Carrying memory into the future: Women's sports, the digital realm, and the biopolitics of worthiness

Abstract

To be seen is to be known. To be heard is to be understood. To be known is to be loved. Such statements present a seemingly simple, logical progression, pipeline, or pathway, and yet: notions of visibility, audibility, and comprehension are not as straightforward as they may initially appear. What happens beneath the surface, in the in-between? How does power shape our perceptions of who is *worthy* of being seen, heard, and known in the first place? Worthy of being *remembered*? To problematize visibility, audibility, and comprehension within contextual frames of history, memory, and worthiness is to expose a near-invisible nexus of power shaping and directing our lives across time and space. This research aims to apply a multidimensional, *both/and* framework to the realms of sport, media, and gender that simultaneously acknowledges systemic, institutional barriers facing Western women's sports and media coverage while centering the collective agency, resistance, and joy of the women's sports community, both online and offline.

Introduction

Saturday, August 12th, 2023. The thrilling quarterfinal clash between the Women's World Cup co-hosts Australia and European giants France draws a sellout crowd to Suncorp Stadium in Brisbane, Australia. A hard-fought battle through to the end of extra time, the teams aim to outlast one another in what would become the *longest penalty shootout in World Cup history*, women's or men's (Fox Sports, 2023). Pressure mounting, shot for shot, the squads are evenly matched. However, even the great must fall: a devastating miss from France leaves the Matildas' fate in the hands of their rising star striker, Cortnee Vine. Unfazed by the electrifying

atmosphere, she steps up to the spot as 49,461 fans look on in awe (Mayne, 2023). Australia holds its breath. The world trembles with anticipation. Inhale. Exhale. Laser-focus. She advances; lightning-quick and laced with power, her clinical strike propels Australia into both their first-*ever* World Cup semifinals and the history books as the stadium erupts in raucous celebration.

Figure 1. William West, 2023 / AFP/File; Figure 2. Photo by AAP/Jono Searle Photo by Darren England.

To understand this record-breaking tournament and the crucial role of social media in generating the sensational present of women's soccer, we must first understand the past: simply put, "how a world is shaped is memory" (Ahmed, 2017, p. 263). Through the naturalized association of sport and masculinity that emerged in the early nineteenth century, the prevailing societal organization of Western colonial, capitalist, white supremacist cisheteropatriarchy seeks to obscure the history, memory, and truth of women's soccer: if you do not know where you came from, those who came before you, how can you know yourself? How can you know the full extent of your power? Shifting away from this patriarchal paradigm to what Heide Goettner-Abendroth calls "a theory of matriarchy" allows for the critical exploration of the patriarchy's functions and its institutions of power *without being trapped in its confines*: the transcendent nature of the matriarchal paradigm offers a generative space in which we can illuminate the often censored or

invisibilized knowledge and histories of those who came before us, thereby *carrying memory into the future* (2023, pp. 2, 13).

To preface, *women* in this research "refer[s] to all those who travel under the sign women": to speak plainly, trans women are women (Ahmed, 2017, p. 14). The 'sign women' further includes all gender-diverse people who may not identify as women themselves, but find safety and community within experiences of womanhood and women's sports. In essence, "in a world in which *human* is still defined as *man*, we have to fight for women and as women" (Ahmed, 2017, p 15).

In contrast to what the patriarchy would have us believe, women's soccer was a historically thriving enterprise. Building off the 1881 efforts of Scotland's Helen 'Graham' Matthews, Nettie Honeyball and Lady Florence Dixie founded the first "organized women's soccer league" in Britain with the establishment of their team, the British Ladies' Football Club (BLFC) in 1894 (Macfarlane, 2023; Wills, 2019, n.p.). For Honeyball and Dixie, the advent of this organized league aimed to "provide football-playing opportunities for girls and young women," while simultaneously facilitating access to capital (Lee, 2012, p. 88). The BLFC's inaugural match took place on March 25th, 1895 at Alexandra Park in the northern London neighbourhood of Crouch End, drawing more than 10,000 spectators to the event (Macfarlane, 2023; Wills, 2019). Such a crowd is attributed to the pre-match marketing efforts of Honeyball and Dixie, who strategically utilized the sensationalist nature of mass media to generate publicity through "several provocative newspaper articles and interviews" (Lee, 2012, p. 88).
Despite the BLFC's eventual disbanding due to insufficient funding, the popular interest in women's soccer remained. The sport "saw a resurgence" during World War I, as women organized matches to fundraise for the soldiers (Macfarlane, 2023). Primarily featuring Dick,

Kerr Ladies, matches at Goodison Park, Manchester United's Old Trafford, and Bolton's Burnden Park drew impressive crowds of 53,000+, 31,000, and 27,218 respectively (Skillen et al., 2022). Despite these events being "one-off games," they smashed the average attendances "of men's teams United and Bolton[, which] were 27,140 and 22,910 respectively in 1920" (Skillen et al., 2022, p. 52). Furthermore, despite the significant portion of "remarkably mean-spirited and sarcastic" reports, "the size of support for women's games was frequently discussed in contemporary newspapers, ensuring the wider population was aware of the game's growth" (Lee, 2012, p. 90; Skillen et al., 2022, p. 52).

As these one-off women's games in England continually surpassed the men's games in terms of popularity, attendances, and profit, women's soccer posed a *threat* to not only the continued survival and thriving of the men's game, but to patriarchal power. In his work *Society must be defended* (1976), Michel Foucault pinpoints the nineteenth century as a pivotal historical juncture in the evolution of power: sovereign power's individualized 'anatomo-politics' and its "old right—to take life or let live—was [not] replaced, but… came to be complemented by a new right[;] the power to 'make' live and 'let' die" (Foucault, 1976, p. 241). This expresses the expansion from what I conceptualize as *hard power*, forcibly acting on individualized bodies, to *soft* power: a "massifying [power] that is directed… at man-as-species[,] a 'biopolitics' of the human race," which operates through the "power of regularization" (Foucault, 1976, pp. 243, 246-247). In contrast to hard power, soft power weaves through not only our bodies, but our societies, relationships, lives, and everything around us with carefully constructed ease and near-imperceptibility.

Foucault's conceptualization of racism is also relevant here. Involving the "introduc[tion of] a… break between what must live and what must die" within the "biological continuum of

the human race of races," this biopolitical racism reflects notions of nineteenth century evolutionism such as "the hierarchy of species that grow from a common evolutionary tree, the struggle for existence among species, [and] the selection that eliminates the less fit" (Foucault, 1976, pp. 254-256). Foucault's racism expands on a "relationship of war[, that is,] 'in order to live, you must destroy your enemies'" to establish a "'biological-type relationship'" between the lives of one group and the deaths of another group (1976, p. 255, 256). That is to say, framing the death, killing, and manufactured vulnerability of the 'other' as "something that will make life in general… healthier and purer," a natural phenomenon occurring as a result of a biological hierarchy, works to guarantee safety for and reinforce the naturalization of the biological whole's supremacy through circumstances that continue to 'make' it live (Foucault, 1976, p. 255; Walia, 2021).

