Brittney Griner, Intersectionality, and “Woke Politics”: A Critical Examination of Brittney Griner’s Return to the United States

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In February of 2022, professional women’s basketball player Brittney Griner was detained in Russia on drug possession charges. Her detainment was a trending Twitter topic demonstrating the cultural, political, and social state of the United States, specifically pertaining to race, gender, nationality, and LGBTQ matters. The purpose of this study was to analyze what Brittney Griner’s release from Russia tells us about social power relations and contemporary social political matters on the axis of race, gender, and sexual orientation. We organized the data to determine three distinct, yet interconnected themes: (a) Woke Politics at the Intersection of Race, Gender, and Queerness; (b) Preferential Treatment at the Expense of Whiteness Informed Patriotism; and (c) Intersectionality as Political Pandering.

On February 17, 2022, Russian authorities detained Women’s National Basketball Association (WNBA) star Brittney Griner (BG) on drug possession charges at Moscow’s Sheremetyevo airport. A search of Griner’s luggage revealed that she was in possession of vape cartridges containing “liquid with hashish oil,” a crime punishable by 10 years in prison. For several months following detainment, Griner awaited trial in a Russian prison. Her trial began on July 1, and on August 4, 2022, the court found Griner guilty and sentenced her to 9 years in a Russian prison. A Russian court overturned Griner’s appeal of her conviction and she was transferred to a penal colony outside of Moscow. Almost immediately following her sentencing, conversations began pertaining to a prisoner swap between the United States and Russia. After months of negotiation, on December 8, 2022, the 10-month saga came to an end as Russian authorities released Griner from prison in a prisoner swap involving notorious Russian arms’ dealer Viktor Bout (for a complete timeline, see Reuters, 2022).

Throughout this timeline (February–December of 2022), BG was a continuous subject of sociopolitical and sociocultural commentary both within traditional U.S. media and on social media platforms. Griner’s detainment, sentencing, and ultimate release all coincided with Russia’s invasion of Ukraine. Throughout this time, many U.S. officials believed that Griner and other Americans were being used as political pawns and leverage in ongoing dealings between the United States and Russia. On February 24, 2022, throughout this time, many U.S. officials believed that Griner and other Americans were being used as political pawns and leverage in ongoing dealings between the United States and the Kremlin that were complicated by Russia’s invasion of Ukraine (Triay et al., 2022). Simultaneously, Griner’s detainment, sentencing, and release came during a time of deep polarization and division in American society, particularly polarization related to issues of race (anti-critical race theory legislation, anti-woke movement), gender identity and expression, and politics (legislation attacking the human rights of queer and trans people). According to Zirin (2022), it was amidst this backdrop where “racism, sexism, and homophobia have become the new patriotism” (p. 2), and political pundits and representatives from varying paradigms questioned if a Black lesbian female athlete was a “worthy enough American” to be swapped for. However, such commentary did not hinder BG’s release as it was ultimately rendered secondary to domestic political cultural wars rooted in whiteness, patriarchy, and heteronormativity.

As noted by Zirin (2022), domestic tensions were on full display, as politicians and their electorate criticized Griner by marginalizing her identities, attacking her decision to play basketball in Russia, and portraying her as “un-American” or as someone who hates America, given her previous engagement in racial justice efforts (i.e., #SayHerName, #Black Lives Matter [BLM]). Consequently, Griner’s release exacerbated how racism, sexism, and homophobia are social systems deeply entrenched in the U.S. polity (Collins & Bilge, 2020; Crenshaw, 2018; Kendall, 2021). Hence, any examination of Griner’s release cannot ignore that she is a Black lesbian American woman. In doing so, her identities and their interplay within social systems and institutions are centered.

The purpose of this study was to analyze what BG’s release from Russia tells us about social power relations and contemporary social political matters on the axis of race, gender, and sexual orientation (McDonald & Birrell, 1999). Essentially, this project uses BG as a muse to make sense of the current sociopolitical moment in regard to the intersections of her identity and how the interpretation of her identity is a proxy to justify anti-Blackness, sexism, homophobia, transphobia, and misogyny. BG’s return to the United States holds cultural meaning, as her return was more than a prisoner exchange with Russia. Rather, her return provided a lens to understand how intersectionality epistemologies can be weaponized and co-opted to advance domination and subordination in our society. Consequently, we not only demonstrate the relevance and necessity of considering the varying social systems individuals’ identities are entangled within to fully understand their experiences in sport (see Keaton, 2022, 2023; McDowell & Carter-Francique, 2017; Walker & Melton, 2015), but we also articulate how a Black lesbian woman’s intersectional personhood is personified in a meaning that escapes them and speaks to broader sociopolitical issues and dynamics (McDonald & Birrell, 1999). Our study builds upon previous social media analyses demonstrating how sport phenomena can be used as a means to understand racial and gender sociocultural and sociopolitical issues in the
United States (see Black et al., 2022; Cooky & Antunovic, 2020; Frederick et al., 2023). This study was guided by the following research question:

**RQ:** In what ways do oppositional tweets pertaining to BG’s return to the United States weaponize intersectionality epistemologies?

**Broader Sociopolitical Context of Brittney Griner’s Release**

From a sociological lens, the broader sociopolitical and sociocultural context of BG’s release is pertinent to our research methodology and findings. This context includes, but is not limited to: (a) Elon Musk becoming the CEO of Twitter; (b) Anti-Black hate crimes representing the largest bias incident category of hate violence in the United States—64.8% of recorded hate crimes in 2021 (United States Department of Justice, 2023); (c) Sexual orientation and gender-related violence accounting for 19.7% of recorded hate crimes in 2021 (United States Department of Justice, 2023); (d) Sustained conversations and legal hearings regarding the January 6th insurrection, to which mostly White Americans participated in violent acts to hinder President Biden’s confirmation vote as the elected President; (e) The WNBA being lauded and perceived as a sport league collectively engaging in social justice efforts; (f) Increased political commentary pertaining to Black women being a critical voting block for the Democratic party, while the aims and agenda of the Democratic party continue to ignore Black women’s issues and plight (Kendall, 2021); and (g) The rise of the anti-woke movement, which consists of state and federal representatives using their political power to ban critical consciousness on the axis of identity, particularly race and LGBTQIA+ (Kanu, 2023). These (and many other) varying sociopolitical and sociocultural issues and instances are relevant to the social media commentary regarding BG’s release. Therefore, BG’s release is ripe for sociological interpretation, as her release prompted commentary from varying communities along the political spectrum and through a sports figure, their commentary illuminates the state of Blackness, queerness, nationality, gender, and politics in the United States.

