ability to multiply their numbers. In the eyes of the slaveholders, slave women were not mothers at all; they were simply instruments guaranteeing the growth of the slave labor force. (Davis, 1981, p. 7)

Even though it might be hard to believe that one group of human beings could view another in this way, I do so to create awareness of the true circumstances these women experienced. Despite these first two controlling images, "the slave woman was [aware that she was] first a full-time worker for her owner, and only incidentally a wife, mother and homemaker" (Davis, 1981, p. 5). For this reason, the Black slave woman made great strides in her attempt to create a sense of normalcy within her community of fellow slaves. Therefore, Black women and men slaves had an equal division of labor within their family arrangements that seems to be based on there being no "weaker sex" (Davis, 1981, p. 8) among slaves.

Davis (1981) paints a picture of the egalitarian social relations among Black women and men in the following statement:

> [The] sexual division of domestic labor does not appear to have been hierarchical: men's tasks were certainly not superior to and were hardly inferior to the work performed by women. They were both equally necessary. Moreover, from all indications, the division of labor between the

sexes was not always so rigorous, for men would sometimes work in the cabin and women might tend the garden and perhaps even join the hunt. (p. 18)

Although the above passage indeed debunks the myth[x] of the matriarch, I examine this myth and the image of the matriarch—the third controlling image—in great detail in the next subsection. Nonetheless, the experiences of Black women during slavery forced them "to develop certain personality traits which set them apart from most white women" (p. 27) instead of defining themselves based on

> …the accumulated experiences of all those women who toiled under the lash for their masters, worked for and protected their families, fought against slavery, and who were beaten and raped, but never subdued. [Instead] it was those women who passed on to their nominally free female descendants a legacy of hard work, perseverance and self-reliance, a legacy of tenacity, resistance and insistence on sexual equality. (p. 29)

In essence, this created standards for a new womanhood based on the drive, determination, and legacy that Black women have passed on to their daughters and granddaughters that set us apart from our sisters.

The image of the matriarch as part of the myth of matriarchy

In order to delve into the myth of matriarchy, it is vital to first examine the circumstances that led to the assumption of such a family structure. Davis (1981) discusses how the state legislators of the slavery South followed the principle of "*partus sequitur ventrem*" (p. 12) in which the child follows the condition of the mother. This principle was based on the assumption that slave children were fatherless since birth records failed to list a father. Yet, the fact remains that many times the slaveholders were the fathers (Davis, 1981). Thus, "most historical and sociological examinations of the Black family during slavery have simply assumed that the masters' refusal to acknowledge fatherhood among their slaves was directly translated into a matriarchal family arrangement of the slaves' own making," (pp. 12–13). Placed within the historical context of the U.S. through the writings of Black women, it is clear how the myth of matriarchy was created in order to keep black men subordinate to white men and create the appearance that Black women held the power.

With the assumption that the matriarchal family arrangement was the family structure of choice, the myth was created, leading Daniel Moynihan to conduct the 1965 U.S. government study of *The Negro Family: The Case for National Action*, also popularly known as the Moynihan Report. The report "directly linked the contemporary social and economic problems of the [b]lack community to a putatively matriarchal family structure" (p. 143) by arguing that "the state of the black community was 'pathological'" (Springer, 2005, p. 37) while also "making it appear that [B]lack women were already liberated" (p. 38). This is consistent with what B. Smith (2000) terms

“Myth No. 1: The Black woman is already liberated” (p. xxviii). In an attempt to debunk the Black women’s desire for a matriarchal family structure, B. Smith (2000) states that, “‘…our women in black had freedom contemptuously thrust upon them.’ Of all the people here, women of color generally have the fewest choices about the circumstances of their lives. An ability to cope under the worst conditions is not liberation” (p. xxviii). However, after reading Moynihan’s report (1965), it becomes apparent he viewed blacks’ oppression to be deeper than the racial discrimination that produced poor housing, unemployment, inadequate education, and substandard healthcare; he felt the oppression was tied to a lack of male authority dating back to slavery, which “had effectively destroyed the black family” (Davis, 1981, p. 13).

