

THE RHETORICAL PLAYBOOK:  
FOOTBALL, RACE, RHETORIC, AND PLAY  
POSSIBILITY SPACES OF THE AMERICAN  
UNIVERSITY

By

JOSIAH MEINTS

Bachelor of Arts in English  
Mississippi State University  
Mississippi State, Mississippi  
2009

Master of Arts in English  
Mississippi State University  
Mississippi State, Mississippi  
2011

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Dissertation Approved:

Dr. Joshua Daniel-Wariya

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Dissertation Adviser

Dr. Lynn Lewis

---

Dr. Anna Sicari

---

Dr. Laura Arata

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Name: JOSIAH MEINTS

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Abstract: My dissertation examines and defines the relationship of college football within the culture of the American university, especially at larger Division I athletic schools. In my first two chapters, I argue that universities are complex rhetorical objects formed from an amalgam of physical buildings, fans, merchandise, traditions, icons, narrative, and fans, among many other components. As such, college football works as an effective shorthand for the university and thus has significant import and control over university culture and identity. In my third chapter, I argue that the rules of college football restrict the identities of student-athletes through rules around eligibility and amateurism. Because student-athletes are constantly responsible for maintaining their eligibility, they are constantly playing their sport on the football field and in the classroom. In my fourth chapter, I track the racist motivations of rule changes during football's early years and how this has continued throughout the history of the sport, particularly in recent rules around player conduct. Conduct rules primarily revolve around White norms and deviations from those White norms, however minor, are punished with penalties on the field and off the field. In my fifth and final chapter, I demonstrate how employing antiracist pedagogy and empathy in our classrooms can help us give student-athletes more agency over their identity in our classrooms and beyond. Antiracist pedagogy can be a humanizing force for them despite the dehumanizing nature of collegiate athletics.

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## CHAPTER I

### PREGAME WARMUP

*Prior to regular season games, teams must have access to the field for pregame warm-ups until at least 22 minutes before the opening kickoff. This may be altered in advance through written mutual agreement of the teams. Game management personnel are responsible for administering this rule.*

-Rule 3.1.1.a., NCAA Football Rules (2018)

*“Can. You. Feel. It?”*

*“Hell, yeah!”*

-Pregame call and response by Mississippi State players

### **Introduction**

On the Oklahoma State University campus Thursday afternoons before a football game are filled with waiting. Sidewalks in the few green spaces around Boone Pickens Stadium slowly collect people in lawn chairs or milling about as they wait for the opportunity to claim a spot to tailgate on Saturday. Like a miniature reenactment of the Oklahoma Land Run, some Cowboy fans arrive sooner than the prescribed deadline to unofficially claim a space before they are supposed to, but the rules are lightly enforced so no one ever gets in trouble. Once the spots are claimed by neon tape and small signs and the metal frames for tailgate tents like bleached bones, they all leave but will return tomorrow to protect their spot and begin the setup process.



Come Saturday morning, the tents and fans are dressed in orange and black and white and grey. Grills are deployed, beer and alcohol that would normally be illegal on campus are openly consumed, and fans migrate towards the stadium to watch the Cowboys play. The team, led by the band and spirit squads, makes the relatively long walk from the Student Union where they've spent the night in the Atherton Hotel, a university-run hotel. Fans cheer and wave. They shout the call and response of "Orange! Power!" and spell out the university acronym with their hands. Fingers are rearranged into the shapes of pistols and wagged in the air in a way that evokes a reckless or proficient gunslinger, depending on your perspective. The scene is all cowboy boots, hats, t-shirts, jeans, sundresses, and belt buckles the size of a fist.

Once inside the stadium, the chants and rituals continue in earnest. Spelling the school acronym picks up at a hurried pace as does spelling the state name. Repetition folds in on repetition until the songs run together and the rhythm of the scene directs fans on how to feel about their football team and their school and themselves. Beer is sold in the stadium as are Chick-Fil-A sandwiches. The band plays the state anthem, the main theme from the musical *Oklahoma!* and then covers half the field with a diagonal gap for the team to run through later. The cheer dance squad wears chaps and tight crop tops while the pom squad are dressed in traditional "collegiate" cheer skirts. The band all have cowboy hats even in late August heat. The ROTC representatives step out onto the field with the American and state flags and the announcer implores everyone in a post-Kaepernick world to stand and salute the flag out of respect for all things America and Veterans and those currently serving. OSU's black horse mascot Bullet rides onto the field with the female Spirit Rider on his back dressed in a white shirt and black hat, an allusion to OSU's well-respected female Equestrian athletic program. The football team crowds in the tunnel leading out onto the field behind an orange field gate and runs out through smoke. The game starts just minutes later and the man in the orange jumpsuit gets the crowd to chant "Orange! Power!" back and forth across the stadium. The team scores and the band plays a romping song and the crowd waves with one hand to the beat. This

is called the Waving Song and while it may appear to refer to waving wheat, the website and all OSU description clarify that it is not.<sup>1</sup> OSU players wear a combination of orange and black and white uniforms with chrome, shiny, or matte helmets. When the game ends, the band plays the alma mater and the football team and coach Mike Gundy with his mullet soaked in sweat face the student section and sing. Everyone throws their arms over the shoulders of the people on either side of them. When they sing the lyric “Loyal and true,” the crowd shouts “So True!” which is controversial for some of the old guard since this tradition is relatively new and seems like a bastardization of a perfectly good song. A sort of small athletic heresy.

Following the game, fans pour from the stadium to hastily clean up their tailgates or keep tailgating into the evening and night. They may go home or to the iconic Stillwater restaurant Eskimo Joe’s with racist caricature mascot and eat cheese fries and burgers. They may filter down to the Strip with its undergrad bars and the late night eateries. They walk their way back to hotels or dorm rooms or gameday houses or cars or RVs or rentals or their own homes if they are born and bred. They will talk about the game, the disappointments and triumphs, and analyze the performance of the coach and the players. All of this, the setup and the gestures and traditions, interacts directly with how the team embodied the spirit of the university. This pattern will repeat several times during the semester, waxing and waning in various ways based on team performance and the weather, but this disruption to what many consider the primary educative work of the university will go on and will cycle back around next fall.

But why?

In a general sense, this dissertation will answer this question. This project will describe the rhetorical nature of college sports as a part of the American university system, particularly focusing

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<sup>1</sup> Kansas, on the other hand, has a song where after a score fans will wave two hands. This is called “Waving the Wheat,” so making this distinction evident is crucial for OSU’s brand.

on Division 1 football, the most culturally recognized division in college football. To give the project a functional scope, this dissertation will take much of its analysis from schools within the Big 12 athletic conference which is comprised of 10 schools: Iowa State University, Kansas University, Kansas State University, Oklahoma State University, the University of Oklahoma, Texas Tech University, Texas Christian University, Baylor University, the University of Texas, and West Virginia University. Other notable and historically influential football programs and examples will be discussed for their relevance within the development of the sport as an institution and for their importance in college football at the time of writing. Because my concern in this dissertation is with the ways that programs rhetorically shape their interactions with the public as a rhetorical system, I will give examples of typical institutions or athletes, but these are in no way isolated cases. Nor will this project employ direct research on student-athletes themselves except that which can be found in the literature for similar reasons.