As it relates to our data and athlete of focus, we find it pertinent to further contextualize the rise of right-wing extremism on Twitter that directly coincides with Elon Musk’s leadership and intersects with the time frame of our collected data (December 8, 2022). Donald Trump’s rise to power in 2016 coincided with the emergence of the alt-right, a movement defined by the “desire to (re) assert the primacy of Western, White, male, heterosexual conservatism . . . . The movement aggressively attacks ‘political correctness’ and ‘victimization’ as a basis of identity politics.” (Falcous et al., 2019, p. 591). A hallmark of this movement is the promulgation of hate and fearmongering, which has been a joint effort by Donald Trump, right-wing media outlets, and conservative think tanks to paint a narrative that frames White lives and existence as more difficult in comparison to People of Color (see Kusz, 2017). In January of 2021, following the January 6th insurrection, Trump was banned from Twitter. However, his account was restored by Musk in November of 2022. The reinstatement of Trump’s Twitter account aligns with the contention that Musk is “. . . positioned against content moderation and in favor of a facile understanding of free speech maximalism” (Warzel, 2022, p. 3). Furthermore, Warzel (2022) argues that we currently reside in the “digital Wild West, where the powerful and hateful alike can inflict damage and experience no consequences” (p. 3).

Lastly, BG’s release occurred during a cultural and political war against LGBTQ athletes, adults, and children. According to the American Civil Liberties Union, there are 452 anti-LGBTQ bills during the 2023 legislative session and each of these bills target the humanity of queer and trans individuals by seeking to advance legislation that strips their civil and free speech rights or lessen their access to education and healthcare.

**Literature Review**

**Depictions of Black Women Athletes in the Media**

Black women athletes have historically been marginalized due to their race-gendered identities navigating sport systems of patriarchy and racism (Carter-Francique & Richardson, 2016; Simien et al., 2019). Their marginalization is exacerbated by how the media fails to truly make sense of Black women’s femininity (Cooky et al., 2010; Razack & Joseph, 2021; Schultz, 2005) and other intersections of their identities, like class, nationality, and ethnicity (Razack & Joseph, 2021; Zenquis & Mwaniki, 2019). The saliency of their Blackness positions Black women to be masculinized and stripped of their femininity, while their womanhood makes them susceptible to being objectified and sexualized (Withycombe, 2011). The work of Schultz (2005) affirms this assertion as their analysis of how newspaper outlets covered Serena Williams 2002 U.S. Open “cat-suit” succinctly captured how masculinity for Black women is synonymous with masculinity. Black women’s masculinity has been discussed by the media as an example of superhuman abilities, compared with animalistic features, and led to interpretations of their features as unnatural (Carter-Francique & Richardson, 2016; Schultz, 2005; Simien et al., 2019). These portrayals of Black women are anti-Black sentiments and depictions of misogynoir (Bailey, 2021), which is sexism with racial undertones specific to Black women. Bailey coined misogynoir “… to describe the particular brand of hatred directed at Black women in American visual and popular culture” (Anyangwe, 2015, para. 3).

This distinctive hatred toward Black women was explicitly demonstrated by Don Imus, a radio talk show host who referred to Rutgers majority Black women’s basketball team as “some nappy-headed hoes,” in his attempt to contrast and describe Rutgers women’s basketball team with the University of Tennessee women’s basketball team (Cooky et al., 2010). Imus’s comments illuminate the casualness of misogynoir in the media, as his sexism was not aimed at all women, because his use of “nappy-headed” made this directly aimed at Black women. The work of Cooky et al. (2010) examined how major and regional newspapers covered the Don Imus and Rutgers University controversy and was attentive to how these news articles were framed. The authors critiqued whose voice/perspective was centered or excluded, and they were attuned to the intersection of race, gender, sexuality, and class. A significant finding from their study was how actors defending and attempting to protect Rutgers women’s basketball from misogynoir did so through “subjugated knowledges” (Collins, 2000), specifically by bringing attention to the class status of these Black female athletes. Hence, advocates challenging the underlying discourse of “nappy-headed hoes” (read: low-class, unruly, hypersexual/sexual deviant Black women) sought to position the Rutgers players as “innocent victims” and “young ladies of class” to purport a counter narrative (read: subjugated knowledges) that resisted Imus’s misogynoir (Cooky et al., 2010). Consequently, commentary bringing attention to the class status of Rutgers women’s basketball sought to minimize their saliently marginalized
identities (race and gender), as these Black women athletes are: “Valedictorians,” “a musical prodigy,” and “a budding young lawyer” (Cooky et al., 2010). While the scholarship of Cooky et al. (2010) and Schultz (2005) centered the intersections of identity for Black women athletes, the media framed these controversies through a lens of race, highlighting how the media tends to focus on a singular axis of Black women athletes’ realities.

Razack and Joseph (2021) analyzed how U.S. tennis burgeoning superstar Naomi Osaka encounters misogynoir (Bailey, 2021) in her experiences with sponsors, and in how media misrepresents and understands her racial, national, and diaspora affiliations. The authors discuss how she challenges misogynoir by reaffirming her cultural, racial, and ethnic background in her engagement with media as they usually undermine her Black and Haitian identities. The media’s attempt to limit her connection to Blackness is demonstrated in the questions the media posed to Osaka during the 2018 U.S. Open regarding Serena Williams’ behavior. The media asked Osaka pointed questions that would position Williams as an unruly, out of control, and disrespectful athlete—hegemonic portrayals of Black women athletes (Carter-Francique & Richardson, 2016; Cooky et al., 2010; Schultz, 2005). Razack and Joseph (2021) bring attention to how the media’s questioning sought to use Osaka’s cultural Asian background to present her as a feminine, respectful, and modest athlete, and their attempt to do so sought to erase her Blackness. Their analysis highlights how Osaka had to resist such misogynoir by reaffirming her Blackness to the media and reminding them of her Black and Haitian cultural background. Consequently, the media engages in misogynoir through their commentary of Black women athletes (Cooky et al., 2010; Schultz, 2005) but also in their tactics to erase female athletes’ cultural and racial background, as in the case of Naomi Osaka (Razack & Joseph, 2021).