Furthermore, “Moynihan alleged that [B]lack women were matriarchs because they ‘fail[ed] to fulfill their traditional ‘womanly’ duties’ and were guilty of emasculating black men” (Springer, 2005, p. 38). What makes this claim so ridiculous is that the white male slaveholders were not worried about Black women fulfilling their womanly duties—since Black slave women were seen as genderless laborers—until it came time to exploit them as women through the use of rape and endless childbearing. It is this image of a Black matriarch that serves as evidence to the coercion Black women faced with the white power structure (Springer, 2005) as slave laborers and continued to face as paid workers. While working both as slaves and paid workers, Black women’s identity focused mainly on race and gender, yet the reality was that we truly experienced life as an intersection of our various yet complicated aspects of identity. Therefore, it is Black women’s paid work after the emancipation of slavery that became the site that exemplified our experience with the intersecting oppression of race, class, gender, and sexuality.

Black women’s paid work: The site of intersecting oppression

“Upon emancipation, Blacks became wage laborers and were thrust into these exchange relationships in which individual gain was placed ahead of collective good” (Collins, 2000, p. 52). More specific to Black women workers, they were confined to two major occupations: (a) field labor and (b) domestic work. For those women living in the South after emancipation, field work was little change from the work they had done while being enslaved except they earned a wage. Those women who were not compelled to work in the field became domestic servants, which like their sisters working in the field “bore the similar stamp of slavery” (Davis, 1981, p. 90). Furthermore,

> Black women worked as cooks, nursemaids, chambermaids and all-purpose domestics, white women in the South unanimously rejected this line of work. Outside the South, white women who worked as domestics were generally European immigrants who, like their ex-slave sisters, were compelled to take whatever employment they could find. (p. 90)

However, in the South, domestic work was synonymous with Black girls and women, which not only paid low wages and exposed them to the constant threat of sexual harassment but also physical abuse (Davis, 1981; Collins, 2000). To make matters even worse, Black women workers—whether in the field or within someone's home—still did not get to benefit from their labor since "the male head of the extended family unit receiv[ed] any wage earned by the family unit" (p. 53).

Based on the poor working conditions, low wages, and the threat of sexual harassment and physical abuse, many "Black women wanted to withdraw from the labor force, not to mimic middle-class [w]hite women's domesticity but, rather, to strengthen the political and economic position of their families" (Collins, 2000, p. 54). However, the "limited opportunities available to [black] men made it virtually impossible for the majority of [b]lack families to survive on [the b]lack male wages alone" (p. 54). Far too many Black women could not make this choice to stay at home and continued to work for pay (Collins, 2000). This remained the standard until the 1910s—this era marked the first great migration of blacks from the countryside of the South to the big cities in the North, which continued until after World War II. This trend stimulated a shift in Black women's labor market activities in that many of these women were no longer forced to be live-in domestics as Black women had been forced to do in the South, instead being a domestic in the North meant day work (Collins, 2000). This, in turn, finally helped to create a private sphere for the black family that could include a mother figure. However, since black men often found high wages through temporary work and Black women obtained lower wages through secure jobs, it was often the case that Black women financially supported their families. Thus, this situation exemplified the effect of gender within the racist labor market in which gender differences created distinct patterns of economic vulnerability (Collins, 2000).

The image most notably used to explain Black women's paid work as an example of intersecting oppression is through the controlling image of the mammy. The mammy was the faithful, trustworthy, grateful, and obedient domestic servant (Collins, 2000; Davis, 1981). When I think about the image of the mammy I am immediately reminded of the smiling Black woman on the Aunt Jemima pancake syrup bottle or Hattie McDaniels, who played the mammy in the 1939 film, *Gone with the Wind*. Although these are just two examples, this standard

of a “good Black woman” (Collins, 2000, p. 72) was used as a “normative yardstick” (p. 72) upon which all Black women's behavior was evaluated. Collins (2000) states the symbolism of the mammy best when she says, “By loving, nurturing, and caring for her [w]hite children and ‘family’ better than her own, the mammy symbolizes the dominant group’s perceptions of the ideal Black female relationship to elite [w]hite male power” (p. 72).