Though this project will focus on the Big 12 and other prominent programs as its main objects of analysis, the theoretical principles and approach to analysis should be generalizable to other collegiate football programs. Programs like Alabama and Clemson rule the college football landscape with the inevitability of fate. Some fans and journalists compare these programs to titans or supervillains, like Thanos of the Marvel films. While these are usually done for humorous effect, the use of mythic metaphors is not an uncommon occurrence within the rhetoric surrounding college football. As university historian J.D. Toma (2003) notes in his detailed account of football's connection to the university,

Their [fans'] strong connection with and good feelings toward "their" institution develop through narratives and other cultural forms associated with the expression of the collegiate ideal through football is of great use to the university both in building campus community and enhancing external relations. (p. 62)

Even with programs that are not “ours,” fans recognize their cultural, institutional, and economic power to shape the collegiate-athletic landscape. From the University of Miami’s meteoric rise in the 80s to the underdogs like Boise State University or the University of Central Florida who build their ethos around never being given the chance to play for the biggest trophy, stories and myths are both facilitators and distillations of the rhetorical importance of college football. So despite the focused scope of this project, the principles of identity, embodiment, game design, rhetoric (especially procedural and visual), and pedagogy described within this project can be applied in football programs, institutions, and even sports well beyond the Big 12.

In the following sections of this chapter, I will define a few key foundational concepts not defined in each chapter, outline the specific gaps in the research my project will address, and conclude with a brief preview of the structure of the dissertation.

### **Definitions**

Because of how complex and non-discursive concepts like “play,” “games,” and “sport” are, defining them with a single, written definition can at times create more ambiguity than it solves. However, for the sake of some functional common ground, I will attempt to collect here working definitions of the basic concepts of play, games, and sport together as they are all intrinsically intertwined. This section’s intent is not so much to definitively define these terms, but describe their relationships and approximate a general sense of meaning as any strict definition of play, game, or sport would likely collapse under any intense scrutiny and application.

Defining “play” is particularly difficult because as Brian Sutton-Smith (2001) notes in his work on the ambiguity of play: “We all play occasionally, and we all know what playing feels like. But when it comes to making theoretical statements about what play is, we fall into silliness. There is little agreement among us, and much ambiguity” (p. 1). Some of this may be that play has been around longer than written language itself. Cultural historian Johan Huizinga (1950) asserts from an

evolutionary perspective that “Play is older than culture” (p. 1). Play as an act and state of being is one practiced almost universally as a part of human culture, even though the rules and acceptable spaces differ significantly from culture to culture and situation to situation. Some of play’s relative universality may be that human language and signification contains an ambiguity from which play can arise. Jacques Derrida (1989/1967) describes play in language as how signifiers can have multiple meanings, can exist and be absent in the same space, and how this freeplay has existed as long as structure within the human framework. Because human language is porous and shifting, adjusting meaning to experiment with the possible effects is something that is intrinsically part of play.

Play also can be identified by when and where it occurs. Game rhetorician Ian Bogost (2008) argues that play must exist within some level of structure for it to have any materials to actually work with. Through the structured limitations of a ball, playground, field, or frisbee, play has means of occurring in and around that structure and limitation. Johan Huizinga (1950) also affirms this need for boundaries to define play, and asserts that play is a necessity of human existence and not merely wasted time, as is often proposed in popular culture. Play within structure is innate to the human experience and cannot be easily divorced from “work” as a concept. Additionally, Mikhail Bakhtin’s (1984/1965) idea of the carnival as a revelatory space where boundaries and dichotomies are collapsed only exists within a structured, recognized carnival space. The materials of the carnival, timeframe, even the location are often prescribed so that the play of the carnival can occur. Game designers E. Zimmerman and K. Salen Tekinbaş (2003) describe play as “free movement within a more rigid structure” (p. 304). So even though popular culture often frames play as boundless, like Calvin and Hobbes’ “Calvinball,” play requires some structure. In the comic strip by Bill Watterson, Calvin, a young boy, plays a game with his imaginary friend and toy stuffed tiger, Hobbes. In this game the rules are constantly shifting and changing as Calvin and Hobbes make adjustments on the fly. However, even in this framework, rules still exist as they change dramatically. The rules may not be stable, but they are always present, and in this same way, the space enabling play is flexible.

The structure that forms play and gives it materiality is often called a “game.” As Huizinga (1950) notes, the gamespaces where play takes place exist all throughout human culture. Courtrooms, classrooms, public spaces, marketplaces, restaurants, movie theaters, and even funeral parlors are all specific spaces with structures within which certain styles of play can occur and certain styles are less accepted (Huizinga, 1950). This does not mean that play cannot breach these boundaries, but that these boundaries, according to video game theorist Ian Bogost (2008), can shape the possibilities of play within that space in a way that constricts it to certain patterns and forms. A videogame played with a Nintendo Switch console can only be played in certain ways, no matter how creative those ways are, because of the limits of controls, display technology, and even hardware. Basketball with its clearly delineated court, baskets, and balls create a very specific set of movements to optimally win the game. Game studies scholar Jesper Juul (2005) narrows this definition down to “A game is a rule-based formal system with a variable and quantifiable outcome, where different outcomes are assigned different values, the player exerts effort in order to influence the outcome, the player feels attached to the outcome, and the consequences of the activity are optional and negotiable” (p. 36). Game designer Jesse Schell (2008) defines a game as “a problem-solving activity, approached with a playful attitude” (p. 37). Game studies scholar James Paul Gee (2005) argues that games are educational objects and structure, ones he claims exemplify learning principles in use better than many other mediums, though what they teach can vary significantly from game to game. Like play, however, the idea of a game can be somewhat ambiguous but generally seems to be a structured activity or space where play can take place.

Extending from there, sports are games that involve the body. As Ben Carrington and David L. Andrews (2013) describe in their introduction to a compendium on themes and key research in sports studies, how involved the body needs to be is a complex question. Some sports like basketball and rowing clearly require intense amounts of physical labor, but other sports like competitive cup stacking do not (Bogost, 2013). With the rise of esports, or competitive videogames, sports

definitions are even more tenuous since sports already share as significant overlap with games. As sports geographer John Bale (2003) notes, sports are intensely concerned with space. Sport represents land—the *Atlanta* Falcons or the *Boston* Red Sox—but also requires space in which to occur. Football, the primary topic of this dissertation, is likewise interested in space with the entire game revolving around moving or inhibiting movement across land and with teams seen as representing universities and geographic areas. Other voices like Marxist sports scholar Jean-Marie Brohm (1978) would argue that sports are merely distracting sites of social control, a space where the elite pit the proletariat against each other. Sports as sites of capitalism and nothing more. Regardless, sport is a place in which the body is leveraged within a game for the sake of play.