This inability of the media to center the intersections of Black women athletes’ multiple identities fails to explore the complexity of their journey to and through sport. For example, WNBA stars Nneka Ogwumike and Chinene Ogwumike were cyclically marginalized by the media during their tenure at Stanford University. The media continuously failed to make sense of the Ogwumike sisters on the axis of race, gender, class, and nationality by reframing from considering how their cultural Nigerian background intersected with their Black racial identity as Americans and as female athletes who academically excelled (Zenquis & Mwaniki, 2019). Rather than unpacking the intersections of the Ogwumike sisters, the media manipulated and reduced their identity to “foreign female Blackness to maintain White supremacy” (p. 23). One tactic by the media that maintained White supremacy was the reliance of the Model Minority myth to explain why the Ogwumike sisters were successful academically and athletically. While the exceptionalism of Ogwumike sisters was celebrated as a Nigerian family “making the most out of coming to the U.S.,” these Model Minority tropes seek to invalidate the systemic experiences of Black Americans, who are too often interrogated for not attaining “success” like other immigrant groups, specifically those from Asian and African countries. Attempts by the media to dissociate the Ogwumike sisters as Black Americans and selectively accentuate their Nigerian cultural roots as the explanation for their zest for academic and athletic success, is an example of the Model Minority myth being used to promote anti-Blackness.

The aforementioned scholarship has discussed how Black womanhood for Black female athletes has been ignored (Carter-Francique & Richardson, 2016; Zenquis & Mwaniki, 2019) and oversimplified by the media outlets (Cooky et al., 2010; Razack & Joseph, 2021). Our aim is to build upon and extend the previous literature by not unpacking the lack of attentiveness to intersectionality in the experiences of a Black lesbian athlete (BG), but rather to examine in what ways commentary pertaining to BG’s humanity demonstrates how intersectionality can be weaponized (read: manipulated, incorrectly interpreted, and applied) to maintain varying forms of marginalization.

Social Media, Sport, and Politics

The alt-right has been labeled as a rebranding of White supremacy and White nationalism, which has allowed racism (Frederick et al., 2022; Oshiro et al., 2021), misogyny (Darvin et al., 2021; Schmidt et al., 2019), misogynoir (Harrison et al., 2020), and other marginalizing ideologies to appeal to new generations of bigots, especially on social media platforms (Marwick & Lewis, 2017). Falcous et al. (2019) contend that the alt-right (and Donald Trump) promotes ideologies such as sporting exceptionalism, U.S. superiority and militarism, and White victimhood. Andrews (2019) argues that the ideologies espoused by Trump (and those aligned with his views and rhetoric) represent a “continuation of the rightward shift in US politics” (p. 104). This movement has flourished in the digital sphere, especially on social media platforms such as Facebook and Twitter (see Frederick et al., 2021, 2023; Harrison et al., 2020; Schmidt et al., 2019), a vehicle that Trump (and others) frequently used(d) to scapegoat and stereotype historically marginalized groups (Kusz, 2018).

Kusz (2017) argues that heightened sentiments of militaristic nationalism and White supremacy have allowed for Donald Trump’s polarizing discourse to flourish. Understandably, sport scholars have been interested in examining social media commentary in the Trump era. In their analysis of all of Trump’s sport-related Tweets, Frederick et al. (2021) found that Trump often evoked sentiments of nationalism in his tweets with the theme of sport as American identity. Many of the tweets within this theme related to Trump’s feud with the National Football League and its players for kneeling during the National Anthem to protest police brutality. The authors argued that Trump’s rhetoric placed sport within a narrow set of American values, thereby framing athletes engaging in social justice as being (un)American. Schmidt et al. (2019) were interested in determining how Facebook users discussed the activism efforts of Colin Kaepernick and Megan Rapinoe, both of whom knelt during the National Anthem in response to police brutality and in solidarity with the BLM movement. Comments pertaining to both Kaepernick and Rapinoe discussed their actions within the framework of American values and nationalism. However, users debated the nature of racism in the United States when discussing Kaepernick (i.e., racism does vs. does not exist). This rhetoric also questioned Kaepernick’s masculinity and called for him to be shunned from the U.S. Commentary related to Rapinoe discussed an athlete’s role in political matters, how an athlete should represent their country, and the issue of freedom of speech. Some users were quick to point out that Rapinoe should be grateful to be an American, as she is a citizen of a country that allows her to be herself (i.e., a lesbian).

Issues and debates related to race and gender remain salient within social media commentary and discourses. For example, Harrison et al. (2020) examined the reactions to Jemele Hill’s tweet calling then President Trump a “White supremacist.” The authors found that, like previous works, social media commentary involving discussions of race and gender “often devolve into stereotypical tropes and uncivil discourse and ultimately fail to address the central point of discussion” (p. 144). They further argued that Hill’s race and gender were focal points of social media conversation(s)
at the expense of other important topics. Oshiro et al. (2021) examined cyber racism directed at Black male athletes in an online brand community known as Texags.com. Specifically, they analyzed how users discussed activism among Black professional football players in the National Football League. They were particularly interested in content posted following the inauguration of then President Trump. Their findings revealed three themes including good/true versus bad dichotomy, dumb/misguided sheep, and thug. The authors concluded that “… users dehumanized each player while constructing a deeply racialized narrative surrounding the current wave of athlete activism” (p. 15). Finally, Frederick et al. (2022) examined Twitter commentary pertaining to the feud between Donald Trump and Megan Rapinoe after Rapinoe said she would not go to the fucking White House and Trump responded with a series of nationalistic tweets with racially charged undertones. Unlike previous studies, this analysis found that most users rejected Trump’s racist rhetoric and called on him to focus on leading the country rather than engaging in debates with professional athletes. However, commentary on Rapinoe was a bit more divided, with some users showing support for Rapinoe while others echoed the nationalistic sentiments that Trump employed. The current manuscript builds upon these previous works, as examining BG’s return to the United States lead to stark division along sociopolitical lines, in a manner that resembles, but also differs from Jemele Hill (Harrison et al., 2020), Megan Rapinoe (Frederick et al., 2022), and Colin Kaepernick (Schmidt et al., 2019).