Furthermore, the image of the mammy also worked to control racial, gender, sexual, and class oppression. In regards to racial oppression, the aim of the mammy was to influence Black maternal behavior, which in turn could potentially lead to Black women perpetuating racial oppression among their own children and families (Collins, 2000). This occurs, “By teaching [b]lack children their assigned place in [w]hite power structures,” which can lead to Black women internalizing the mammy image; thus, perpetuating racial oppression (p. 73). However, in relation to gender and sexual oppression, the mammy was seen as a physical, asexual woman who is “a surrogate mother in blackface whose historical devotion to the [w]hite family is now giving way to new expectations” (p. 74) with the expectation being commitment to their jobs. Within the context of class, it is believed that “the mammy image was designed to mask [the] economic exploitation of social class” (p. 74). Although this image has become more muted, it is more than likely that Black women may still feel the need to play the mammy role in their paid work settings even though they teach their own children the complete opposite at home (Collins, 2000). Whatever the case may be, the above is an explanation of the effect the mammy image has on race, gender, sexuality, and class.

Additional controlling images: An overview

Up until this point, the focus has been on the intersecting oppression Black women historically faced by being stereotyped and controlled by the images of being seen as genderless, the breeder, the matriarch, the liberated woman, and the mammy. These five mages are not the only ones that have been used to control Black women. Collins (2000) discusses four additional controlling images: (a) the welfare mother; (b) the welfare queen; (c) the Black lady; and (d) the jezebel, whore, or hoochie. The first image, the welfare mother, can be described as a Black woman who is a bad mother while being portrayed as content with sitting around, collecting welfare, shunning work, and in turn passing her bad values to her offspring. Though there may be cases where this is true, the fact remains that this image is detrimental to not just Black women but to all blacks because then we are “racially stereotyped as lazy by blaming Black welfare mothers for failing to pass on the work ethic” (p. 79). The

welfare queen—the second control controlling image mentioned by Collins and the seventh overall—can be seen as the epitome of economic dependency without the use of children and "constitutes a highly materialistic, domineering, and manless working-class Black woman…[who] is content to take the hard-earned money of tax-paying Americans and remain married to the state" (p. 80). The welfare queen image has been used as a sign and/or scapegoat for the deterioration of the state; thus, emphasizing the role of Black women when welfare or welfare reform is mentioned in the media.

Conversely, the Black lady refers to a middle-class professional Black woman "who stayed in school, worked hard, and [has] achieved much" (pp. 80–81). Yet, in doing so, she is said to have become less feminine by competing with men as well as too assertive, which explains why she can't find a man to marry her (Collins, 2000) instead of staying single by choice. Furthermore, when taken together, the welfare queen and the Black lady "constitute class-specific versions of a matriarchy thesis whose fundamental purpose is to discredit Black women's full exercise of citizenship rights" (p. 81). As a result, these two images place Black women in opposition of one another by making it a matter of class when really it is a tactic utilized to make these women appear different—to the public and one another—so they are unable to relate.

The final controlling image—the jezebel, whore, or hoochie—has been central in restraining Black women's sexuality since it "lie[s] at the heart of Black women's oppression, [the] historical jezebels and [the] contemporary hoochies represent a deviant Black female sexuality" (Collins, 2000, p. 81). More specifically, the image of the jezebel originated under slavery and functioned to reduce all Black women to the category of sexually aggressive women; whereas, the hoochie can take on many different forms as a "plain hoochie" (p. 82), a "club hoochie" (p. 82), a "gold-digging hoochie" (p. 82), and a "hoochie mama" (p. 83). Although each form carries its own distinction, they all assume normalized heterosexuality within our U.S. society in which white males hold the power. Therefore, in our society where the *mystical norm* is set as the ideal, "the jezebel or hoochie becomes a racialized, gendered symbol of deviant female sexuality" (p. 83). Once again, situating Black women as the deviant instead of

> […] being the most sought after 'object of sexual pleasure'—as in the case of black men—white women tend to occupy this 'upgraded,' that is, degraded, position primarily because white beauty plays a weightier role in sexual desirability for women in racist patriarchal America. (West, 2001, p. 130)

