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More Than Just Athletes: Literacy Experiences of Black Collegiate Athletes

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A Lil' Letter to America

*America, America, the land of the free
Where black people can die from just being black and free
They protest to be able to live life in peace like the majority
Thugs and animalistic people is all you see
In reality, all they really want in life is equality
Instead, America which is the land of the free
Elects a president with zero political history
To restore the long legacy of white supremacy*

*Minorities were never a part of the American dream
They were only brought here to build your dream
I used to believe in this American dream
Dream that one I would be playing in front of thousand, on a college team
I have achieved that dream
And believe that, it was only a scheme*

*For you to continue to exploit black men
To continue to view them as animals, Then
Have the nerve to say 'Make America Great Again'
It was only great for white men
You on the other hand just want free labor again
So, you can continue to try to find new and creative ways to enslave black men*

-Humphrey, 2018

Two years ago, in July 2018, Lil' Jordan Humphrey, who at the time was a collegiate athlete at the University of Texas-Austin, took to his personal Twitter account on a Friday morning to express his thoughts about being a Black man and an athlete in America (Humphrey, 2018). What first started off as an assignment for an American literature summer course, caught the attention of thousands of people on Twitter. The poem called, *Lil' Letter to America*, was created in response to a poem he was assigned to read called, *America* (1956) by Allen Ginsberg. Humphrey's professor asked his class to write their own letter to America. As a Black man and collegiate athlete, Humphrey's poetically shared his version of "America" in which many Black people, people of color, and athletes related to. Humphrey's poem went viral on Twitter with 2.3 thousand likes. Although many people praised his words, others were shocked and angry that instead of posting a video about his football talent, he shared his identity as a Black writer.

Historically, literacy among Black people in the U.S. were "not just tied to skills and proficiencies" (Muhammad, 2020), but acknowledged and practiced as acts of liberation for the individual and collective (McHenry, 2002; Muhammad, 2020). Muhammad (2020) notes, "An example of this was using acts of literacy to disrupt racism through their written and spoken words, including public addresses that fostered agitation to shake the wrongdoing placed upon their lives" (p. 22). For example, in the late 1800s, Black people formed Black literary societies (also known as reading-rooms, literary institutions, and debating societies) because "they were not invited or allowed to speak or participate in White-run literary organizations" (Muhammad, 2020; Tatum, 2009). These societies were cultivated to advance Black people's literacy skills to counter and resist the racial violence and oppression they suffered as Black Americans (McHenry, 2002, p.17). Humphrey's poem is an example of literacy acknowledged and practiced as an act of liberation. His poem is an embodiment of his individual identities and Black history. Understanding how Black people define and situate literacy expands the narrow view of traditional literacy.

As a Black woman literacy scholar and former collegiate athlete, I was not surprised by the uproar that followed Humphrey's poem. Too often Black collegiate athletes are seen, loved, and admired for their athletic ability, yet are not taken seriously when it comes to their academic performance and expressing their academic experiences (Martin et al.

2010). Martin et al. (2010) studied 27 high-achieving African American male collegiate athletes from four academically rigorous American universities in the Pac-Ten conference. Participants were interviewed to acquire a greater understanding of their successful academic experiences. One of the major themes that emerged from these collegiate athletes were the need for them to prove they were academically capable. Additionally, it has been well documented that the role of “student” is often at odds with the responsibilities of being a student-athlete (Bimper et al. 2013). I observed four primary identities represented in Humphrey’s poem: Black male athlete, writer, and student. How collegiate athletes see themselves has been conceptualized through their athletic and racial identities with academic outcomes (Bimper & Harrison, 2014). To expand on this work, I believe a deeper understanding is needed to consider the literacy identities of Black collegiate athletes. Curiously, I questioned why some of Humphrey’s audience could not allow these identities to simply coexist with his athletic identity. These identities, of course, may not be his only identities represented in the poem, but the point still remains that he is more than a Black athlete. With the support of his football coach, peers, and other university faculty, Humphrey remained empowered through the racists and ignorant Twitter comments that ensued. This brought me to explore my literacy experience as a collegiate athlete, as well as other Black collegiate athlete’s literacy experiences as a student, and an athlete.

As a Black female former collegiate athlete, gymnastics was my initial pathway into college. My natural tumbling ability caught the eye of a gymnastics coach who thought I would flourish in a gymnastics environment. I started at a local gymnastics gym in Olympia Fields, IL. As I continued to progress and become more serious about gymnastics, my parents decided to take me to a gymnastics gym that was highly recruited by collegiate gymnastics programs. Pursuing an athletic scholarship became my dream, which motivated me to make sure I was academically eligible. Although academics was never a concern of mine throughout grade school because I was passed through, my primary identity was an athlete. As a result, my academic literacy development (reading, writing, listening, and speaking) inadvertently became a second priority. I did not realize the significance of my literacy development until I transitioned into college. After being placed on academic probation, I took initiative to seek academic support and mentors outside of athletics.

Through reflection of being a collegiate athlete, I found that my literacy experiences lived in telling my story and my athletic ability. After an unfortunate injury, I was not able to finish my last year as a collegiate athlete. I sought out opportunities to share my story with university faculty, organizations, scholars, and other student-athletes to promote the importance of academic achievement, literacy development, and identity development of Black men and women, particularly collegiate athletes. The vast majority of college level classes heavily rely on the cognitive development of reading and writing, yet collegiate athletes are required to train for several hours a day—and they often fear losing their academic scholarships. Every class I took, I applied my experiences of being a Black female collegiate athlete to my required readings and assignments. I became interested in reading what scholars and educators were writing about Black student-athletes across the elementary to college continuum. However, research on the literacy experiences of Black collegiate athletes led me to a depth of deficit-based literacy research on Black males from elementary to adult years.

As I finished up my bachelor's degree, I became an academic advisor for the men's basketball team at the same university. During my time, I mentored collegiate athletes and tutored them in English and education classes. Through this work, I provided athletes with a dual sense of purpose—both on and off the court. When I worked with my athlete mentees, I saw the tenacity in their eyes. They wanted to succeed academically but desired for spaces to holistically develop. Many times, collegiate athletes from other sports would want to work with me because I could relate to them beyond being an athlete. Although I was their academic advisor, I mentored them because I knew at some point, they would no longer be athletes, so I worked with them to create different opportunities to express themselves. Most of those opportunities was through connecting their athletic experience to their reading and writing assignments. Talking through their athletic experiences led to uncovering stories that included their athletic identity but revealed that their literacy experiences lived within their multiple identities (sister, brother, employee, student, friend, etc.), diverse cultures, and historical connections.

Exploring where literacy lies at the intersections of Black people's identities and cultures are important because our research on culture and identity is transformative for people (Kirkland, 2013). Lil' Jordan

Humphrey's literacy, identity, and culture allowed him to speak historical truth on *Black America*. Additionally, my story has helped to construct narratives of myself and others. While literacy, for me, was never associated with my ability to pass a test, it was found in my resistance to not allow dominant White spaces (athletes and academics) to silence me. Similarly, to Humphrey, he states to a journalist, "I was able to use my brain and my platform that I have by bringing awareness to things that a lot of people can't speak about" (Harris, 2018, p.3). He continues by stating:

"It's a well-known topic in today's society right now with the NFL and Colin Kaepernick. I live it. A lot of people on the [football] team live it. My family lives it. I knew people were going to come for me. It was just in my head and something I was thinking about for a while and wanted to put in words" (Harris, 2018, p.3).

As scholars continue to expand on what counts as literacy, this work will contribute to fields such as athletics and literacy to value and understand holistic and diverse identities beyond the athlete.



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