Foucault's work with biopolitics and its components of regularization and racism exposes a key implication: *worthiness*. Whose lives are deemed *worthy* of living? Whose lives are deemed worthy of being seen, heard, and known? Of being remembered? Of having access to resources necessary to not only survive, exist, or live, but to *thrive*? In short, the prevailing systems of power protect those at the top of the hierarchy of domination, deeming that minority, or biological whole, *worthy*. The massifying and divisive power within the biopolitics of worthiness acts as an overarching theme; such amorphous power is embedded in the fabric of society, subtle in its directing properties to the point of invisibilization.

Ultimately, the monumental success of the Dick, Kerr Ladies' match at Goodison Park in 1920 triggered the wrath of soccer's governing body in England. On December 5th, 1921, the English Football Association (FA) banned women's soccer "from FA affiliated grounds with the reasons outlined being that the game could be harmful to female participants" (Skillen et al.,

2022, p. 53). Standing for 50 years, this ban "prevented FA affiliated clubs from staging women's football on their pitches," thereby eliminating "the possibility of playing and developing the game in prominent venues in major footballing centres" and stripping women's soccer of further visibility in popular culture (Skillen et al., 2022, p. 53). While women's participation in soccer was not expressly forbidden, the ban curtailed the growth of women's football in England, intentionally hindering the development of the sport (Skillen et al., 2022, p. 53).

Across the pond, a similar sequence of events took place in Canada: "immediately following the war, and throughout the 1920s, was a period of tremendous excitement for Canadian sportswomen and the fans who supported them" (Hall, 2003, pp. 31-32). Commonly referred to as the 'golden age of women's sport,' this era saw increased organizing of women's sports teams in basketball, hockey, and softball, by women, for women (Hall, 2003). Comparable to the English FA, the Canadian Dominion Football Association (DFA) stood in staunch opposition to women's participation in soccer. The DFA refused to allow "any clubs affiliated with the DFA to play" in international friendlies against the English Dick, Kerr Ladies' team when they "proposed to tour Canada [and the United States]" after the English FA's ban came into effect in 1921 (Hall, 2003, p. 31).

Within a biopolitical context, the FA's and DFA's bans can be understood as interlocking manifestations of hard and soft power. The rulings forcibly acted upon the women's individual bodies; in England, the ban prevented women from playing soccer in an officially *recognized* way. In a post-structuralist sense, the bans exemplify Sara Ahmed's conceptualization of "walls, brick walls, institutional walls [as] those hardenings of histories into barriers in the present[;] a materialism that shows how history becomes concrete" (2017, pp. 135-136). The hard power of

the bans worked in tandem with ideological justification to sustain the perception of non-belonging of women in the realm of sport. Such *ideologies* are pertinent examples of soft power: "while they represent the world and its institutions, they also distort what is known about social relations, especially power relations: ideologies legitimate power through both representation and deception" (Lynch, 2022, p. 135).

The combination of ideology as soft power and Judith Butler's concept of *framing* further illuminate the violent, intersecting, far-reaching legacies of racist, colonial, capitalist cisheteropatriarchy in shaping perceptions of worthiness. As "operations of power," the resulting frames reflect these divisive societal systems, working to subtly and strategically restrict and mold memory, history, and perceptions of reality into a hollow, linear frame of domination and white supremacy: "the truest memory is rarely the one that survives" (Butler, 2009, p. 1; Arthur Riley, 2022, p. 175). With specificity to sport, ideology as soft power strategically employs media framing to "decide, in a forceful way, what we can [see and] hear" (Butler, 2004, p. 5). Interrogating this combination exposes the concept of *articulation*: Toni Bruce describes articulation as "the process by which different discourses are conjoined, often to the point where they become so taken-for-granted that the joining itself never comes into question" (2016, p. 363). Dominant articulations include that of "sport and masculinity" and *femininity* and *fragility* (Bruce, 2016, p. 363). Such patriarchal frames reinforce and reflect mass media's systemic exclusion of and historically negative portrayals of women athletes (Butler, 2009, p. 1).

To once again preface: it is utterly crucial to note that the mutually reinforcing systems of colonialism, racism, and white supremacy fundamentally inform the institutions of gender, sport, and media, and irrefutably intersect with sexism and capitalism. Within the patriarchal paradigm of domination, worthiness is conditional and inextricable from systems of power such as sexism

and capitalism, as are the institutions of gender, sport, and media. In terms of gender, dominant constructions of worthiness are predicated on the repudiation of all that is associated with femininity. To Ahmed, "an institution typically refers to a persistent structure or mechanism of social order governing the behaviour of a set of individuals within a given community" (2017, pp. 152-153). In her book *The Cultural Politics of Emotion* (2014), Ahmed explains that "metaphors of 'softness' and 'hardness' [are gendered, and can] show us how emotions become attributes of collectives, which get constructed as 'being' through 'feeling'" (2014, p. 2). *Softness* is feminized, and predominantly linked with *passivity*. Within the patriarchal paradigm, *women*, *femininity*, *softness*, *passivity*, and *emotion* are synonymous with *weakness*. The six terms outlined above are diametrically opposed to traditional ideals of *men*, *masculinity*, *hardness*, *agency*, and *apathy*, which are synonymous with *strength*. Ahmed speaks to the association of *femininity* with *fragility*:

> When femininity is registered as fragility, when that fragility is used to explain what happens to her, or what she can or cannot do, a consequence of power is recruited as the cause. She is treated with caution and care because she is fragile; because she is treated with caution and care, she is fragile. (Ahmed, 2017, pp. 169-170).

Both the English FA and Canadian DFA weaponized the articulation of femininity and fragility to prevent women's participation in soccer. Though softer manifestations of power, such ideologies still generate walls. The historical patriarchal privileging of men and their sports as unconditionally worthy not only serves the naturalization of sport as a masculine realm, but also acts as a defense mechanism: "a wall becomes necessary because the wrong bodies could pass through" (Ahmed, 2017, p. 145). Further shaping perceptions of worthiness and belonging, this organizing principle "has historically positioned women of all nations, races and ethnicities,

sexual orientations and levels of able-bodiedness as 'Other' within the realm of mediated sport" (Bruce, 2016, p. 363).

The role of the media in reifying gendered ideology of worthiness and belonging in sport, as well as the governing bodies' paternalistic claim of bans as harm prevention cannot be overstated (Dworkin, 2020). In England, male reporters penned numerous articles declaring that "'it must be clear to everybody that girls are totally unfitted for the rough work of the football-field'" (Lee, 2012, p. 91). In Canada, the men of the DFA provided no concrete rationale "for preventing women from playing soccer, although one suggested 'a woman was not built to stand the bruises gotten in playing football'" (Hall, 2003, p. 31). Media messaging from authority figures such as Dr. Arthur S. Lamb insisted that "'highly undesirable forms of competition are doing a great deal of harm, not only to the girls themselves, but to the promotion of safe and sane participation for our women of tomorrow'" (Hall, 2003, p. 32).