Theoretical Framework

Intersectionality

Intersectionality is a framework and theory for centering how social identity is simultaneously entangled in multiple systems of marginalization (Collins & Bilge, 2020; Nash, 2018). Intersectionality was coined and applied by Crenshaw (2018) to explain how Black women during the late 60s and 70s, in the eyes of the law and society, were not considered fully woman or fully Black. She demonstrated this by analyzing sex- and race-based discrimination claims filed by Black women employees. Her analysis found Black women’s’ sex discrimination claims were dismissed because they are Black, and their race discrimination claims were dismissed because they are women. Thus, intersectionality brings attention to the simultaneity of Black women navigating and experiencing their racial and gender identity in an intersected and simultaneous manner (Crenshaw, 2018), as Black women rarely (if ever) experience the singular aspect of their identity. Consequently, intersectionality prompts individuals to consider how identities are not singularly informed by one system of marginalization or privilege. It brings attention to how lived experiences are intersected within varying systems, which results in a lived experience that is not solely informed by racism, but classism, sexism, nationalism, and other aspects of identity.

Reading Sport Critically Through Intersectionality

BG is simultaneously a Black lesbian woman; thus, our application of intersectionality considers the relationship between her gender, race, sexual orientation, and national identities through the interpretation of Twitter users who oppose her return to the United States. By solely focusing upon BG and her return to the United States, we intend to “… connect seemingly discrete incidents and events that are generated within the world of sport to the larger social world” (McDonald & Birrell, 1999, p. 283). McDonald and Birrell (1999) discuss the importance of analyzing particular sport incidents and sport celebrities as cultural sites that elucidate power relations in a particular cultural context and refer to this sensibility as reading sport critically. Scholars who read sport critically are cultural critics who analyze how the meaning of a sport incident or celebrity shapes cultural knowledge and is linked to matters of domination and subordination in society. As a cultural critic, scholars are attentive to how the meaning of a sports celebrity escapes them. Meaning, there is a transcending of an athlete in material form to hold more of a sociocultural significance (McDonald & Birrell, 1999). For example, Michael Jordan is more than a basketball player (material), as he is a sociocultural depiction of American capitalism and a site for making sense of racial politics and ideologies (see Andrews, 1996). In the same breadth, as cultural critics we will unpack what BG’s return to the United States was “… made to mean, and by whom” and how this meaning-making is relevant to broader sociopolitical dynamics and sociocultural matters (McDonald & Birrell, 1999, p. 293). Therefore, the following research question guided this work:

RQ: In what ways do oppositional tweets pertaining to BG’s return to the United States weaponize intersectionality epistemologies?

Methodology

Bottom-Up Framing

The traditional news media have long operated as a one-way broadcast medium that selects how to frame the news. The process of framing involves selecting various aspects of reality, and making them more salient through the selection, emphasis, and exclusion of information (Entman, 1993). The resulting news frames produced by media outlets help establish meaning regarding key issues within society (Zaharopoulos, 2007). With the advent of social media, news consumers went from passive consumption to active consumption as social media provided a platform for all to express their views on societal topics. This led to Nisbet (2010) arguing for a shift from the transmission model of traditional news framing to a more interactive, social constructivist model that focuses on a “bottom up” model of framing. This shift to a bottom up, or emergent framing conceptualization is important, as the focus of framing studies shifts from focusing only on traditional media and hierarchical gatekeepers, to considering the reactions and content produced by ordinary, everyday individuals who ultimately become “active contributors, creators, commentators, sorters, and archivers of digital news content” (Nisbet, 2010, p. 75). In the context of sport, bottom-up framing has been used to investigate digital media users’ responses to athlete activism (e.g., Frederick et al., 2021, 2023; Schmidt et al., 2019), responses to athlete’s transgressions (Allison et al., 2020), and reactions to women athletes (e.g., Darwin et al., 2021; Pegoraro et al., 2018). It is important to note that in this emergent framing approach, the discussion of topics is more fluid in nature, with neither the media (i.e., top-down) or individual users (bottom-up) being all powerful in the construction of a narrative. Therefore, as outlined in this section, the current study drew upon the framework of intersectionality within the context of bottom-up framing to investigate the reactions of Twitter users who opposed the release of BG from a Russian prison and her return to the United States.

Data Collection and Data Analysis

All data were collected using the data extraction software Meltwater, a dedicated online social media analysis platform that supports
Boolean searches of social media, predominately Twitter. The search terms “Brittney Griner,” “BG,” “WeAreBG,” and “Griner” were first used to search for tweets. When the hashtag “AmericaHating” started to trend and was linked directly to a tweet discussing BG’s release (by Donald Trump Jr.), this search term was added to the data collection. Additionally, to ensure that the organic discussion around BG’s release was captured, retweets were omitted from the data set. The data were collected for the first 36 hr from the news of her release breaking on December 8, 2022. Once data were downloaded, cleaned (e.g., removed content not in English and emoji only tweets) the following data sets were included in the study: BG (n = 107,280); Griner (n = 32,030), and AmericaHating (n = 8,521). To further isolate commentary pertaining to the research question, Leximancer keyword searches were employed. Leximancer is a qualitative software that conducts thematic and semantic analysis on written words as well as visual text (Bals et al., 2012). Specifically, keywords related to the visibly salient intersectional identities of BG were entered into the existing data set via the Leximancer keyword search function. These keywords included, among others, “gay,” “Black,” “lesbian,” “color,” “woman,” “man,” “queer,” “White,” and so forth, resulting in a final data set of N = 14,284 (BG, n = 8,322, 7.76% of its data set; Griner, n = 4,088, 12.76% of its data set; and America Hating, n = 1,874, 21.99% of its data set). The above key terms were relevant to the systems of oppression centered in the research question.