While it has taken quite a few pages to discuss the nine controlling images that Black women are affected by, I do so to bring to light the historical context in which I'm sure many of my sisters—Black, brown, red, yellow, and white—were previously unaware of, which I liken to my own experience.[xi] This knowledge is critical to understanding how we as Black women can move forward while regrettably providing the foundation wherein Black women are defined as the Other. As previously mentioned, the foundation of the Other is based on binary thinking in which domination involves continuous attempts to objectify the subordinate group. However, the challenge is to see ourselves as subjects rather than objects as hooks (1989) summarizes best by saying,

> As subjects, people have the right to define their own reality, establish their own identities, name their history. As objects, one's reality is defined by others, one's identity created by others, one's history named only in ways that define one's relationship to those who are subject. (p. 42)

What hooks (1989) compellingly explains is how numerous Black women have been treated by American society since slavery and still continue to face as oppression and discrimination. All of the images mentioned above work to perpetuate Black women as the ultimate Other in our society.

<u>The Lasting Impact of the Controlling Images in Women's Sport</u>

With the *mystical norm* (Lorde, 1984) in place, the nine images mentioned above can be employed to control Black women and in turn define and situate us as the ultimate Other—deviant, unreal, and less desirable. In holding such a status within the American matrix of domination, the impact of being defined by these images influences the various institutions (e.g., government, education, sport) in our society, allowing the systems of oppression to continue to operate. One such institution is that of sport and specifically, women's sport. Now, it's easy to suggest is that all we need to do is simply not buy into the stereotypical images and instead create our own images that define us. Although this logic is ideal, I personally know yet also believe that it is a process of personal exploration to get to this point, which begins with acknowledging what is called internalized oppression.

Since oppression is institutionalized in our society, targeted group members (e.g., Black women) often believe the messages and internalize the oppression, act them out, and thus perpetuate the stereotype, which then reinforces the prejudice and keeps the cycle of oppression going. In other words, 'internalized oppression is the mechanism within an oppressive system for perpetuating domination not only by external control but also by building subservience into the minds of the oppressed group ([Pheterson, 1990,] p.35)' (Tappan, 2006, p. 2120).

Conversely, our white counterparts are experiencing an acute case of internalized domination in which an individual "perpetuates [the] oppression of others and alienation from oneself by either denying or degrading all but a narrow range of human possibilities" and in turn dominating those that differ from themselves (p. 2120). With both forms of internalization at work, dominance and oppression, they become a part of our psyche at both the conscious and unconscious level.

Although these psychological aspects are commonly emphasized in social justice work, I support Tappan's (2006) proposal that there are limitations in using this kind of language or images. He takes it one step further to emphasize his proposal by stating that it is critical that we "understand the relationship between the individual and the social, cultural, historical, and institutional contexts in which the individual lives" (p. 2122). Yet, in order to do so, "we must find a way to 'live in the middle'—to focus on both the personal and the systemic" (p. 2122). As Tappan (2006) discusses, Wertsch (1991, 1995, 1998) proposed the concept of mediated action, which provides a useful way for us "to live in the middle." Tappan (2006) goes on to explain,

> Mediated action entails two central elements: (1) an agent, the person who is doing the acting, and (2) 'cultural tools' or 'mediational means'—tools, means, or 'instruments,' appropriated from the culture and used by the agent to accomplish a given action. (p. 2117)

Moreover, these cultural tools are acquired through the process of appropriation in "…which persons actively participate in the ongoing process of gaining proficiency and expertise in using specific meditational means…" that are maintained through mastery and ownership (p. 2124).

Within the context of women's sport, mediated action takes place when cultural tools such as the use of the nine images of Black women previously mentioned are utilized by an agent (e.g., mass media, coaches, fans) "result[ing] from the mastery and ownership of cultural tools that transmit oppressive ideologies, messages, and scripts"(Tappan, 2006,p. 2127), thus creating appropriated oppression. The use of these images as cultural tools carries over into sport where the same power dynamics are at work that are operating within society. An example of such mediated action, which is well known within women's sports, are the comments made by Don Imus regarding the Rutgers women's basketball team in the spring of 2007. More specifically, the day after the NCAA Division I women's basketball championship game, Don Imus, the former host of MSNBC's *Imus in the Morning* said the following on his nationally syndicated radio show that was also being simulcast on a cable channel:

> IMUS: So, I watched the basketball game last night between -- a little bit of Rutgers and Tennessee, the women's final.