As detailed through the examples above, it is evident that the surge of visibility, audibility, comprehension, and memory connected to women's soccer and its athletes prior to 1921 challenged notions of belonging in the realm of sport, as well as perceptions about *life trajectories* for women. Women's soccer called into question the "neo-Victorian belief[s] that male-female biological differences predispose men to aggressively dominate public life, while females are naturally suited to serve as the nurturant guardians of home and hearth," and threatened the patriarchy's biological whole (Messner, 1992, p. 150). Therefore, these bans and ideologies were necessary "to protect the men's game," 'making' it 'live' and 'letting' women's soccer 'die' (Hall, 2003, p. 31). This demonstrates the biopolitical framework within which we can "understand the state as ultimately *protective* rather than *oppressive*," in terms of maintaining not only the purity of sport and media, but perceptions of purity, superiority, worthiness, and

belonging of white men's lives at the expense of all those beneath them on the supposed biological hierarchy (Kay, 2020, p. 36).

It is clear that as interlocking manifestations of hard and soft power, these historical bans and traditional, repressive, ideologies of which they were born directly contributed to shaping gendered life trajectories. In the wake of governing bodies' calculated prohibition and censorship of women's soccer, and therefore its truth, history, and memory, "subsequent generations were prevented from watching female role models while the entire football industry, from media coverage to kit manufacturing, paid little or no attention to female participation" (Skillen et al., 2022, p. 53). This censorship also deprived generations of women and girls of the experience of community belonging and membership through sports. With no competition, "men's football grew and improved significantly in almost every area, including participation, attendances, income, kit development, and so on" (Skillen et al., 2022, p. 53). The dominant media messaging of femininity, fragility, and women as other in the realm of sport resulted in the continued fortification of soccer as a masculine endeavour; in both England and Canada, soccer "was not encouraged in schools, universities or in the women's sports clubs," further stripping women and girls of not only visibility, but the various opportunities, possibilities, and pathways to officially recognized professional careers in soccer and sports at large (Hall, 2003, p. 32). The censored layers of knowledge in this molding process evokes Susan Bibler Coutin's concept of *dismemberment* with regard to its characteristics of "the separation of persons from history… the embodied nature of structural violence… and the denial [and active prevention] of [community] membership" (Coutin, 2016, p. 4). Ahmed emphasizes that the power found in this dismemberment and dominant ideology "work as…mode[s] of directionality, a way of orientating bodies in particular ways, so they are facing a certain way, heading toward a future

that is given a face" (Ahmed, 2017, p. 43). If "we are directed by what is in front of us [and] what is in front of us depends on how we are directed," how are we to know what we do not know? (Ahmed, 2017, p. 48). How are we to discover anything if we do not know what questions to ask? If we do not know there are questions to ask in the first place? This experience of "'not knowing' is… made possible through a public performance of a void, the knowledge [concerning women's soccer] that cannot be permitted to circulate" (Coutin, 2016, p. 4).

To these points, I argue that sometimes, the *absence* of something can also act as a wall: the persistent, near-inarticulable feeling that there is something more, just hazy beyond comprehension. Ahmed emphasizes that "you can be hit by something before you become conscious of something"; the "intangibility [of walls] can be… described as an institutional achievement" (2017, p. 139). The edge of the frame, the brush against the wall: "we can feel an absence; we can sense what is missing" (Ahmed, 2017, p. 181). In attempting to communicate the existence of these "phantom walls," you make *something* out of what others may perceive as *nothing*: "you come up against what others do not see[,] and… what others are often invested in not seeing" (Ahmed, 2017, pp. 138, 142). Media framing and the articulation of sport and masculinity have historically combined to create such phantom walls. To turn on the television and see, hear, and know only men: "if we are hit by something, again and again, our body might register this impact as an expectation: that the wall will come up" (Ahmed, 2017, p. 139). As a reflection of the biological whole, white, cisgender, heterosexual, middle-to-upper-class, able-bodied, neurotypical men visibly dominate sport and sport media, occupying the majority of positions ranging from athletes, coaches, managers, and owners, to broadcasters, commentators, reporters, and journalists. Sometimes, "walls are how some bodies are not encountered in the first place" (Ahmed, 2017, p. 145).

These patriarchal walls and frames, phantom and otherwise, reinforce and reflect mass media's enduring, systemic exclusion and historically negative portrayals of women athletes (Butler, 2009, p. 1). To Butler, cultural frames are effective in deciding whose lives are considered worthy of recognition, of loss, and of grief: "if someone is lost, and that person is not someone, then what and where is the loss, and how does mourning take place?" (2004, p. 32). In combination with Butler's work, Kath Woodward's "The gendering of defining moments: heroic narratives and pivotal points in footballing memories" (2019) emphasizes the harm of erasure and disdain in terms of their significance to women and their lives. Focusing on visibility and memory, Woodward asserts that "the processes through which women are made (in)visible… matter in the exploration of changing times and gender equality in football" (2019, p. 1109). She argues that "visibility is not just about being there–it is about being seen to be there and how one is seen" (Woodward, 2019, p. 1110). The connection between visibility and memory runs deeper than just a mere absence; instead Woodward emphasizes that "to lose the capacity to remember is in part to lose the self because the embodied self can no longer be situated in time. Memory loss is identity loss and memories make and remake identities" (Woodward, 2019, p. 1111).

Sara Ahmed furthers both the queries of Butler and assertions of Woodward: she asks us "what happens when those who have been designated as ungrievable are grieved, and when their loss is not only felt as a loss, but becomes a symbol of the injustice of loss?" (2014, p. 192). With the world finally reawakening to the power that lies within women's sports, Ahmed's inquiry as to whether "griev[ing] for the [historically] ungrieved… convert[s] an injustice to a justice" is increasingly relevant (2014, p. 192). In terms of the near-invisible, unequal systems of power that shape our lives, experiences, and opportunities, Ahmed aptly declares that:

> If the violence of what happened is recognised, as a violence that shapes the present, then the 'truths' of history are called into question. Recognition of injustice is not simply about others becoming visible (though this can be important). Recognition is also about claiming that an injustice did happen; the claim is a radical one in the face of the forgetting of such injustices. Healing does not cover over, but exposes the wound to others: *the recovery is a form of exposure*. The visibility produced by recognition is actually the visibility of the ordinary and normative or the visibility of what has been concealed under the sign of truth. (Ahmed, 2014, p. 200).