### **Triangulating the Research Gap**

With that idea of sport, games, and play in mind, I position this work within the larger literature. This dissertation, while located within the field of rhetoric and writing studies, also participates in the interdisciplinary field of sports studies. Sports studies draws from sociology, history, psychology, media studies, kinesiology, sports management, business, economics, journalism, rhetoric, anthropology, game studies, and other fields of research. As such, this dissertation will discuss college football primarily as a rhetorical process and object, but will draw from the breadth of the field of sports studies. My work will intersect primarily with four main subfields: sports sociology, game studies, sports journalism & history, and rhetoric. Below, I will briefly describe each subfield's primary concern as a discipline and how it pertains to the rhetorical focus of this project.

#### ***Sports Sociology***

As a human science, sociology is primarily concerned with how different groups interact with each other. Sociologists, unlike rhetoricians, rely heavily on quantitative analysis and study and their focus is not necessarily on the impact of language itself but on the way that language and social

interaction shape society. While sports sociology ranges significantly in its focus, a major theme of the sport sociology is the study of race and gender. In looking at race, scholars like Earl Smith and Gary Sailes have done an exceptional amount of work describing how Black athletes are consistently demonized, commodified, and discarded when they are no longer useful (Smith, 2007; Turick, Darvin, Bopp, 2018; Sailes, 1998a; Sailes, 1998b; Love, Gonzalez-Sobrino, Hughey, 2017; Leonard & King, 2011; Harpalani, 1998; Harris, 1998; Hall & Livingston, 2012; Grainger, Newman, & Andrews, 2006; Downs & Love, 2017; Carrington, 2010; V. Andrews, 1998; D. Andrews, 1996; D. Andrews & Carrington, 2013; D. Andrews, Mower, Silk, 2011; Anderson, 2010). Sports sociology also examines how fans and sports institutions relate to one another (End, Dietz-Uhler, Demakakos, Grantz, Biviano, 2003; Gerdy, 2006; Jones, 2010; Keaton, Gearhat, 2014; Leonard, 2005; Loy & Booth, 2000; Nixon, 2002; Perez, 2012) as well as how women are positioned within these sports institutions (Eitzen & Zinn, 1989; Eitzen & Zinn, 1993; Duncan, 2006). Because my research examines how student-athletes and the game of football rhetorically create fans and communities, my research will draw from the data and observations of sport sociologists while attending to the rhetorical structures that enable the effects they observe. At times in trying to describe sociological phenomena empirically, sports sociologists may not attend to what effect language and communication have on creating and fostering environments of abuse or control. My work will address that underexplored area of the research by analyzing the composition of the university, college football, the fan, and the student-athlete as rhetorical objects and subjects.

### *Game Studies*

Game studies as a field has been particularly preoccupied with non-sport forms of play, and especially videogames in recent decades. Some scholars within game studies look at how games can be applied to non-game elements to benefit society (Gee, 2007; McGonigal, 2011) while others examine games and the communities surrounding them (Paul, 2018; Boellstorff, Nardi, Pearce, Taylor, 2012; Holmevik, 2012; Taylor, 2007). A significant portion of scholarship is devoted to



analyzing the games and their code specifically (Montfort, Baudoin, Bell, Bogost, Douglass, Marino, Mateas, Reas, Sample, Vawter, 2014; Murray, 1997; Abraham, 2018; Bogost, 2007; Calleja, 2012; Consalvo, 2009; Copier, 2005; Keough, 2014; Moore, 2011; Navarro, 2012; Pargman & Jakobsson, 2008; Stenros, 2012) while others focus on videogames from a design perspective (Ferrara, 2012; Zimmerman, 2012). In these cases, the focus is almost solely on videogames with some articles here and there on tabletop or board games, but the majority of the research focuses on digital forms of play. As editor-in-chief of the journal *Game Studies*, Espen Aarseth (2017) has noted little research in game studies has been applied to sports and tabletop games. Consalvo, Mitgutsch, and Stein (2013) edited a collection of essays on sports videogames, but even then, the focus was primarily on the videogames and not so much on the sports themselves. Because of this gap, Aarseth (2017) even calls the field of game studies as a whole to publish more in this area and opens the journal to these publications. Despite this call, game studies has yet to examine sports from this perspective, so this dissertation will bring game studies principles and theory into contact with sports rhetoric. By focusing on American football, I can demonstrate how games rhetoric apply to sports and present one potential method for analyzing sports through a rhetorical game studies lens.

### ***Sports Journalism and History***

Journalism and history combined may have produced the largest and most comprehensive coverage and analysis of sports of any field. I have included history with journalism because while both fields may vary in their attachment to the academy, their preoccupation is still with the primary source of sports and sports figures in ways that sports sociology and game studies typically aren't. While most journalism in news outlets like ESPN, SB Nation, Sports Illustrated, or even a local newspaper will have probably the best primary sourcing of any discipline, it may often lack in interrogating or theorizing on sports, though this is not necessarily true. Some sports journalism will simply report the narrative of an event, and this is incredibly valuable work in its own right as it has highly perishable kairos. Longer form journalist work that is allowed to take its time can produce

some insight into the nature of sports not found in more academic work (Bois, 2017b; Hall, 2017; Kirk, 2017; Dorsey & Witt, 2019; Edelman, 2016; Hehir, 2011; Matula & Rives, 2014; Corben, 2009; Hutchinson, 1996; Paolantonio, 2008), especially work that follows the muckraking tradition of journalism (Godfrey, 2014; Godfrey, 2017; Godfrey, 2018; Godfrey & Robinson, 2018; Benedict & Keteyian, 2013; Resnick, 2018; Freeman, 2015). Some work even plays with the forms of sports itself through fictive or parody (Bingham, 2018). Work by writer and creator Jon Bois, in particular, can at times walk a line between sports journalism, sports fiction, and sports philosophy. His long multimedia story *17776* is about 3 sentient satellites observing Earth 15,000 years in the future where everyone has suddenly become immortal and covered the planet in nanobots that won't allow any people to come to harm under any circumstances so they all play varying forms of football, some of which look nothing like the current sport (Bois, 2017a). Hunter S. Thompson with his trademark gonzo journalism style walked a similar line between fact, fiction, and philosophy in much of his sports work like his first piece "The Kentucky Derby is Decadent and Depraved" and his canonical *Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas* (Thompson, 1970; Thompson, 2005). More historically-based work often trends toward more academic approaches to theorizing and secondary sources. Much of the work on football focuses on how it grew within its institutional context (Perrin, 1987; Watterson, 2000; Nelson, 1994; Toma, 2003) or how Black athletes experienced and integrated the game (Demas, 2010; Freedman, 2015).