> ROSENBERG (former *Imus* sports announcer who was filling in for sportscaster Chris Carlin): Yeah, Tennessee won last night -- seventh championship for [Tennessee coach] Pat Summitt, I-Man. They beat Rutgers by 13 points.
>
> IMUS: That's some rough girls from Rutgers. Man, they got tattoos and --
>
> McGUIRK (the show's executive producer): Some hard-core hos.
>
> IMUS: That's some nappy-headed hos there. I'm gonna tell you that now, man, that's some -- woo. And the girls from Tennessee, they all look cute, you know, so, like -- kinda like -- I don't know.
>
> McGUIRK: A Spike Lee thing.
>
> IMUS: Yeah.
>
> McGUIRK: The Jigaboos vs. the Wannabes -- that movie that he had.
>
> IMUS: Yeah, it was a tough --
>
> McCORD (co-host): Do The Right Thing [Referring to the Spike Lee's Movie].[xii]
>
> McGUIRK: Yeah, yeah, yeah.
>
> IMUS: I don't know if I'd have wanted to beat Rutgers or not, but they did, right?
>
> ROSENBERG: It was a tough watch. The more I look at Rutgers, they look exactly like the Toronto Raptors.
>
> IMUS: Well, I guess, yeah.
>
> RUFFINO (veteran engineer): Only tougher.
>
> McGUIRK: The [Memphis] Grizzlies would be more appropriate. (Media Matters, 2007)

Regardless of the hegemony that engulfs our consciousness to not speak up, many civil and human rights advocates spoke out against these comments. In fact, I felt fortunate enough to be in a position in which I could help draft a press release that could be included in the discourse. I was quoted as saying,

> NAGWS fully acknowledges the right of free speech in America, yet we must also stand up for justice when those with a public voice perpetuate the sexualization of women athletes, especially women athletes of color. We commend the Rutgers' women's basketball team for reaching collegiate sports grandest stage—the NCAA title game. However, it is unfortunate that the athletes' commitment and hard work to their team and sport during the season was reduced to assumptions about not only their physical strength, but also to stereotypes associated with their race, sexuality, and self-expression through body art. To make matters worse, these women athletes were pitted (by Imus) against another group of accomplished women athletes—the University of Tennessee's women's basketball team. (NAGWS Board of Directors, 2007)

I still stand proud by that statement, and only wish that the discourse could move past the prioritization of one aspect of identity over another—Were Imus's comments racist or sexist?

In my mind, that's not what is significant about this outburst by a white man with the power to reach millions of listeners and viewers. Instead what is significant is the fact that Imus's comments demonstrate both appropriated domination and oppression as proposed by Tappan (2006). In particular, there were three comments made by Imus and McGuirk, the show's executive producer that highlight the point. The first comment—"Rough girls from Rutgers. Man, they got tattoos…"—is consistent with how Black female athletes are consistently viewed in our society as masculine and/or sexualized women who are not considered real. This perception corresponds to the stereotypes associated with Black women in general. Although these same characteristics are typically celebrated in black male athletes, Imus's on-air counterparts chose to compare these young women of color to a male NBA team that resides in a city that is ranked seventh in the nation for its percentage of blacks within the population, 61.4% (U.S. Census Bureau, 2008), while it experiences 2.64 more violent crimes per capita then the national average (CityRating.com, 2008). To make matters worse, Imus is not just comparing two teams, pitting Black women against black men, and using racial characterization as a cultural tool; he is also illustrating his privilege and power to perpetuate the oppression of others by disregarding these women and men as individuals with unique stories and accomplishments.

This demonstration of power and privilege continues as McGuirk follows up Imus's "rough girls" comment by referring to them as "some hard-core hos," which is then corrected by Imus when he says, "That's some nappy-headed hos there." Once again, the image of the genderless Black women is applied by a white man until it is convenient to exploit them as stereotypically deviant women. By employing such an image, Imus and McGuirk utilize it as a cultural tool in their mediated action. Although this exchange between these two white men, four men overall, can be seen as an example of mediated action, I also believe that mediated action can be used as a force for positive change. In fact, I see this paper as such an example and a means to bring to light the controlling images of Black women in order to focus on both the personal and systemic as we—Black women—"live in the middle."