Ahmed asserts that articulating the varying institutional and phantom walls obstructing women's belonging in the realm of sport requires a significant amount of ongoing labour in order to *prove* there is a problem: "we have to show what we know: walls are not just perceptions. But perception does still matter. Some perceptions are walls. What you are perceived as being can be what stops you from being" (Ahmed, 2017, pp. 142-143). This speaks to one of the foundational expressions of the women's sports community: representation matters—if you can *see it*, you can *be it*. For decades, the concerted effort directed at censoring, devaluing, and situating women's sports in precarity has collectively stripped people of the capacity to form memories, identities, life trajectories, and the capacity to mourn. The sport-media industrial complex systemically censored women's sports' media coverage, information, and histories; strategically stunted growth of leagues and kept players in abject conditions; and perhaps most significantly, restricted the life trajectories of those who initially could not *see it*:

> To [subsequently] become conscious of possibility can involve mourning for its loss. You can feel the sadness of what could have been, but was not to be. Maybe we realize: it would have been possible to live one's life in another way. We can mourn because we

> didn't even realize that we gave something up. The shape of a life can feel like a past tense; something we sense only after it has been acquired. (Ahmed, 2017, p. 47).

So many slipped through the cracks; so many had no idea pathways to professional athletics even existed. In a way, this research is for them.

With time and sociocultural advancements, such as Title IX in the United States, which outlawed sex-based discrimination in all Federally funded educational programs and activities, the effectiveness of outright bans on women's participation in sport and the fragility rhetoric waned (Britannica, 2024). As women athletes fought for increased visibility, worthiness, and belonging in sport and media, the power directed at them shifted to a partnership between media framing and resource gatekeeping based on Western neoliberal capitalist conceptions of skill and value reinforced by sexism. A departure from Kurt Lewin's original gatekeeping theory, resource gatekeepers govern access to, availability of, and quality of women's soccer specifically, weaponizing the justification that women's sports and athletes are *unworthy* of said resources. Instead of forcibly acting upon women's bodies like the bans, resource gatekeepers practice strategic *withholding*; similarly to the enforcement of the bans, though, the denial of resources works in tandem with softer ideological power and the media.

To situate women's soccer at the intersection of gender, labour, and language: as labour is the primary generator of value under Western capitalism, it is therefore necessary to control it in order to reproduce capital (Previtali and Fagiani, 2015). Language is critical in shaping perceptions of worthiness and controlling labour: words create worlds as worlds create words. Dictionary definitions of *worth* provide key words such as *value* (especially monetary), *usefulness*, and *importance*; connecting the above to conceptions of *labour* and *skill* under capitalism with relevance to sport is informative. Dissecting *worth* and *worthiness* illuminates

underlying operations of the biopolitics of worthiness: interconnected are the adjacent perceptions of *deserving* and *earning*, *legitimacy*, *proving*, *success* and *failure*, *competition* and *comparison*. Within the patriarchal paradigm, white men's lives are deemed more worthy not only because they are white and men, but because they are the money generators (breadwinners) and the generators *of* money: due to the systems dedicated to making men's sports thrive, such sports generate increased capital, accumulating said capital in the hands of other predominantly white men. This cyclical transfer of power demonstrates Ahmed's concept of white men as institution, "referring not only to what has already been instituted or built but the mechanisms that ensure the persistence of that structure… shaped by a series of regulative norms" (2017, p. 153). Therefore, it is evident that "sexism and racism become systems of inheritance in which white men are freed up to take the place of other white men" at the expense of everyone situated lower in the hierarchy of worthiness (Ahmed, 2017, p. 158).

With regard to labour and *skill*, it is important to note "the fact that 'skills' are ideologically constructed [by the ruling class], with some competencies being defined as skills and others being excluded from the definition, mostly on the basis of gender stereotypes" (Zulauf, 2001, as qtd. in IOM, 2012, pp. 13-14). Furthermore, the hierarchy of skill, ranging from skilled, low-skilled, to unskilled labour is another manifestation of invisibilized power, in that concrete, consensually agreed-upon definitions of these terms are rather elusive. It is Karl Marx who aptly summarizes the uncertainty surrounding value and definitions of skill under capitalism:

> The different proportions in which different sorts of labour are reduced to unskilled labour as their standard, are established by a social process that goes on behind the backs of the producers, and, consequently, appear to be fixed by custom. (1867/2015, n.p.).

On the surface, we could summarize dominant arguments against the worthiness of women's soccer by acknowledging the gendered division of labour: women's traditional household reproductive labour is unpaid and framed as the manifestation of inherent biological, feminine qualities. If caring and nurturing are natural qualities, they are therefore not skills, and reproductive labour is not, in fact, labour. To apply a similarly rigid perspective to women's soccer, we could argue that because society does not view women's soccer *as work*, it therefore does not have *value* due to perceptions of femininity, especially racialized femininity. To explore this argument with more depth exposes the implication that women's soccer somehow requires *less skill* than men's soccer. Simply put, the *labour* necessary for participation in women's soccer is perceived as requiring less *skill*, therefore having less *value*, and ultimately less *worth*. Western Neoliberal iterations of capitalism deepen this argument: the "role that competitiveness, measurement, and meritocratic evaluation play in framing social life… harm people by defining them as failures and holding them responsible for not competing successfully in competitions they cannot win" (Lynch, 2022, p. 134). To this point, women's sports are doubly framed as less skilled *and* as not *competitive*: as competition and meritocracy are lauded under capitalism, if you are not competitive, you must not be *working hard*. A lack of hard work in turn signifies a lack of *value*, and therefore *unworthiness* of any *reward*. This ideology creates a vicious cycle that systemically devalues the labour and skills in women's soccer in order to justify the pay disparity, substandard working conditions, and negative to apathetic cultural treatment reproduced through traditional media agents.

In her work "Stopped at the gate: Women's sports, 'reader interest,' and decision making by editors" (2005), Marie Hardin speaks to this justification of unworthiness, suggesting that "interest in women's sports has been suppressed by their symbolic annihilation" (Hardin, 2005,

p. 66). These intersecting forces of perceptions of unworthiness, symbolic annihilation, and common arguments that women's sports are not profitable, in high demand, and that no one watches them are "cloak[s] for hegemonic decision-making" (Hardin, 2005, p. 72). These common arguments are evidently reinforced by sexist ideology: in their 25-year study "From fizzle to sizzle!': Televised sports news and the production of gender-bland sexism" (2017), Michaela Musto, Cheryl Cooky, and Michael Messner further speak to not only this hegemonic worldview but the shifts in sexism in women's sports coverage. Since past iterations of hard power and softer ideological power such as the fragility rhetoric were no longer effective in the face of human rights advancements, ranging forms of sexism were employed to trivialize and degrade women's participation in sport. This evolution of sexism in women's sports media coverage transformed from overt and denigrating, to an emphasis on athletes' traditional gender roles as wives, mothers, and girlfriends, to a "dull—neither overtly sexist nor ambivalent—rendering of women's sporting events" (Musto et al., 2017, p. 581). The final stage of this evolution can be understood as what Musto et al. call 'gender-bland sexism,' which "frames women in a lackluster… manner[;] cover[age of their] athletic accomplishments [is] devoid of overt sexism but simultaneously perpetuate[s] beliefs about men's inherent athletic superiority" (2017, p. 575). Gender-bland sexism as a mechanism of symbolic annihilation is reproduced through consistently lower production value of women's sports in terms of "fewer camera angles, statistics and graphics, and lower sound quality"; significantly shorter segments and a manufactured absence of highlights showcasing skill and physicality; and bland, monotonous tone void of the "fast-paced, funny, and descriptive language" awarded to coverage of men's sports (Musto et al., 2017, pp. 581, p. 586).