My work here will not only rely on the facts and reporting of these journalists but will share a preoccupation with the primary "text" of sports events in a way much of the human sciences have not. Not only is the game structure useful, but events themselves reveal a great deal about the impact and rhetorical force of sports. Many of the themes about sports which I will describe are insinuated or understood in some respect in journalistic circles, but my work will go well past these observations and analyze the rhetorical processes and relationships that create the effects commonly observed. Not only will I identify the racism present in sports and how football is ecologically intertwined with the

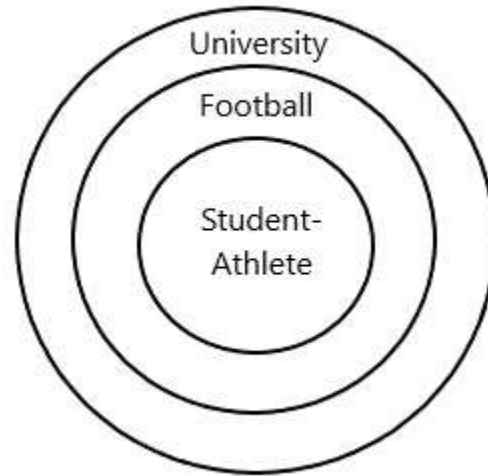
university, I will describe how this works rhetorically, something which most journalism rarely does (often because of its concern with primary texts and deadlines).

### *Sports Rhetoric*

While there has been some work on the rhetoric of sports and sports rhetoric is gaining relevancy as a research focus, rhetoric has largely ignored sports as a topic. This is surprising considering how rife sports are with textual and oral rhetorics as well as multimodal rhetorics. Scholars like Debra Hawhee (2005) have done work on athletics in ancient Greece, and Linda Fuller has edited two collections with essays discussing primarily the intersections of gender, sexual orientation, and race and sport (Fuller, 2010a; Fuller, 2010b). Indigenous studies rhetoricians like C. Richard King (2010) have done extensive work on indigenous mascots in sports, while scholars like J. Michael Rifenburg have discussed more generally how we as writing center tutors and writing teachers can best serve and teach our student-athletes (Rifenburg, 2012; Rifenburg, 2018; Rifenburg & Allgood, 2015). However, even though this and other work in rhetoric on similar topics is valuable, these analyses typically do not deal with the sports themselves as objects of analysis but rather how sports are used. While I will attend to the way sport is used, I will also focus on football itself as an object of analysis, both how it is played and how discreet and linked moments are rhetorical. By drawing on game studies with its vocabulary of game design and the rhetoric of game mechanics, I intend to focus on the game itself as well as the context and athletes within the game. All of these analyses have been valuable and have brought useful insight on the social activity we call sport, but many of these have so specifically focused on one aspect of the game that they neglect the other elements. In the next section, I will conclude the chapter with a brief description of the organizational structure of the dissertation and explain how I am going to describe football in a rhetorically holistic manner.

### **Organization**

This dissertation will attempt to tackle the problem of college football in rhetorical layers, starting from the outermost and working inward. In figure 1, I demonstrate a simplified version of what that structure will look like.



*Figure 1*

This diagram, of course, is only one particular way to look at sport and its functions within the university. As I will show, the boundaries between these layers are neither as stable nor as separated as I make them out to be here, but this diagram does identify roughly how my work will approach football. In chapter 2, I will first focus on the rhetorical make-up of the university and how that structure is ecologically intertwined with football. I theorize the university as a rhetorical constellation, a collection of various objects and subjects all linked together in a network. In this constellation, football is both the most effective at adding new fans to this constellation but is also instrumental in creating and defining the culture of a university. In chapter 3, I turn to the game of football itself. Drawing on game studies concepts of how we define the boundaries of a game, I will argue that football extends well beyond the green field where athletes run plays and formations. Instead, through the rules written by the NCAA about amateurism, football is a game of identity management. Athletes must manage their amateur status before they concern themselves with the rules of the sport for Saturdays or with studying film and conditioning. In chapter 4, I extend the

discussion of chapter 3 and present how football, because it is a game of identity, codifies racist behavior into the rules regarding conduct. I track how the genesis of many rules on conduct and sportsmanship are based on vague ideas of civility and thus are not rhetorically neutral. Additionally, many of the rules censuring celebration and taunting were created directly as a response to Black student-athletes and are intended in framing and enforcement to curtail the behavior of Black student-athletes and not white ones. In the final chapter, I argue that antiracist pedagogy can help writing program administrators resist the racist control of institutions like the NCAA and university oversight. By adopting a proactively antiracist practice in our writing programs, we can benefit all of our students, including student-athletes.

## CHAPTER II

### SINGING THE NATIONAL ANTHEM

*We are Cowboys!  
Being a Cowboy isn't in our clothes,  
it's in our character.  
We finish what we start.  
We stand for what matters,  
even if we stand alone.  
We know challenges come with pain,  
but pain will not win.  
We dream only as big as the sky.  
We have passion to do what's right,  
even when it's hard.  
We end the day knowing  
we gave it everything we had.*

- Cowboy motto, inscribed on stone plaques in Oklahoma State University Welcome Plaza

*Are You Ready?  
Hell Yeah! Damn Right!  
Hotty Toddy, Gosh Almighty,  
Who the Hell Are We? Hey!  
Flim Flam, Bim Bam  
Ole Miss by Damn!*

-U of Mississippi cheer

### **Introduction**

My three-year-old son and I drive past Oklahoma State University's campus on the way to his daycare nearly every day. He's a huge fan of Pistol Pete and the idea of football, and he's gone to two games at Oklahoma State University already. He doesn't yet understand the huge cost the student-athletes pay to play the game, the injustices in how they are treated, the

racism embedded in the game's rules on sportsmanship. For him, football is a game that involves tackling and wrestling, which seem rough but fun at the moment because he mostly does them softly on carpets and beds. During the games we've attended, he quickly learns that when everyone stands and claps, we need to stand and clap. When everyone shouts "Orange!" we also shout orange. When someone has the ball, you yell, "Get him!" He is very proud of his ability to yell, "Daddy, watch me: Get him!" When he sees Pistol Pete or depictions of him around town, he excitedly points them out. He does the same thing with the OSU logo, in particular what they call the OSU Brand (figure 2) because it has a cattle brand aesthetic.



*Figure 2 (OSU, 2019)*

When my son sees the logo, he excitedly gets my attention again: "Daddy, look! It's Pistol Pete's name!" For him, any appearance of the letter G is his name because his name starts with G, just like any J is my name or any K is my wife's name, so this misrecognition is understandable.