Moreover, these comments assume the heterosexuality of Black women while perpetuating the sexualization of female athletes of color by reducing them to assumptions and stereotypes. Such assumptions and stereotypical images are represented in the third and final comment —when Imus and McGuirk compare the Rutgers' and University of Tennessee women's basketball teams to the jigaboos[xiii] and wannabes[xiv] in Spike Lee's 1988 movie

School Daze in which the practice of colorism[xv] is satirized. In creating such a dynamic, Imus and McGuirk are using their power and privilege to put Black women in opposition to one another as a tactic to make them appear different. However, it is not about light versus dark or the other images that Imus and his colleagues employed. Instead the situation is best summarized by Essence Carson— a Black female athlete on the Rutgers women's basketball team—when she states,

> We are highly angered at his [Mr. Imus's] remarks but deeply saddened with the racial characterization they entailed. Not only has Mr. Imus stolen a moment of pure grace from us, but he has brought us to the harsh reality that behind the faces of networks that have worked to convey a message of empowerment to young adults, that somehow…someway…the door has been left open to attack your leaders of tomorrow. You must not forget that we are students first and then athletes…and before that student lies the daughter. (Rutgers Athletics, 2007)

Thus, "there is a bigger issue here, more than the basketball team. It's all women athletes, it's all women" as said by C. Vivian Stringer—head coach of the Rutgers' women's basketball team (Rutgers Athletics, 2007).

Breaking Free from the Images: Creating New Forms of Femininity for Black Female Athletes

Although I wholeheartedly agree with Coach Stringer that the bigger issue at hand is the treatment of not just female athletes but women in general, for the purpose of this paper—bringing awareness to the images employed to oppress Black women—it is critical to conclude with ways that Black female athletes and their non-black allies can help them break free of these racial characterizations. As I bring this paper to a close, I want to be clear that we—as Black women—have the right to create new images for ourselves and future generations. However, the challenge lies in the fact that in creating our own images, it is essential that we avoid recreating and/or playing into the already established depictions.

As Collins (2004) discusses, Black female athlete's muscular and athletic bodies along with the assertiveness that is needed to win in sport represent new forms of femininity. An example of such a new form of femininity, which is highlighted by Collins (2004), is the William sisters, Venus and Serena. They are two young Black female athletes from a working class background playing the elite sport of tennis with muscular 6-foot-1 ½-inch frames and the ability to serve a tennis ball at 127 mph. Furthermore, these two sisters have found their own way to reject the norms of tennis with their form-fitting, flashy outfits and braided hair as illustrations. With that said, I believe that the definition of image/representation is expanding to include action; thus, it is not just about what one sees but also the action(s) of the individual(s) involved.

Returning to the Imus incident as an example, the Rutgers women's basketball team are a "[…] group of

women [that are] bright, gifted, hard-working and ha[ve] persevered through so much" as stated by their head coach—C. Vivian Stringer (Rutgers Athletics, 2007). Moreover, this group of women led by a respected coach, who happens to be a Black woman, was able to understand that this unexpected personal attack was an opportunity to demonstrate that we have each other's back by standing up for not just Black female athletes or female athletes in general but ALL women. This is illustrated best by Coach Stringer and Essence Carson, respectively, when they state,

> We realize that it's about women across the world, across the nation. It just so happens that we finally take a stand. (Rutgers Athletics, 2007)
>
> You don't get too many opportunities to stand up for what you know is right, I know we're at a young age and we know what's right and what should be done. We're glad to have the opportunity to stand up for what is right. (Rutgers Athletics, 2007)

The Rutgers women's basketball team and the Williams sisters are just two examples of many that display this new form of femininity. Therefore, it truly is up to Black female athletes and Black women in general to redefine our femininity and the corresponding images we want to project within and outside of the matrix of domination.

With this being the case, there is still a need to understand the identity of Black women through the words of Black women given that

> …our women in black had freedom contemptuously thrust upon them. Of all the people here, women of color generally have the fewest choices about the circumstances of their lives. An ability to cope under the worst conditions is not liberation. (Smith, 2000, p. xxviii).