Once commentary pertaining to the intersections of BG was isolated within the data set, we conducted an inductive thematic analysis with a critical and interpretive lens. Our criticality centered the sociopolitical context of BG’s release, like athlete activism, the “anti-woke movement,” right-wing politics, LGBTQ hate and legislation, and anti-Blackness. Consequently, given who she is and the sociopolitical context of the United States when BG was released, we did not suspend these realities for several reasons: (a) Doing so would not align with our epistemological lens and theoretical framework, and (b) Twitter users’ commentary did not suspend how BG’s release was relevant to the sociopolitical context of the United States.

An inductive analysis is utilized to reveal emergent themes within a data set. No a priori categories are used during this process. Three researchers familiar with this line of inquiry split the data set evenly for analysis, meaning the BG, America Hating, and Griner data sets were each analyzed by one of the three researchers. The first phase of the coding process involved placing tweets within categories in terms of the intersectional identities being discussed (Blackness and queerness, Blackness and womanhood, and nationality and race). In doing so, our first phase of coding focused upon the essence of a tweet and asking ourselves “What is this tweet really getting at?” (Gee, 2014). Three members of the research team read thousands of individual tweets and exemplar tweets were categorized based on “what they were really getting at,” in an effort to group like-minded tweets together. It is important to note that not every tweet was added to our coding table, as the data set consisted of thousands of tweets, many of which employed similar rhetoric and tropes. If tweets were overly redundant, they were omitted from our final coding document. Once saturation by categorizing a range of intersectional commentary based upon similar and overlapping sentiments had been achieved, we interpreted how these tweets reinforced or challenged sentiments of race, gender, and sexual orientation in the United States. Author 1 and Author 2 engaged in several peer debriefing sessions to develop emergent themes that were true to the data, while also unpacking how these tweets were informed by race, gender, and sexual orientation.

As it pertains to our research question, in what ways do oppositional tweets pertaining to BG’s return to the United States weaponize intersectionality epistemologies, we organized the data to determine three distinct, yet interconnected themes: (a) Woke Politics at the Intersection of Race, Gender, and Queerness; (b) Preferential Treatment at the Expense of Whiteness Informed Patriotism; and (c) Intersectionality as Political Pandering. Each theme highlights how the intersections of BG’s identity are interpreted through a gaze of White supremacy, homophobia, misogynoir, anti-blackness, and transphobia. Each theme demonstrates how BG’s identity is interpreted and tethered to cultural and sociopolitical politics historically and contemporaneously occurring in the United States, specifically the rise of the anti-woke movement and right-wing political leaders and rhetoric (Golden, 2023; Kusz, 2018). While these opposing tweets demonstrate vitriol toward BG, as cultural critics (McDonald & Birrell, 1999), we argue that these tweets really speak to how anti-woke movement and right-wing sympathizers are attentive to the
intersection of identity and power, but they manipulate (read: weaponize) their understanding of interconnected systems of oppression (Crenshaw, 2018) to center whiteness, maleness, and heterosexuality. Thus, intersectionality epistemologies were weaponized to portray having multiple marginalized identities as ideal and having prominent social significance (Theme 1). The oppositional tweets weaponized intersectionality epistemologies to argue Black and queer folx as ruining American cultural norms and structural apparatuses at the expense of White male heterosexual patriots (Theme 2). Lastly, intersectional epistemologies were manipulated (read: weaponized) and justified as a political tactic to gain Black and LGBTQ votes for the Democratic party (Theme 3). Consequently, these oppositional tweets have stripped intersectionality of its original intent, which is to be used as a framework to make sense of how marginalized identities are entangled in social systems to maintain an interconnected oppression (Collins & Bilge, 2020; Crenshaw, 2018; Nash, 2018). Our findings demonstrate that the maintenance of interconnected oppression is not perceived as harming marginalized folx, but interpreted as erasing, limiting, and devaluing the social, political, and cultural capital of White heterosexual men.

### Woke Politics at the Intersection of Race, Gender, and Queerness

Twitter users weaponized and distorted intersectionality epistemologies, a common tactic used by “anti-woke movement sympathizers” (Kanu, 2023), to villainize BG’s identities as her unjustly receiving preferential treatment because she is a Black lesbian American woman. Thus, the intersections of her identity were discussed as being privileged in an attempt to mock and distort who is truly marginalized in the United States—White heterosexual men, like Paul Whelan. For example, one user stated, “Anyone else believe she [is] only released because she’s black, gay, & hates America?” Such a sentiment is arguing that her intersections as a Black lesbian “anti-American” made her proverbial “intersectional stock value” hold more weight to be rescued via a prisoner swap. Another comment explicitly argues her intersecting identities are more valuable than other identity groups by asserting, “I guess her intersectional value … black, gay, and America hater … made her too valuable to lose!” This rhetoric of “intersectional value” weaponizes intersectionality to argue that her intersecting identities actually provide her more societal privilege and power, which aligns with Kusz’s (2017) contention that right-wing arguments often frame White lives as more difficult in comparison to People of Color—a completely distorted perspective of intersectionality. The influence of the sociopolitical context upon users’ interpretation of BG’s release is evident in how they referred to her detainment as “virtue signaling”—“Bunch of virtue signaling pussies cause she’s a carpet munching black person that’s all you care about.” These comments seek to critique agendas of wokeness (read: centering identity), but their racist, sexist, and homophobic rhetoric demonstrates that anti-woke movement sympathizers recognize and can pinpoint how identities intersect to create disparate lived realities. In the below tweet, the attentiveness to intersecting identities is displayed like a “checkbox” and intends to signal being lesbian, Black, and a woman as prized identity markers, while being straight, White, and male are the truly marginalized social identities:

![Checkmarks for various identities](image)