Furthermore, the interlocking powers of censorship and gender-bland sexism rife in traditional media's control of women's soccer coverage and information impacts the behaviour of mass media consumers, which "is determined by the dynamics of the [coverage] situation which includes the channels through which [coverage appears], the gatekeeper governing the channels… and the… ideology of the gatekeeper" (Lewin, 1943, n.p.). Connecting Lewin's theory to present-day gender relations, Hardin asserts that gatekeeping often takes the form of the "decision-making process [of] choos[ing] stories," which "is a basic and powerful force" in shaping a "hegemonic worldview that privileges men" (2005, p. 65).

The previous sections sociohistorically detailing the biopolitics of worthiness were necessarily situated within the patriarchal paradigm to illustrate the ubiquitous influence of power in shaping our lives. In returning to Goettner-Abendroth's theory of matriarchy, we can privilege tenets of reciprocity, community, love, and regeneration, instead of greed, individualism, dominance, and exploitation (De Baere, 2024). I aim to shift from the *either/or* framework characteristic of the patriarchal paradigm and henceforth "embrace a *both/and* perspective that creates space for a rupture discourse that sees no incompatibility between athleticism and femininity" (2023, pp. 2, 13; Bruce, 2016, p. 368).

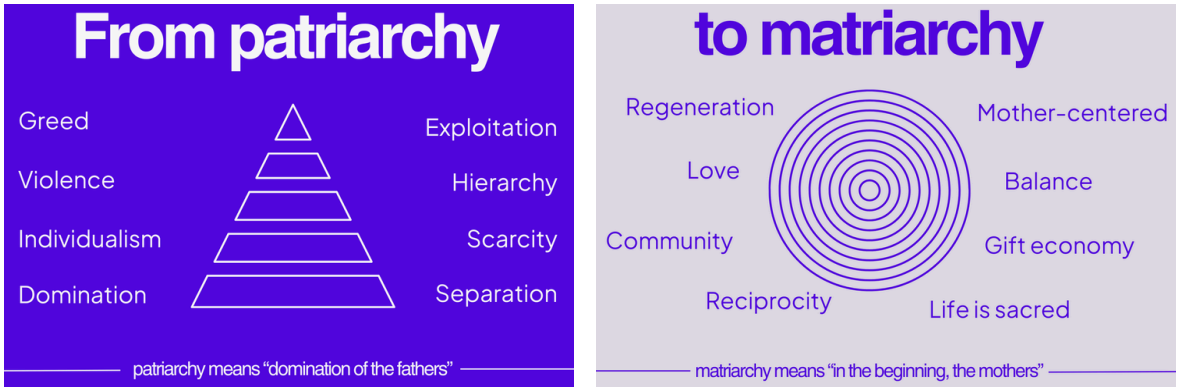


Figure 3. "From patriarchy to matriarchy" (De Baere, 2024).

A prime example of a *both/and* space is the digital realm, specifically social media platforms, which emerged as influential powers around the 2010s. As women athletes, their teams, and league organizations now "have [increased] opportunity to talk directly with their consumers, [bypassing] traditional media gatekeepers," social media presence on platforms such as Instagram is a fundamental piece of curating online women's sports communities (Coche, 2016, p. 91, 90). The augmented ability to proliferate, endorse, and support women's sport content reflects the community's active commitment to breaking the traditional frame, reframing the conversation around, and creating a new frame for women's sports, online and offline. This process works to gradually undo the indoctrination of the patriarchal frame, slowly changing people's minds from binary *either/or* judgements to *both/and* acceptance of women in sports as the discussion disseminates outward.

On their own, "sports are… a powerful platform for athletes to express their voice, to bring public attention to social injustice both inside and outside the world of sports, and to advocate for social change," but the rise of "social media… has provided a powerful outlet for resistance" for the women's sports community (Cooky, 2017, p. 3; Musto et al., 2017, p. 590). We can understand their strategic use of social media platforms as creating an actively updating historical record of women's sport. "With its large reach and low costs," social media's interactive format not only generates increased visibility, audibility, and comprehension of women's sports, leagues, and players, but makes the history of injustice surrounding them *easily accessible*. Social media's capacity to serve as a historical record challenges the verity of collective memory and the reign of "intellectual, charismatic, white, heterosexual, cisgender men… as keepers of the history" (Arthur Riley, 2022, pp. 175-176). To employ Christina Sharpe's metaphor of the wake: "in the wake [of systemic frames, walls, and gatekeepers], the

past that is not the past reappears, always, to rupture the present" (2016, p. 9). This rupture, as outlined by Butler and Ahmed, allows space for exposure, recognition, and familiarity of grief, loss, and suffering: such experiences heighten not only the consciousness of the individual, but also the "world-consciousness in which the suffering of those who do not belong disturbs the atmosphere" (Ahmed, 2017, p. 60).

The symbiotic relationship of women's sports and social media in raising awareness of social injustice and instigating cultural and perceptual shifts is unmistakable.

Figure 4. CBS (2020). *Players kneel during the National Anthem before the NWSL Challenge Cup kicked off on June 27*; Figure 5. Mike Ehrmann/Getty Images (2023). *Canada and the USWNT faced each other in the SheBelieves Cup*; Figure 6. Nathan Ray Seebeck/USA TODAY Sports (2023). *San Diego Wave players express their support for Spain's Jenni Hermoso after their game Friday.*

Women soccer players frequently utilize the visibility of their professional stage as a means to protest injustice and dominant constructions of worthiness, thereby reaffirming a shared ethic of love. Figure 4 illustrates the solidarity of National Women's Soccer League teams with the Black Lives Matter movement in the wake of the police officer Derek Chauvin's cold-blooded murder of George Floyd in the United States in May 2020: players from the Portland Thorns and North Carolina Courage donned shirts stating the movement's name, and knelt during the national anthem in protest of police brutality as an instrument of the ongoing, state-sanctioned, racially-motivated structural violence inflicted upon Black people in America across time and space. Their statement is clear: literally, *we will not stand for this any longer*. Figure 5 further depicts the supportive, communal framework within women's soccer: prior to a match between

the Canadian and United States women's national teams at the SheBelieves Cup in February 2023, the players joined arms and formed a circle to protest the "drastic cuts to the program ahead of [the] summer's Women's World Cup in Australia and New Zealand," the lack of compensation for their play in 2022, and their federation's threat of legal action against the team's attempted strike (Peterson, 2023, n.p.). Both teams wore purple and white wristbands to show support for causes of gender equality and trans rights (De la Fuente, 2023). Figure 6 shows the NWSL's San Diego Wave expressing their solidarity for Jenni Hermoso, the illustrious Spanish striker, whom the then-President of the Spanish Federation (RFEF) and Vice President of UEFA assaulted with a non-consensual kiss as Hermoso collected her gold medal at the 2023 Women's World Cup.