When my son conflates the symbol for the university and the mascot, it actually illustrates the interaction between the symbols that are used to represent the university and the symbols that are used to represent the sports program. When describing a university, the sports program and much of its iconography and tradition work as shorthand for the university, but this shorthand extends well beyond just the symbolism and into the very conceptualization of school spirit and identity. For example, in 2015 OSU hosted the Kansas University Jayhawks in the homecoming football game. It was Big 12 custom to host another Big 12 school for homecoming instead of lower division team that

would presumably be an easy win. On the other hand, Kansas is one of the worst football programs in the entire NCAA Division 1 bowl series, so the game was mostly an afterthought, a guaranteed win that most fans might leave early or barely watch after the first quarter. However, the game took on additional significance after a woman having a psychotic episode weaved around protective barriers and plowed into a crowd of people watching the Homecoming parade, killing 4 and injuring many more (Bitton & Charles, 2015). University officials discussed cancelling the game and many national level pundits thought they should, that it wasn't suitable to do something as frivolous as play a game after something so violent and tragic. But the game went on and OSU annihilated Kansas by a score of 58-10. Before the game the team said the Lord's Prayer on the field as a way to pray for the people injured or the families of those who were killed. Following the prayer, the team stood up and red shirt-senior wide receiver David Glidden began to rally the team and help them "get up" for the game. After the tragedy that had just happened in a street not half-a-mile from the stadium, the crowds and media were watching Glidden, too. The cameras passing over the group of players clustered around him caught Glidden shouting to his teammates in a swaying and vibrating circle around him: "Here we go, baby! This is the whole fucking community right here!" Some were shocked by the profanity; others found it suiting (Stavenhaugh, 2015).

For Glidden and the team, the whole of Stillwater and OSU was symbolically in the crowd hit by the car, and the entire crowd in attendance represented the entire community of OSU: all alumni, staff, faculty, students, and fans. Blending the sports public with the university public, Glidden and the team and many of the fans in the stadium who cheered and engaged with the game much more aggressively than they would have otherwise used the game as an entry point into public grief. Through dominating this specific game and conquering the Jayhawks, OSU as a community could begin to construct a narrative of overcoming and triumph in the face of adversity, two key narratives within sports in general. Despite the moral and ethical quandaries of playing a game after a tragedy, football mattered because it was a locus for the community to gather around and a rhetoric to deploy



in memorialization. Fans and OSU officials began a memorial campaign modeled after the one employed following the Boston Marathon bombing. Boston's "#BostonStrong" became Oklahoma State's "#StillwaterStrong." A sculpture (figure 3) called the Stillwater Strong Memorial was erected near the site where the crash took place. At the center of the memorial stands a folded metal ribbon similar to those cloth ones common for awareness and tribute campaigns, and the ribbon colors reflect the unification of town and university and sports and place. The ribbon is half bright OSU orange and half Stillwater High School blue, meeting in the top and middle of the ribbon as if two fabrics were sewn together.



*Figure 3 (Bitton, 2018)*

Here the town and university are represented in the colors of schools and the association of the sports teams with the need and facilitation of the memorial blends athletics, place, and institution together in a way that's almost impossible to extricate. One becomes the other becomes the other in a Mobius strip of identity.

This conflation of place and institution will be addressed more thoroughly later in this chapter, but for the moment it should be noted that it is common both in specific events like OSU's 2015 Homecoming tragedy and general signifiers like the names of universities themselves often

being place-based (Toma, 2003). A school named for its general location both signals where it is but also which population it is first designed to serve. While the specific city may not be self-evident from the name, the University of South Florida or Western Kentucky University give clear markers for approximate geographical location. And the fan references to these universities typically can evolve into just utilizing the state name, especially the U's of [State] or flagship universities (Toma, 2003). You can call the University of Texas at Austin just "Texas" within a football context or the University of Alabama "Bama." Even for the Morrill Act or land grant public institutions, the A&Ms, Techs, and State universities, the abbreviated name of the university often emphasizes place. Virginia Tech and Georgia State and Alabama A&M are still preoccupied by their place names and very rarely do place named universities obscure the place reference. Thus, fans often feel a high level of involvement between their location and the team that they cheer for, a sort of civic pride in the sports team. When the team wins, the city wins, and when the team loses, the town loses also.

As rhetoricians, accounting for the rhetorical situation of any composition moment has become an automatic first step in our praxis. However, when we examine our own context within academia, we rarely account for some of the most significant elements of our rhetorical situation: sports and their effect on the university. More often than not, athletics are seen as a distraction from the "true mission" of the university, which may account for why rhetoric and composition so often dismisses collegiate sports as "pat." However, by assuming the presence of sports is nothing more than a distraction, we miss a valuable opportunity to interrogate our own context. As I intend to show in this chapter, college football is not merely a distraction or fun activity undergrads engage in when procrastinating from their work. Football is not merely a business venture to make the university money, but in many ways it embodies and exemplifies how the American university treats education. Additionally, football and sports in general reflect and dictate our institutional identity far more publicly than the work that we ourselves do, so it is crucial for us to examine the rhetorical nature of the university and college football as a component of this. The game of football and the modern

American university are inextricably linked together in an ecology that is as complex as the millions of objects and people that make up its parts.

### **Research Questions and Methods**

In this chapter I will answer the following three research questions.

1. How do we rhetorically define university identity?
2. What historically have been the links/relationship between the university and college football and what are they now?
3. How does the university utilize football to define itself?

To answer these questions I will first trace the history of college football as a sport that emerged in the late 1800s to early 1900s. I will then theorize the rhetorical nature of the university as a constellation of rhetorical “things” drawing on elements of object-oriented ontology and university anthropology. Using this framework, I will describe how college football is intertwined with the university as a rhetorical constellation and how the university deploys football moments as a means of adding more “things” to its constellation. I will discuss first an instance at Oklahoma State of this and then describe the same effect at other institutions with a similar size and football presence. Finally, I will explain how the university repairs its constellation when an event or narrative adds a negative association to the constellation. Through these steps, I will describe how a complex and nonlinear relationship intertwines football and university identity well beyond even popular estimations.

### **The Origins of Football as College Sport**

College football is perhaps the most integrated into university life of all sports, particularly in the way it represents American academic institutional culture. In his discussion of football as part of American universities, university and football scholar J.D. Toma (2003) describes football as both a representation of the culture of “football schools” and also a way for these schools to shape their interactions with their communities (p. 19). According to Toma (2003):

They [football schools] are places where football matters in several ways: in the expression of institutional culture on campus; in the national reputation of what are essentially local institutions; in the support by local communities needed to build institutions; in the ways people relate to and identify with institutions; in the development of institutions as brand names; and in external relations and institutional advancement. (p. 19)

Football is especially successful at these rhetorical moves because it is a nexus for what Toma (2003) calls the “collegiate ideal” (p. 26). The collegiate ideal for a university or college arises from distinctive qualities of each institution, in particular the extracurricular activities (Toma, 2003). While institutions can be known for their academic or research pursuits by educators and researchers, for the vast majority of the public, the ideal life of a college student is primarily defined by the traditions and culture of the institution and not the specific academic programs (Toma, 2003).