This tweet is really saying (Gee, 2014) that Paul Whelan, a White male American former marine, is not marginalized enough and his proverbial intersectional stock will only increase if he alters his gender identity. While these users are intending to weaponize intersectionality and “woke politics,” their sentiments reinforce that anti-woke movement and right-wing sympathizers are not as color-blind and ignorant to the spectrum of identity as they presume (Golden, 2023). Furthermore, these individuals often promulgate rhetoric meant to reflect White victimhood (i.e., whiteness suffers at the hands of intersectionality and political correctness), a hallmark of the alt-right movement (see Falcous et al., 2019). These distorted perceptions of “woke politics” mocked, ridiculed, and despised BG because an American Black lesbian woman was a priority for the United States government and “Maybe if he (Whelan) was a black transgender [the government] would have tried harder.” As previously discussed, BG’s release coincided with anti-woke movement sympathizers proposing and passing legislation aimed at further oppressing queer and trans individuals. The sociopolitical context (a milieu of whiteness, transphobia, racism, etc.) of her release led to BG’s humanity being stripped, as she was referred to as “it,” “he,” a “black male,” and someone “pretending to be a female”:

A mental midget at 6’9” tall, an anti-American narcissist that’s disgusted by the National Anthem of the free country it was born in, who makes millions of $ playing a ball game, but who is oppressed due to the FACT that it is genetically a black MALE pretending to be a female.

Although BG is not a trans person, her gender presentation, height, and Blackness made her a cultural and sociopolitical target for sustaining and fueling transphobia in the United States, as countless tweets misgendered her as a man and articulated that she was only released because of her “Black privilege.” In contrast to Whelan who was not released “Because he’s not a black, America hating LBGTXYZ celeb.”

Interestingly, rarely was BG’s release discussed through a singular aspect of her identity—a foundational attribute of intersectionality (Collins & Bilge, 2020). More often than not, she was discussed as being Black and lesbian, a Black lesbian woman, or a Black lesbian American woman. These tweets were attentive to nationality, sexuality, gender, and race, but argued that these marginalizing identities increased BG’s social and political capital—a distorted understanding of intersectionality: “Guess if you’re a black, America hating lesbian, you get preferential treatment.” Many users questioned the U.S. government in a manner that was really asking (Gee, 2014), “How could they use our resources for someone so unworthy?”:

You traded a terrorist arms dealer for an entitled, America-hating basketball player who knowingly broke the law b/c she was stupid enough to think a black, gay, woman would work in a communist nation like it does here.

These tweets mocking the social implications of having multiple marginalized identities, rarely villainized BG for one aspect of her identity, as the simultaneity of what she represents—the entitled Black athlete, the problems of liberal ideology, and so forth—resulted in her intersectional identities being interpreted as the problem with American society. Thus, “woke ideology” and intersectionality was problematized to diminish and manipulate who is truly marginalized in the United States—White heterosexual men.
Preferential Treatment at the Expense of Whiteness Informed Patriotism

BG’s release highlighted how her intersectional identities were interpreted as receiving “preferential treatment” at the demise of whiteness, masculinity, and patriotism. Thus, Twitter commentary opposing BG’s release reinforced whiteness and White supremacist ideologies about who is patriotic, how one’s patriotism should be displayed, and the relationship between whiteness and patriotism. Tweets capturing this theme, explicitly and implicitly, compared BG’s release with Paul Whelan, who was upheld as the embodiment of American nationalism and patriotism for the simple fact that he is a White American male and former Marine—despite his discharge from the military for bad conduct in 2008, after he was convicted of charges related to larceny (Villegas & Ables, 2022). Essentially, the weaponizing of BG’s identities are rooted in the politics of marginalized people being perceived as a threat to cultural and structural apparatuses that should value maleness, whiteness, and patriotism (Dickerson & Hodler, 2021). These oppositional tweets use BG as a muse to dissect and make sense of whiteness and militarism, as personified in Paul Whelan, to hold less social power. Therefore, the attentiveness to BG’s identities is relevant to these users because Black, women, and queer folk have become too significant to the polity and this signiﬁcance will weaken the racial, gender, and sexual orientation social hierarchy.

Users proclaimed: “One America hating black gay woman brought back, one white heterosexual America loving man left there,” “You care more about a black lesbian America hating criminal baller than you do a straight white American Marine!!!,” and “Meanwhile the Straight white MARINE husband and father is still there.” In effect, these tweets argued in favor of one patriotic ideal. This ideal was deﬁned by whiteness, heterosexuality, masculinity, and in alignment with the U.S. military (Dickerson & Hodler, 2021). Furthermore, it is important to note that Whelan was convicted of espionage in 2020 and sentenced to 16 years in a Russian prison. The nuances as to why he was not released are largely ignored in Twitter commentary opposing BG’s release because the details of their disparate circumstances are irrelevant and incongruent with users’ manipulation of identity politics and weaponization of intersectionality. Meaning, their weaponization of intersectionality epistemologies becomes even more fallacious, if they consider the difference in BG’s and Whelan’s convictions—espionage versus drug possession. For example, the criminality of BG is discussed (“drug user,” “criminal”) but Whelan’s is entirely ignored, because ignoring his criminality strengthens these user’s manipulation of intersectionality.

Gittleston and Crawford (2023) quote Roger Carstens, special presidential envoy for hostage affairs, who stated “The Russians have tried to fashion him into being a spy, which he is not . . . . And so they hold the key to the jail cell. The other side always does” (para. 17). This quote showcases the enhanced value and leverage placed by the Russians on Whelan as a political bargaining chip, a detail rarely (if ever) addressed in the oppositional commentary pertaining to BG’s release.

Additionally, these tweets questioned how America could negotiate with Russia on behalf of BG, given she “hates America” as an activist athlete: “A woke black, BLM activist that hates America vs. a white, America-loving soldier & hero,” “They leave an America Loving Citizen Locked-up and left behind and bring home the America hating citizen who cares less about the American flag and personal freedoms,” and “Let’s see if she continues to kneel for the anthem.” In concert with espousing a patriotic ideal rooted in racism, sexism, and misogyny, these tweets often stated that one could not be a true patriot if they protested against U.S. social and political systems. Furthermore, any advocacy for the marginalized was viewed as counter to the patriotic ideal. Sociologically, these tweets are attempting to make sense of Black athlete protests and their participation in the BLM movement, BG’s intersecting identities, and why Paul Whelan was not released by Russia. However, users’ interpretation of why BG was released and not Whelan contained rhetoric espousing patriotism informed by whiteness to reinforce systems that privy White heterosexual men.