The women's sports community reinforces these on-the ground acts of resistance and solidarity through social media, specifically Instagram. The circulation of photos and videos from multiple angles, as well as quotes and interviews from diverse, intersecting perspectives surrounding these unjust events assists in carrying memory into the future: "collective memory requires that we piece together the fragments of individual memory and behold something not necessarily *larger* but with greater depth and color" (Arthur Riley, 2022, p. 174). A critical function of social media as an actively updating historical record is the hashtag, which acts as an archiving feature as well as a tool to boost awareness and comprehension: women's sports accounts on Instagram used hashtags such as #BlackLivesMatter; #EqualPlayEqualPay; #ProtectTransKids, #TransRightsAreHumanRights; #SeAcabo #ItsOver #ContigoJenni #MeToo in order to generate further community solidarity and resistance, the cultural shifts of which ripple outward. With specific regard to the example of Jenni Hermoso, the combination of online and offline worlds generated such intense backlash against former RFEF President Luis

Rubiales, and such unwavering, global support for Hermoso that he was forced to tender his resignation and was banned from "all football-related activities" for three years (TOGETHXR, 2023).

Despite the widespread allure and influence of social media in revamping the communicative terrain in terms of women's sports, we cannot paint social media solely as a site of agency and unwavering community, love, and support; within the both/and framework, we must also acknowledge its flaws and limitations. In the complex, nonlinear process of breaking the patriarchal frame, a blend of competing discourses is observable in the women's sports community's use of Instagram. As it is nearly impossible to extricate ourselves from the system in which we are situated, that being the patriarchal or dominator model of society, content and strategies employed in some ways feed into this model in the ongoing attempt to attain *equality* with men's sports. Attaining equality here could be understood as equal power in terms of visibility, audibility, comprehension, memory, and resources, especially capital. Many of the accounts observed employ liberal feminist undertones that align with neoliberal capitalist conceptions of merit, accrual, and consumption: the resulting "emphasis on gender equality *with* men *within* existing societal structures… implicitly normalizes coverage [and resources] of culturally valued men's sport as the ideal against which women's representation should be judged" (Bruce, 2016, p. 364).

In her book *Gender, media and voice: Communicative injustice and public speech* (2020), Jilly Boyce Kay states that "the seductive notion that social media has enabled a democratisation of voice is repeated so often that it has become a truism" (p. 10). Her concept of communicative injustice problematizes *audibility* in terms of *voice*: she argues that 'othered' populations "are denied a voice that is sufficiently expansive, complex and meaningful so as to allow them a

position of full citizenship and personhood in contemporary culture," and that "irreconcilable gendered norms… and exclusions" characterize public speech (Kay, 2020, pp. 7, 9). She asserts that "to have *meaningful* voice in the contemporary context clearly cannot simply be equated with speaking in any public way. It is to speak *of things* and *in ways* that have the potential to transform the social order" (Kay, 2020, p. 132). Due to pervasive institutional and ideological walls, frames and gatekeepers of worthiness and belonging, "achieving this kind of meaningful voice has been, and remains, a profound challenge for women" (Kay, 2020, p. 132). Evidently, the audibility of women's voices and speech is still partially situated in the biopolitics of worthiness. Increased access to effective public speech is afforded to white, cisgender, heterosexual athletes whose gender presentations align with dominant constructions of femininity and whose speech aligns with white supremacist ideals of propriety. Their stories and causes hold more cultural weight, and experience significantly less vitriol due to the attachment of worthiness to their lives. In short, "for a voice to be effective, it is not enough for it to simply exist. It must carry value from the perspective of the listener" (Crawford, 2023, p. 692).

Here, we can see the layers of audibility: to speak and be heard is to be understood, and yet there is a marked difference between being *heard* and being *listened to*. Additionally, Kay notes that the women's sports community "come[s] up against the brute realities of misogynistic backlash, ridicule, trolling and hate that circulate so easily throughout digital culture" as a result of the increased exposure and visibility to those outside the haven of supportive community (2020, p. 6). Therefore, "social media might allow women to circumvent the gatekeepers of traditional media in order to communicate and self-express in public contexts, but it also allows for instantaneous forms of gendered[, racial, queer, trans, and xenophobic abuse" (Kay, 2020, p. 6). However, Kay acknowledges that "this is a rather totalising narrative that reduces all

mediated communication to a commodity form that ultimately, inevitably and neatly shores up the power of neoliberal capitalism as well as heteropatriarchy" (2020, p. 12). We could understand the women's sports community's use of social media platforms such as Instagram, then, as *strategic compliance*: to privilege only institutional oppression is to obscure the individual and collective agency these athletes and media creators strategically exercise. We know from Audre Lorde that "the master's tools will never destroy the master's house," though in this situation we can acknowledge the necessity of using the master's tools in order to get a foot in the door, so to speak; ultimately, oppressive systems cannot be destroyed from the inside out, but there is something to be said for the ability to access these internal resources and influence and redistributing them outward (1984/2016, p. 259). Through this both/and orientation and the recognition that communicative injustice is produced and reproduced by systems of power such as racism, misogyny, ableism, and capitalism, Kay argues that we must reframe *voice* away from associations of streamlined individualism and instead to a "messy multiplicity" of voice that is "collective, feminist, and queer" (2020, p. 22).

To further the discussion of the women's sports community's strategic use of social media to break traditional frames, reframe the conversation and create a new frame around women's sports that privileges matriarchal tenets of reciprocity, community, love, and regeneration, this research purposively samples the Instagram account TOGETHXR (De Baere, 2024). Founded in 2021 by four of the world's greatest professional athletes, soccer player Alex Morgan, snowboarder Chloe Kim, swimmer Simone Manuel, and basketball legend Sue Bird, TOGETHXR is a "media and commerce company [that] sits at the intersection of women's sports and culture" (TOGETHXR, 2024). As the "fastest growing [and] most influential brand in women's sports," TOGETHXR pushes for "equal rights, coverage, and investment in women's

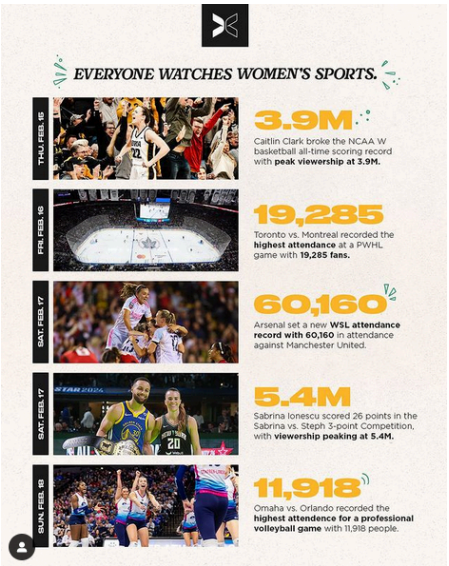
sports" and representation while showcasing and supporting "women of all ages, races, and backgrounds" (2024). Importantly, as Esther Wallace describes in her TED Talk *Representation is hope: You have to see it to be it* (2022):

> Representation isn't just about role models. It isn't just about admiration. Representation is power, and it is truth. It is the invitation to explore our potential for greatness and success. Representation [is critical] because it affirms for us that there is no ceiling to our potential. (Wallace, 2022).