This ideal has been in place at universities long before the invention of football. In the early 1800s, student life became particularly extracurricular in its focus as the curriculum became increasingly detached from the world around it. Most of this extracurriculum was developed by students themselves (Toma, 2003). Toma (2003) explains that “the extracurriculum compensated for the seeming irrelevance of the classical curriculum, which stressed learning for its own sake, not as direct preparation for professional life” (p. 27). These “non-academic” traditions were more than the modern stereotypes of toga parties<sup>2</sup> and drinking and involved creating many of the earliest student organizations and clubs and sports, including football (Toma, 2003). The ideal college experience evolved out of these social and educational opportunities outside the classroom. College life came to no longer be defined as purely academics for its own sake, but an educational experience beyond the normal idea of a university (Toma, 2003). As Toma (2003) notes, students in the United States attend

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<sup>2</sup> The idea of life at a university is often poorly depicted in film. These films often depict every college campus as essentially an Ivy League school with ancient buildings and classrooms decorated with dark wood. The film *Animal House* (1978) and its contemporaries deserve some of the credit for embedding these narrative so deeply within the American psyche.

college, not university, and we refer to football as “‘college’ football, not ‘university’ football” (p. 26). Where Americans will use the term “college” and “university” synonymously, most other countries make distinctions between a college as a vocational training facility or school within a university. We see some of this still reflected in how American universities refer to themselves as colleges but contain within themselves colleges like a College of Business or a College of Arts and Sciences. Because the collegiate ideal involves a deep engagement with extracurricular learning and socializing within a university context as much as it does research and classroom-based learning, the university and college become interchangeable concepts at most larger, publicly recognized institutions.

Football embodies and coopts this collegiate ideal because of how it mediates the impersonal experience of the university and allows for large numbers of students to have a “personal” college experience on the campus. As the small colleges of the early nineteenth century gave way to larger universities focused on research and expanded curriculums, football began to fill the gap of the missing collegiate experience and comradery that was more possible on a smaller campus (Toma, 2003). The physicality of football, combined with its connection to “the norms and values of the new professional class” in America (Toma, 2003, p. 31), made it very popular in the late nineteenth century. Football fandom demystified the university life and combated the “elitism associated with higher education” (Toma, 2003, p. 31). As Toma (2003) notes, “Students from diverse backgrounds could participate together in institutional life as spectators—and players on the field who represented the hopes and dreams of these supporters often were from ethnic and socioeconomic groups that were new to higher education” (p. 31). While football in its current form is played by disproportionate number of minority players (NCAA, 2018e), in its inception, football seemed to be a democratized space (Watterson, 2000; Perrin, 1987; Quinn, 2009). All fans faced the field and the only thing that, supposedly, differentiates them from each other is where they are sitting in the stadium. Marxist sports scholar Brohm (1978) argues that

Sports ideology, like all ideologies, *veils* the real structure of production relations which it assumes as ‘natural.’ This ideology *masks* class relations by turning the relations between the individual within the sporting institution into material relations between things: scores, machines, records, human bodies treated as commodities and so on. The ideology would have it that sportsmen and women are formally free and equal, which then justifies their being ranked into different grades. The hero of this ideology is the ‘self-made man’ who attains the heights of performance on the basis of his own merit and through his own efforts: social advancement is possible after all... (p. 55)

Brohm (1978) in his work focuses primarily on the monolithic nature of capitalist ideology and sometimes takes a reductive view on the nature of sport through this lens, often denying the possibility for any good or agency coming out of sport or play.

While his analysis treats sports more generally and arises from a French context where American football is rarely played or engaged with on any meaningful level, his description of sports ideology still correlates in many ways to the capitalist underpinnings of football and university life. Because the American university often reflects its capitalist context, it would stand to reason that football would reflect this as well. Football, like the university, is rife with the belief of meritocracy (Toma, 2003). Players are commonly framed as coming from nothing or having to work to get themselves to be here. At the end of a game, commentators and fans are apt to call a win (or loss, depending on the level of play) “deserved” or “earned.” Many coaches face a dilemma of starting a less talented player who worked hard to get where they are versus starting a more talented player who hasn’t “earned his spot” yet. Even one of the most beloved college football films, *Rudy* (1993), is the story of a player who is undersized and not talented enough to start on Notre Dame’s football team earning a chance to play in the final two plays of the game. During games, fans sit in varying strata of seats based on their general wealth, status as a donor, and number of years donating to the athletic program. Everyone is believed to be there because they earned their way into the stadium. This notion

of pure merit forms one of the key beliefs of what Forney (2007) would term the “American civil religion” (p. 9). This “religion” is not based on belief in God or other deities, but is instead founded on religious-like principles all adopted and believed by the population of a country (Forney, 2007). Football, along with baseball and basketball, forms a core of this religion, and football’s focus within this “religion” is on the difficulties of life and how people can avoid being brought down to earth through the inherent limitations around them (Forney, 2007). Players are venerated because they can stay erect, fight through challenge, and emerge victorious because they are able to ascend above the mundane difficulties of everyday life (Forney, 2007). So since football embodied the ideals of the upper class and middle class who were funding universities and valuing university education as a means of economic upward mobility, football became exceedingly popular in the mid-to-late nineteenth century and grew dramatically as a sport.

In its early years, football was largely student managed and developed as part of university life. Early forms of “football rush” (Toma, 2003, p. 27) were essentially brutal hazing rituals for underclassmen that often more closely resembled a brawl than a game. However, as the game grew, university administration and coaches saw how effective football was at controlling and unifying university culture, so they began to take over management of the game (Toma, 2003; Anderson, 2010). Sport during the late 1800s and early 1900s was being seen more and more as a way to create and foster morality within youth, particularly as outdoor labor and agrarian life were waning in favor of urban life and factory work (Anderson, 2010). To compensate for the sense that men were losing some essential quality by moving away from the land, many saw sport and football in particular as a way to compensate for the apparently growing deficit in manliness (Anderson, 2010). This led to the rise of movements like “muscular Christianity” which emphasized spiritual and physical health and a disavowal of qualities that might be seen as “feminine” (Anderson, 2010; Toma, 2003). Anderson (2010) notes that coaches were often identified as men who could fill the gap of absent father figures and guide boys into becoming “heterosexual, masculine men” and assuage “fears of feminism and

homosexuality” (p. 29). Women were excluded from most sports as it was believed that participating in competitive sports could ruin their innate feminine qualities (Duncan, 2006). Some physicians even believed that too much exercise might ruin women’s uteruses, and people were worried that athletics could cause women to become less docile and capable of being a wife and mother (Duncan, 2006). In fact, it wasn’t until Title IX passed in 1972 that women began to receive opportunities approaching equity in sports, and now equity is still only present in name or symbolic gesture at most institutions. It is a common refrain among fans of “revenue sports” like men’s basketball, baseball, and football that women’s athletics are an unnecessary drain on university budgets and culture (Duncan, 2006). Thus, early football transitioned rapidly from student-led extracurricular to university sanctioned near-curricular because of its power to foster university culture and train college students to be men.