Intersectionality as Political Pandering

Twitter commentary pertaining to BG’s release argued that she was not a political prisoner of Putin, but rather a political pawn for the Democratic party and President Biden. Thousands of oppositional tweets portrayed BG as only returning to the United States because Joe Biden was politically pandering to the Black community and promoting a leftist-liberal agenda because of her “intersectional value.” Given the Democratic party relationship and history with the Black community and voters (King & Epstein, 2023), such a perspective is not inherently false. Let us not forget President Biden telling Black voters “… if you have a problem figuring out whether you’re for me or Trump, then you ain’t black” (Bradner et al., 2020, para. 6). The longstanding unaddressed and broken promises of the Democratic party have led to Black voters explicitly asking for Democratic leaders to be “a little bit more sincere [rather than] pandering to [Black people] when it’s time to vote” (King & Epstein, 2023, para. 6). Nonetheless, these tweets weaponized intersectionality to argue that appearing to value intersectional identities was a tactic to score political capital. Therefore, the intersection of BG’s identity was argued as necessary intersectional bait for the Democratic party to secure political votes or engage in pandering to the Black community. Thus, BG’s release was perceived as the result of political pandering and identity politics to sustain the Black vote, and these arguments were explicitly and implicitly supported by anti-Blackness rhetoric and other forms of marginalization.

As one user prescribes, BG is the “… poster child for Democrat America” because “[s]he is black, female, queer, America hating, semi-celebrity ….” These sentiments and accusations of President Biden and the Democrats engaging in political pandering to appease Black voters, sought to question who America was “equal” for. Like the previous two themes, Twitter commentary continued to reinforce that BG’s Blackness, sexual orientation, and gender identity, enabled her to be the most ideal candidate for a liberal agenda. Thus, America cares too much (or is too equal) for individuals like BG, in an attempt to center how men, White
people, and heterosexuals are being replaced in the social hierarchy. President Biden supporting BG’s release led to Twitter commentary accusing him and the Democratic party of upholding “systemic racism” against White people, referring to Biden as a “human piece of garbage” and a “bitch” for “leaving that Marine over there while bringing back an America hating dyke” for the sake of Black and liberal votes. While tweets explicitly discuss their frustration with President Biden, these tweets simultaneously were attentive to the intersections of BG’s identity—“an America[n] (nationality) hating dyke (a slur for lesbian).” While users tweeted their disapproval of Biden’s support for BG, within their tweets were anti-Black, homophobic, transphobic, and sexist rhetoric aimed at BG. For example, users cloaked their frustration with Biden by using transphobic rhetoric toward BG, with tweets like, “Joe Biden just exchanged an America hating terrorist for an America hating man pretending to be a woman.” Countless tweets used anti-Blackness rhetoric to discuss their frustration with Biden, “In return, @JoeBiden got an America hating nigga who was stupid enough to go to Russia with cannabis in her baggage.” Interestingly, in the above tweet, BG is not portrayed as solely a “nigga” but an “American hating nigga,” which highlights how she was more often than not perceived through the intersection of her varying identities. Specifically, in the context of the tweet, she is an “America hating nigga” because of her activist efforts, so the user interprets her not solely as a Black person, but a Black activist—to which capturing the attentiveness to identity on multiple axes. Consequently, users became more concerned about who President Biden centered and how her identities threatened the status quo of who is worthy of perceived American privileges. Users failed to see Biden’s negotiation with Russia as a successful operation in global diplomacy because they fixated on the President only doing so because “[He is] pandering color and LGBTQ.” Many tweets explicitly discussed how BG and her salient identities would ensure Biden remained a voting option for Black and LGBTQ people and allies:

If it was literally anyone else they’d be stuck in prison for taking drugs into a country where it’s known you’ll get fucked for having drugs mf wanted to bring home an known black person just for votes right before elections.

Interestingly, BG was perceived as rightfully imprisoned, even though the federal government openly questioned her detainment. In the above tweet, it is apparent that the complexity of the prisoner swap was devalued for the sake of “votes right before elections.” The extreme connection between BG’s release and votes went as far as arguing that President Biden would have “traded Hitler” to gain Black votes. These sentiments continued by arguing President Biden as weak and “dumb”:

[BG] didn’t deserve the treatment she got but it’s her own fault for breaking the laws of a foreign country—Bad political response—releasing an arms dealer is dumb and seems like Biden just trying to suck up to Black voters.

These arguments of political pandering to Black voters are rhetoric that perceives Black individuals as easily influenced and incapable of making decisions regarding their plight—an argument rooted in anti-Blackness, and specifically Black criminality.