That said, I have three suggestive steps we can all take to diminish the oppressive nature that occurs when images are employed against Black women. First and foremost, it is critical to not make assumptions. As I mentioned earlier, it is our assumptions or stereotypes that lead us to "pre-judge" other human beings, which can then lead to discrimination or worse oppression. To take this step even further, I also encourage you to question others' assumptions in a way that doesn't put them on the defense, yet instead is an exploration of socialization and how we view the world. For example, if someone you know refers to a team's style of play as "ghetto" and the team is made up of mostly Black female athletes, then ask them, "What do you mean by ghetto?" or "Can you please explain your statement?" The idea is to ultimately get the person to stop and think. Secondly, when possible, talk to the individual(s) you are making the assumptions about to see how they identify and learn more about their story. Although these opportunities are sometimes less feasible, it is important to remember that people like to feel

respected and doing so is key. Last but certainly not least, educate others by sharing this paper and/or initiating dialogue(s) on the topic at hand or more generally about your role and responsibility regarding the cycle of oppression, the interlocking systems of oppression, and appropriated oppression and domination. Just remember, these three steps are simply a starting point and I encourage you to continue to explore ways to reduce the effect of controlling images on not only Black female athletes but also all female athletes and women in general.

The objective of this paper was to increase your awareness on the oppressive characterizations used against Black females, and more specifically, how it plays out in women's sport. I began by addressing Black women as athletes in women's sport in order to lay the foundation for what can be seen as success despite the silence and invisibility that takes place, which was articulated through a discourse of the socialization of Black women into sport. Then using a historical lens, I outlined the nine images that have been used since slavery to dominate Black women, moving to the present day to discuss how these images have affected Black female athletes directly through the use of the Imus incident as an example. Although all of the images mentioned work to perpetuate Black women as the ultimate Other in American society, each of us —both women and men —has the ability to stand up for ourselves as well as our fellow sisters, so what are you waiting for!

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[i] Since I identify as a Black woman and Black female athlete in particular, I will use pronouns such as us/our/we to denote my membership status to these groups.
[ii] Such a standard is the foundation on which the United States was founded, yet over time has been conveyed through the hegemonic means of radio, television, film and video, print, photography, and electronic media.
[iii] This statistic includes historically black institutions.
[iv] Revenue sports are defined as football and men's and women's basketball.
[v] The data is from the NCAA Graduation-Rates Report and is based on scholarship student-athletes only.
[vi] The term black and African American are both used in this paper to refer to anyone who self-identifies of or belonging to a racial group having brown to black skin, especially one of African descent including those who are bi- or multiracial (Ross, 2006).
[vii] By not real, I mean that Black women typically do not represent what it means to be a woman, which historically has been defined by the standards of white women and men in U.S. society and in turn are labeled as deviant; thus, not real.
[viii] How are these stumbling blocks manifested? These stumbling blocks—sexuality and perceived masculinity—are manifested through mass media, which in turn affects the opportunities extended to Black woman in both sport and society.
[ix] I was unaware that these women did indeed fight back until reading Davis (1981), which in mind exemplifies the one-sided perspective of history that I was taught in both the public and private schools I attended.
[x] For the purpose of this paper, I define myth as a traditional story that is defined as history; "just the way it is."
[xi] When I was exploring my own history for my master's thesis as a young, Black woman raised by a white woman and black father—who focused on providing me with the opportunities American life has to offer instead of a framework that honored the knowledge of history in an attempt to break the barriers in front of me.
[xii] In fact, McCord references the wrong movie. The movie he intended to refer to was Spike Lee's *School Daze*.
[xiii] Historically, the term jigaboo "refers to a person or persons of the black color (African-American, negro, etc.) living in or around small, often abandoned in appearance housing in which crack cocaine [and] whores" are present (Urban Dictionary, 2008). However, in the context of *School Daze*, jigaboos were the dark-skinned, militant, politically and socially conscious Black women.
[xiv] In the context of *School Daze*, the wannabes were the pretty, light-skinned, long-haired, economically well-off Black women.
[xv] Colorism is the practice of placing value on skin tone; a form of discrimination.