Early college football was filled with drastic changes to its presence in collegiate culture and as a result to its rules and physical presence on campus. One of the largest advocates and key figures for standardizing football was Yale football coach Walter Camp. Often credited as being the “Father of American Football,” Camp helped establish the rules of football and was a part of many of the early innovations like the forward pass and the line of scrimmage which moved the game from an exclusively run-based game to a version of the game we see today (Toma, 2003; Frank, 2003). Camp only coached from 1888-95, but was deeply involved in shaping the rules of football for decades following (Nelson, 1994). In 1905, Camp was a part of the joint committee that met with US President Theodore Roosevelt to decide how to reduce the violence and corruption in football because athletes were dying and working as journeymen players instead of fully enrolled students (Nelson, 1994; Duncan, 2006; Farrell, 1989). In response to this meeting, the Intercollegiate Athletic Association was formed in 1905 and later became the National Collegiate Athletic Association or NCAA in 1910 (Farrell, 1989). Football facilities also shifted dramatically during the early years. Harvard led the early escalation of facilities when it built “the first permanent college stadium” (Toma, 2003, p. 36.). Harvard’s stadium was able to seat an estimated 33,000 spectators (Toma,



2003), which may be a paltry number compared to contemporary stadiums like the University of Michigan's "Big House" which seats 107,601 (University of Michigan, 2017) or the University of Alabama's Bryant-Denny Stadium which seats 102,821<sup>3</sup> (University of Alabama, 2016). However, Harvard's stadium was still larger than Michigan's Ferry Field with 18,000 seats, built in 1906, and Yale's Yale Bowl with 27,000 seats, built in 1914 (Toma, 2003). As the game grew, it cemented itself as a permanent feature in the collegiate landscape. Football may no longer have been a student run activity, but it was still a student performed activity. Even as the game became more refined and commercialized, this need for student participation to justify its existence would remain.

While Toma (2003) and the general public typically focus on larger, high-revenue football universities, football's reach within the academy is far broader than those select teams. The most recognizable programs for most football fans and non-fans are schools that fall within the "Power 5" or 5 most prominent athletic conferences in NCAA football. These conferences include the SEC, the ACC, the PAC 12, the Big 12, and the Big Ten and exist within the "bowl subdivision" of the NCAA's Division 1. Bowl subdivision teams are allowed to play in marquee matchups after the regular season in a complex and shifting system of automatic and invitational post-season "bowl games" at unique locations. Each bowl game is a sort of miniature championship, a chance for teams to get extra practice, more prestige, and higher revenue for TV contracts and bowl prizes packages, and fans get a chance to commemorate a season even if their team was unable to win the national championship. There are currently 40 bowl games including the national championship, and they are big business. All schools and conferences that participated in bowl games in 2017 received a combined profit of \$517 million (Schrotenboer, 2017). Because these teams receive so much exposure, they are often the most recognizable brands, but they are the relative tip of the iceberg when it comes to football teams. In the NCAA Division 1 bowl subdivision (FBS), there are 129

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<sup>3</sup> However, the Alabama athletic department is planning substantial renovations to Bryant-Denny to the tune of \$115 million (Casagrande, 2018). The renovations will likely remove a few thousand seats in the interest of improving the overall gameday experience (Casagrande, 2018).

teams, while the lower subdivision of D1 football, the championship subdivision (FCS), has 124 teams with 1 team transitioning from FCS to FBS (NCAA, 2018). Including NCAA Divisions II and III, the NCAA has a total of 666 football teams (NCAA, 2018). In the National Association of Intercollegiate Athletics (NAIA), an athletic governing body more geared towards smaller schools, many of them Christian schools, 92 schools have football program (NAIA, 2018). In community colleges, 133 schools have teams (National Junior College Athletic Association, 2018; California Community College Athletic Association, 2018). And in the Collegiate Spring Football League (CSFL), a league built around requiring its football players to weigh less than 178 pounds, 10 schools have teams. This comes out to at least 901 football teams at American colleges and universities, not to mention the hundreds of club football programs across the country.

While the prominence of each of these programs may not be equal, even programs at small universities and community colleges can have significant support within a community. For example, Netflix's documentary series *Last Chance U* showcases the culture, coaching, and academics of community colleges like East Mississippi Community College (EMCC) in Scooba, Mississippi, and Independence Community College (ICC) in Independence, Kansas. In each of the respective communities, the football team is supported heavily. In the 3<sup>rd</sup> season in particular, the president of ICC notes how deeply invested the school is in football because they know it benefits the local community by giving them something to cheer for and support (Leibowitz & Ridley, 2018). Most wouldn't consider community colleges "ivory towers" because of their inherent mission to provide education to typically disenfranchised groups and areas of the country, but even in these small towns, the football teams help bridge the college and the community. Conversely, the Kansas University football program has been among the worst performing in all of college football, despite being a Power 5 team, and their games are generally very poorly attended. Most Kansas fans connect to the university through basketball instead of football. All this is to say: the size of a school may potentially determine its national impact of its football program, but it would not be fair to assume that fans of

small or lower division schools don't care about their teams and that their teams don't have a significant rhetorical impact on the identity of the college. So while the uppermost tiers of collegiate football stardom may be the most visible and rhetorically forceful programs in the country, football is deeply ingrained even within small or nationally unknown institutions.

In this section, I have detailed how football arose historically as a component of the university institution. While the sport initially began as a student-led activity, it was quickly taken over by university administrators who saw how readily they could leverage the sport and its fandom to build university culture. This culture may be more visible at larger institutions, but even smaller community colleges can have passionate local support for their teams. I will now build on this historical account to describe how the university functions as a rhetorical constellation and football as a key component of the constellation.

### **Institutional Identity as a Rhetorical Constellation**

In this section I will discuss how the university can be defined rhetorically and how that definition accounts for the presence of football as a key component of university identity. I describe the university as a constellation of rhetorical objects and subjects. I use the term constellation and suggest that objects can be "constellated" into the university in a similar fashion to the way Powell, et al. (2014) have in their work with cultural rhetorics. For Powell, et al. (2014) a constellation best describes how cultural rhetorics interact because

A constellation, however, allows for all the meaning-making practices and their relationships to matter. It allows for multiply-situated subjects to connect to multiple discourses at the same time, as well as for those relationships (among subjects, among discourses, among kinds of connections) to shift and change without holding a subject captive. (para. 17)

In a similar fashion, the relationship between the various elements of a university are complex and shifting. At times things become constellated with a university in unexpected ways, and in other

instances an object must be removed from the constellation for the way it connects the university to undesirable traits or events. In either case, the university privileges these connections and relationships between the elements that comprise it, and thus the university is a constellation. However, the way that the constellation displays and self-constructs can vary from university to university.