TOGETHXR "is building a home for generations of women who've never had a place that existed just for them" (TOGETHXR, 2024). For decades, women's sports only received 4% of media coverage; recently, that number has increased to 15%, but this is still only a fraction of the coverage, especially considering that women comprise 44% of all participants in sport (TOGETHXR, 2024). Created by professional athletes, each with intimate understanding of the dominant frames, walls, and gatekeepers obstructing the growth of women's sports, TOGETHXR utilizes the power of its platform to generate a reality in which representation and equality are norms: blending the realms of "culture, activism, lifestyle, and sports," TOGETHXR "shatter[s] the often narrow depictions of women in the media with content featuring a diverse and inclusive community of game changers, culture shapers, thought leaders, and barrier breakers" through in-depth storytelling (2024). Their slogan, "*everyone watches women's sports*" embodies the practice of breaking, reframing, and creating a new media and cultural frame around women's sports, its athletes, and their lives (TOGETHXR, 2024). This tagline directly counters the popular sexist frame of "no one watches women's sports," which stems from legacies of ideological soft power and the biopolitics of worthiness that work to maintain the dominant construction of women's non-belonging in sport. The use of the word "*everyone*"

simply but effectively opposes the fracturing individualism normalized by Western Neoliberal capitalism while simultaneously acting as an invitation: where the articulation of sport and masculinity predominantly rejects those outside the homogenous biological whole, TOGETHXR bolsters the frame of women's sports as a moreso inclusive community that not only welcomes, but celebrates difference.

Living up to their mission statement, TOGETHXR's commitment to "moving culture forward" blends core matriarchal tenets with social media's capacity to act as a historical record (2024). Analysis of the company's Instagram account first provides insight into the themes and strategies employed in the dissemination of women's sports content, then focuses specifically on content surrounding the Women's World Cup soccer tournament in Australia and New Zealand during the summer of 2023. TOGETHXR's Instagram account delivers approximately three to four posts per day to its 347,000 followers, delivered in a range of visually intriguing formats including solitary photographs, swipeable posts containing both text and videos, engaging infographics, as well as interestingly cut and edited videos.



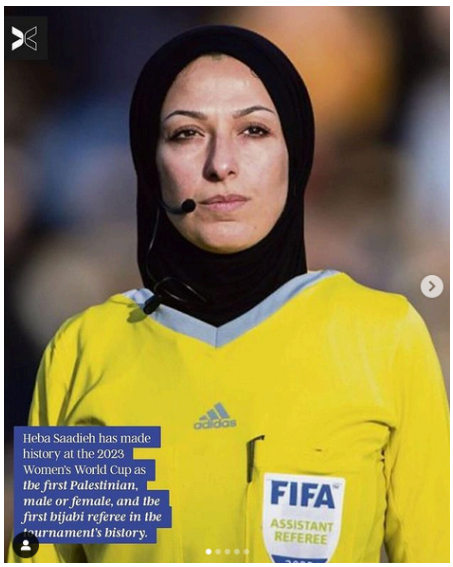


Figure 7. TOGETHXR [@togethxr]. (2024, February 21). *Everyone watches women's sports* [Photograph]; Figure 8. TOGETHXR [@togethxr]. (2023, July 27). *Heba Saadieh making history on the world's stage* [Photograph]; Figure 3. TOGETHXR [@togethxr]. (2024, May 2). *We're watching women take over the sports world* [Photographs via Arsenal Women FC, @arsenalwfc].

The primary theme and function observed in this account is that of *highlighting* women in the realms of sport and popular culture (TOGETHXR, 2024). Within the domain of sport, this highlighting includes individual athletes, teams, leagues, and their accomplishments; non-athletes in sports such as coaches, referees, owners, commentators, reporters, interviewers, content creators, and photographers; sociocultural advancements in womens' sports; current sporting news; girls in sport. TOGETHXR repurposes the nexus of power that has historically been used as an instrument of obfuscation to an instrument of illumination by supporting their claims with concrete statistics, highlighting those with intersecting identities who have been consistently framed out of sport and worthiness, and publishing previously unseen photos and information about the history of women's soccer.

Figures 7-9 illustrate this illumination: figure 7 is a visually intriguing infographic detailing recent record-breaking audiences and television viewership of women's sports. The platform's tagline serves as the title: "everyone watches women's sports" is now no longer just a counterargument to the popular sexist comment "no one watches women's sports." Now, as evidenced in figure 7, the statement is rooted in irrefutable statistical facts. Figure 8 is a post celebrating Heba Saadieh, "the first Palestinian, male or female, and the first hijabi referee in [Women's World Cup] tournament history" (TOGETHXR, 2023). The following slides utilize a storytelling orientation to provide the audience with information about her accomplishments and journey building up to this historic achievement. Figure 9 is a pertinent example of utilizing social media as a historical record to carry memory into the future: the post compares the audience growth from May 1st, 2013, to May 1st, 2023 at Arsenal WFC vs Wolfsburg's UEFA

Women's Champions League (UWCL) semifinals matches on either side of a decade. The most recent UWCL match between the two sides "broke the record for the *highest-attended women's match in England* with 60, 063 fans" (TOGETHXR, 2023). This comparative post further exposes the journey of the women's game with two contrasting photos demonstrating the substandard conditions from a decade prior: the first match was played on a patchy, poorly maintained field at a small stadium with limited seating capacity. Memories exposing these unfavourable conditions speaks to the resilience of the trailblazing professional women athletes who *did* manage to fight through and 'make it' while shouldering and fighting inequality without near-any of the visibility, recognition, or memory they deserved. The second match, however, was played at the Emirates Stadium, which has historically only been home to the Arsenal men's team; however, as the average attendance of the Arsenal Women's team (34,997) surpassed that of *ten men's English Premier League teams* this past season, they will now call Emirates Stadium their home for the upcoming 2024-25 season and beyond, further cementing their worthiness and belonging in the realm of sport (Chambers, 2024). Women's sports were never *nothing*; *nothing* is a false truth, a false memory. Just because it was not visible, does not mean it was not happening: "from [this] 'nothing' will come *everything*" (Northern Super League, 2024).