**Sociological Insights**

The purpose of this paper was to demonstrate how BG became a muse for making sense of the current sociopolitical context, particularly regarding matters of race, gender, sexual orientation, and right-wing politics. As *cultural critics* (McDonald & Birrell, 1999), we examined how BG’s return home was more than a prisoner exchange with Russia, as her return held cultural significance that spoke to commentary purported and supported by “anti-woke movement” and right-wing sympathizers. These individuals used sport as a site to advance their oppressive ideologies, while also highlighting how intersectionality is understood amongst this population but weaponized to argue White people, heterosexuals, and men as the truly disadvantaged social identities in the polity. We argue that these oppositional tweets did not truly care about BG’s return to the United States. However, they used her return as a cultural moment to manipulatively argue their concerns about marginalized people becoming “too equal,” gaining “too many rights,” and receiving “too many social benefits” (Walsh, 2018). Their weaponization of intersectionality illuminates how these users are attentive to the intersection of identity, but their attentiveness does not lead to an understanding of the implications of intersecting systems of oppression (Collins & Bilge, 2020; Crenshaw, 2018). These oppositional users’ and their tweets have co-opted intersectionality to discuss everything wrong with our liberal society—because how dare women, Black, LGBTQIA+ folx be perceived as worthy and hold enough social value to be negotiated for on behalf of the U.S. government. This manipulation of intersectionality is no different from the current weaponization of critical race theory (Golden, 2023). These individuals are manipulating critical race and feminist frameworks to position dominant identities as targeted, and their intent is to limit how these frameworks have served as a means to heighten social consciousness regarding sociopolitical inequity. Thus, too much attention and care for marginalized Americans, like BG, a Black lesbian woman, was interpreted as stripping the sociopolitical influence of White heterosexual men. Such a perspective is incongruence with White supremacists “Great Replacement Theory” (Anti-Defamation League, n.d.). Consequently, BG’s identities as a Black American lesbian woman, made her the ideal symbol for right wing. White supremacist, and anti-LGBTQ ideologists to figuratively point to her as “everything wrong with America.” Previous studies examining Black women athletes’ experiences in the media have emphasized the media’s inability to present, represent, and understand that Black women athletes are entangled in varying systems of marginalization, but especially systems of racism and sexism (Carter-Francique & Richardson, 2016; Razack & Joseph, 2021). However, in our work, social media commentary demonstrates that users who held extreme vitriol for BG are attentive to the intersections of identity, but only to uphold and maintain their social status. Like other Black women athletes, BG’s release reinforced the realities of misogynoir (Carter-Francique & Richardson, 2016; Cooky et al., 2010; Razack & Joseph, 2021; Schultz, 2005), as there was an intentional effort to refrain from perceiving her as a woman, and these obvious attempts to misgender her were supported by anti-Blackness rhetoric (Bailey, 2021). Mirroring the experiences of the 2007 Rutgers women’s basketball team (see Cooky et al., 2010), tweets discussing BG’s release served as a window into making sense of U.S. cultural, social, and political dynamics, but also perceptions of Black female athletes. This project highlights how the right-wing movement perceives varying sport types and athletes as viable outlets for expressing their hate. However, while varying sport types and athletes are susceptible to right wing and White supremacist rhetoric (Dickerson & Hodler, 2021; Frederick et al., 2021), it is important to not interpret this rhetoric as the same, but in a different
context. Hence, in order to make sense of how right-wing politics uniquely impacts the experiences of Black women athletes, we must return to the intent and actuality of what intersectionality is (Crenshaw, 2018; Nash, 2018). By doing so, we argue that Black lesbian women athletes, like BG, are more susceptible to violence because of the systems of oppression their identity is entangled in. For example, Megan Rapinoe, a White lesbian women athlete, did receive oppositional backlash when she supported Colin Kaepernick protesting the national anthem (Schmidt et al., 2019). However, social media content opposing her actions did not dehumanize her social identities as a White lesbian woman, but simply analyzed her actions to discuss the role of athlete activism (Schmidt et al., 2019). Hence, this is a stark contrast from the racist commentary Kaepernick experienced for protesting the national anthem (Dickerson & Hodler, 2021; Frederick et al., 2021) and the intersecting misogynoir and homophobia that BG experienced for simply safely returning home from Russia. Additionally, there were no reports of Rapinoe being violently harassed in public for her actions, unlike BG who was “... confronted by [a] man who was yelling at her about ‘the Merchant of Death’ while traveling to an athletic contest” (Phillip et al., 2023, para. 3). Thus, a factual application of intersectionality means the sport community should be conscious of the reality that right-wing politics invading sporting spaces will not impact all athletes in the same way.

Lastly, such distorted perceptions of cultural and social dynamics pertaining to identity have material consequences upon State and Federal legislation, education, and lived experiences. These perceptions have and will continue to mobilize and sustain political parties and movements that leverage their perceived understanding of race and gender consciousness as counter to the White American ideals (i.e., the rise and sustained support of Make America Great Again). More importantly, since Twitter was purchased by Elon Musk, research conducted by the Center for Countering Digital Hate found that hate speech increased 119% and that Twitter “fails to act on 99% of hate posted by Twitter Blue subscribers, suggesting that the platform is allowing these users to break its rules with impunity and is even algorithmically boosting their toxic tweets” (Centre for Countering Digital Hate, 2023, para. 1). Thus, as scholars, we cannot downplay the implications of intersectionality epistemologies (Collins & Bilge, 2020; Kendall, 2021; Nash, 2018) being weaponized, because their weaponization has become yet another tool for White supremacists, right-wing extremists, and LGTBQIA+ hating people to paint themselves as victims whose identities are under attack by the mere recognition (and acceptance of) historically marginalized people/groups. BG’s release captured what many critical scholars and BIPOC people know to be true—White supremacy will continuously evolve to contend with contemporary demands and sociopolitical issues. These sustained antics means marginalized communities are no longer arguing for our humanity to be seen, but we have entered a social era of our humanity and the marginalization we experience to be seen and argued as desirable, privileged, and ideal. This contemporary evolution uses illegitimate understandings of “wokeness” as a means to reposition White people, heterosexuals, and men as victims of woke culture. Twitter commentary pertaining to BG’s release must be seen as a warning to communities of marginalized people/groups, as these perceptions are attempting to further oppress communities by arguing their oppression does not exist.

Future Work

While our study was attentive to how intersectionality epistemologies reinforced marginalizing systems of oppression, we encourage future work to consider how intersectionality epistemologies could be evoked to defend Black women athletes experiencing misogynoir through leftist and liberal arguments. Our data populated Twitter commentary defending BG’s release through arguments that drew upon intersectionality epistemologies and acknowledged individuals with multiple intersecting identities needing to be protected. These arguments were attentive to how class oppression in women’s sport forced BG and other WNBA basketball athletes to work in countries that place them in even more dangerous social conditions. Future work should critically consider how this commentary challenges the unique vitriol Black women experience, particularly Black lesbian women.

Note

1. The research team used the words “gay” and “man” because they were prominently used by Twitter users and assisted in how we analyzed tweets related to her release at the intersection of race, gender, sexuality, and nationality.

References


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