Through their strategic use of Instagram, TOGETHXR builds awareness, comprehension, and excitement about women's sports while simultaneously exposing the societal injustices facing our collective lives. The account achieves this through informational, historical, and in memoriam posts, while promoting representational inclusivity through collaborative posts with athletes corresponding with months such as Black History Month, AAPI Heritage Month, and Pride Month, to name a few. Breaking away from the academic research corpus's tendency to "only name the problem… state complaint without a constructive focus on resolution [and

consequently] take away hope," TOGETHXR's innovative both/and frame of sport and pop culture centres athletes' and communities' agency instead of implicitly privileging either/or discourses that "work to sustain dominator culture" (hooks, 2003, pp. xiii-xiv). This platform deepens the surface level visibility of women's sports into recognition and *familiarity*, which has historically been gatekept, as well as senses of worthiness and belonging; with its ability to not only showcase stunning athletic highlights but also to amplify a diverse range of athletes, TOGETHXR's orientation of "rich storytelling" humanizes women in sports, endearing them to the public (2024). This facilitates the possibility of "defining moments[,] which are made through the identification of heroic figures, which is only possible if we can recognize players, know who they are and something about their life stories" (Woodward, 2019, p. 1114).

Figure 3. National Women's Soccer League [@nwsl]. (2024, May 22). *There's no such thing as an away game for Barbra Banda!* [Photograph]; Figure 4. National Women's Soccer League [@nwsl]. (2024, May 28). *Ji-So Yun gets the love from the fans in Washington DC over the weekend!* [Photograph]; Figure 5. National Women's Soccer League and Bay FC [@nwsl, @wearebayfc]. (2024, May 11). *Gracias por el apoyo en la carretera* [Photograph].

In terms of TOGETHXR's coverage of the 2023 Women's World Cup in Australia and New Zealand, there are approximately 160 posts dedicated to this tournament. The general theme of *highlighting* is similarly present in this content: the main highlight is the tournament itself, but TOGETHXR illuminates the history makers, game changers, and shared joy within the tournament by dedicating posts to athletes, non-athletes, and team accomplishments and

backstories in addition to actual athletic highlights. This style of content exemplifies the both/and discourse in showing women's multidimensionality; they are more than *just* athletes. As a platform, TOGETHXR is successful in building a flourishing community at the intersection of sports and culture, breaking the traditional narrow frame around women, sports, and life, and demonstrating a *new strength* that is not predicated on white supremacist constructions of masculinity.

Videos of interviews with athletes during the Women's World Cup tournament are especially significant, as they amplify the voices and histories of these athletes to supportive communities who *actively listen*, *understand*, and *care*: their words do not fall on deaf ears. Instead, they are met with outpourings of love, support, and recognition, tying into the notion that to be *known* is to be *loved*. Interviews with Australia's Ellie Carpenter, New Zealand's Ali Riley, and Brazil's legendary Marta stood out from the crowd. These brief interviews encapsulate themes of inspiration, support, and transformation. In her youth, Carpenter, like many young girls, played on a boys team as there was no team for girls. She grew up watching the Australian national women's soccer team, The Matildas, play in stadiums with 300 people in attendance; now, she plays *for* The Matildas in sold out stadiums. She expresses that "how far we've come is just unimaginable" in terms of "chang[ing] women's sport in Australia [and] inspir[ing] the next generation" of young girls and boys (TOGETHXR, 2023). Similarly, Riley hopes:

> That we've inspired the country, [and] that little girls across New Zealand, across the world now will start playing sport and feel like they can achieve whatever they put their mind to and just dream bigger than they have ever been able to before. I just hope that this opens so many doors and opportunities for young girls. We wanted to inspire. We

> wanted to honour the Ferns that came before us, and this team did that. I'm so proud of them. (TOGETHXR, 2023).

"Representation is a lesson that ceilings are just the perception of limitations" (Wallace, 2022). After her final Women's World Cup match, Marta credits the persistence of players who fought through the frames, walls, and gatekeepers in order to lay the foundation of women's soccer. She "ask[s] the new generation to continue where we left off: continue to inspire even more girls and boys, no matter what age they are" (TOGETHXR, 2023). Marta emphasizes that "women's football is a product that gives profit, that gives enjoyment to watch. So support. Keep supporting. Because for them, it's just the beginning. For me, it's the end of the line now" (TOGETHXR, 2023). Clearly, representation is nonlinear; it "is a cycle that keeps going, powered by the opportunities that we have to become the representation that someone else needs to see" (Wallace, 2022).

Limitations and future research

Due to the scope of this paper, I was unable to do proper justice to the effects of coloniality and race on worthiness, gender, sport, and media, and strongly recommend in-depth further research exploring these intersections. Since the scope of this research is limited to Western women's sports and media coverage, issues facing Western women's sports hold the most staying power in terms of relevance and repeated posts on the accounts, and content relating to sociocultural movements are situated primarily within that Western context. Suggestions for further research include illuminating the complex truths, histories, and memories of women's sports beyond the Western contextual frame; identifying women's sports accounts from different areas of the world to increase breadth and depth in the research corpus, as well as to identify similarities and differences in strategic online presence is recommended. Further

research on the effects of biopolitical hierarchies of worthiness on the decision-making process of creating new frames for women's sports, as well as more in-depth exploration of women's sports and the potential for matriarchy is recommended as well.

Conclusion

Ultimately, despite the near-invisible nexus of hard and soft power shaping our collective histories, memories, and truths with regard to dominant constructions of biopolitical worthiness in sport, media, and life, the women's sports community strategically utilizes social media as an actively updating historical record to carry memory into the future. The work of accounts such as TOGETHXR in partnership with professional women athletes and creators generates heightened visibility, audibility, comprehension, and love for women's sports and athletes, combats restrictive perceptions and gender-bland sexism, and highlights the systemic, institutional walls, frames, and gatekeepers attempting to obstruct women's belonging in the realm of sport.

The implications of this research, however, far exceed this summary. These women, they are not *just* bypassing institutional gatekeepers and building flourishing communities. By holding sacred the knowledge and experiences of those who came before them, they are actively rewriting history through the present, changing the very fabric of our culture and society, cracking *life trajectories* wide open by building new *worlds*, new *realities*. The strategic use of these social media platforms facilitates the illumination and normalization of historically stigmatized identities in athletics and in life; they are shifting the cultural consciousness toward increased *acceptance* of non-traditional ways of *existence*. They break the dominant frame and create their own; the resulting visibility, recognition, and *worthiness* of their lives, and therefore the lives of people who look or identify similarly to them, radiate outward. The right to not only

exist, but to thrive, in a professional sports environment and in general, is no longer gatekept by the iron fist of the ruling institutional powers.

Through the fracturing obscurity forged by old, traditional systems of power shines a message of hope: women in sport are creating a new, undeniable core of enthusiasm, support, and communal connection: the "public performance of a void" cannot be sustained much longer (Coutin, 2016, p. 4). The way things *were* is being drowned out by the way things *are*. Can you hear us? Will you *listen*? There are concrete paths forward; a future is being written into existence. The influx of representation of women in sport and in life "stretches our imagination beyond what we thought possible" (Wallace, 2022). Now, moreso than ever, it is possible to know our own power. So, *awaken* to the power within yourself. Your life is in your hands. The tides are turning, and women's sports are up next. Are you with us?

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