In an educational system with so many universities competing for recognition, distinctiveness is key to maintaining relevancy. As Toma (2003) notes, most universities appear to be very similar: most universities and colleges will have the same basic core classes, a focus on research, and a mission to teach and interact with the community. There can be significant variance between them, but these variations are not as readily apparent to the outside public, especially if these distinctions are as nuanced as they can be. Football (and sports in general) helps to create a distinctiveness for universities by using “cultural forms” like “symbols, language, narratives, practices” to invite fans and alumni to identify with the university (Toma, 2003). Fans of Kansas State University are called Wildcats and are often described as being “family” or part of the “Wildcat nation.” K-State’s cheer even draws on this idea explicitly. Often abbreviated “EMAW” in online and fan contexts as a sort of insider reference, K-State describes the relationship of the fans as “Every Man a Wildcat”<sup>4</sup> (Kansas State University, 2015). K-State’s mascot also features a person dressed as a football player wearing a large Wildkat head, as if to signify that anyone could be the mascot because there is no overly specialized costume. Fans and alumni use this identification with K-State as shorthand for a set of values and an institutional history. Because they are a land grant university, the emphasis on agriculture, service to the community, and engineering can position land grants as “universities of the people” where the flagship universities are more often the school for doctors, lawyers, and the elite. When someone sports a purple shirt with the K-State Powercat on the front, they are drawing on a

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<sup>4</sup> Though there has been some controversy over whether or not the slogan should be changed to “Every Person a Wildcat” or EPAW (North, 2011). Ultimately, the slogan is still hosted on K-State’s athletic department’s “Traditions” page and is still a part of the fan culture (Kansas State University, 2015).

number of rhetorical symbols and connections to explain where they may have gone to school or what they value as a “bandwagon fan.”<sup>5</sup> As Toma (2003) notes, “the collegiate ideal as represented through spectator sports is an important factor in defining and articulating the cultural forms that separate one large institution from another in their look and feel” (p. 49).

Universities and football programs draw on a number of cultural forms to accomplish this distinctive “look and feel.” Drawing on the work of Harrison M. Trice and Janice Beyer, Toma (2003) describes university identity through four cultural forms with subforms within each category: “(1) symbols (objects, settings, performers); (2) language (jargon, gestures, songs, humor, metaphors, proverbs); (3) narratives (stories, legends, sagas, myths); and (4) practices (rituals, taboos, rites, ceremonials)” (p. 50).

Toma (2003) defines symbols as “something that stands for or suggests something else” (p. 51). Toma (2003) does note that symbols can have “multiple functions” (p. 52) within a rhetorical situation, and so they can encompass a variety of meanings and purposes. This of course means that symbols can change and shift with *kairos*, such as Pennsylvania State University’s statue of one-time legendary coach Joe Paterno. “JoePa,” as he was affectionately called by Penn State fans. Paterno was head coach from 1966-2011 and was one of the winningest coaches in D1 football at the time of his retirement with an unprecedented record of 409 wins, 136 losses, and 3 ties record. His statue showed him running out ahead of some sculptures of generic Penn State players, symbolizing for many fans his spirit and ability to lead the university forward.

Building on the idea of symbols, Toma (2003) identifies language as a more direct and intentional rhetorical practice than visual symbols: “Embedded within language are categories and rules that provide for more explicit meanings than symbols alone allow” (p. 57). Toma (2003) notes

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<sup>5</sup> Though most K-State fans would laugh at the very notion of a K-State bandwagon fan. They likely exist, but since K-State hasn’t been a perennial powerhouse, most fans prone to cheer for the latest winner are going to pull for programs like Bama and Clemson over K-State, which hasn’t even contended for a conference championship in football since 2012.

that within the symbols and language of an institution, a particular ideology can be embedded as regards football. Though most schools will use similar forms like chants, cheers, gestures, and songs, the ideology that is represented and propagated through the language and songs may correlate to the behavior of the football team (Toma, 2003). It is possible that “[a]t a conservative campus, a conservative offense on the field may be tolerable” (p. 60) to fans, though what is considered conservative will shift dramatically as the game evolves. At one time an offense that primarily ran the ball would be considered conservative, but in 2018, conservative may involve short passes or a balanced attack of nearly equal run and passing plays. Conservative may be more a decision pattern, like whether or not the coach is willing to call risky or trick plays at key moments, whether or not he goes for it on 4<sup>th</sup> down and risks giving the ball back to the other team if they don’t gain enough yardage or he opts to punt the ball to the other team instead. Or, to return to the example of Joe Paterno, Penn State fans not only saw him as a symbolic leader of Penn State, they also described him as a sort of paternal figure for the entire university. His nickname, an easy derivative of his full name, “JoePa” has the feel of an affectionate grandparent name.

Narratives, for Toma (2003), draw on language and symbols to create stories that “help people make sense of their environment” (p. 60). This story will often rely on a certain level of experiential context. To fully encompass the meaning of a particular passing play is possible through language, but it is more often felt within a moment that may take thousands of words to properly describe to someone who never felt it. Or, more colloquially, “you just had to be there.” Narratives are shorthand for extended histories and work as bite-sized stories which can, in turn, eventually be reduced down further into the slogans and chants of language and the visuals of symbols. In 2017, University of Oklahoma quarterback Baker Mayfield led his team to a win on the road over a talented and #2 ranked Ohio State University team. Following the dominant win, Mayfield symbolically planted an OU flag in the middle of Ohio State’s field. The story of his flag planting began to stand-in as a summary of their win and “plant the flag” or #planttheflag became a slogan used by fans and the

image of Mayfield planting it was memed and made into GIFs that were shared widely on social media. In the case of Paterno, his narrative destroyed instead of spread the Penn State culture. In 2011, it came to light that Paterno's longtime defensive coordinator Jerry Sandusky had been raping and molesting children for decades. While Paterno initially denied that he knew, it was later confirmed that he may have known about the assaults at least a decade before Sandusky was put on trial (Ganim, 2017). As a result of Sandusky's behavior coming to light, Paterno's narrative shifted from benevolent coach and patriarch to sexual assault enabler, to a man who would sacrifice the lives of children for the sake of football wins. His statue was removed from campus and was rumored to be melted down, though this has not been confirmed. Because the narrative shifted, the language shifted and the symbol lost the intended meaning and purpose.

For Toma (2003), the practices of football are the most potent rhetorical strategy for creating university culture. Toma (2003) even goes so far as to say that “[t]he essence of college football is the rituals, rites, and ceremonials that articulate and reinforce the collegiate ideal” (p. 63). These sports “[r]ituals are standardized, detailed sets of techniques and behaviors that express common identities that tell people what they are supposed to do” (Toma, 2003, p. 63). Because rituals and all practices require movement and direct engagement by the participant, they actively create the culture within the fan and their context (Toma, 2003). When Florida State fans do the “Tomahawk chop” with the accompanying pseudo-Native American chant, they are reinforcing a group identity with the university mascot and the football team and by extension the university itself. They actively engage with one another and the players in the game through crowd noise and encouragement. The chant becomes a meshing point between the fan and the actual land of the state of Florida, since Florida State attempts to gain geographic ethos from the Seminole mascot. The same principle is true for Mississippi State University's cowbell noisemakers. Fans ring their cowbells both as a symbol of football history involving a cow wandering onto the field, but also their position as an agriculture college. Ringing becomes a ritual and the first calluses from ringing are a rite of passage. These

cheers and gestures and chants extend deeply into the football cultural landscape. For Penn State, removing the statue of Paterno was deeply upsetting because not only did it rupture the established narrative, language, and symbols of the university, it also disrupted the ritual of interacting with the statue before a game. To replace this ritual and show support towards a Paterno's legacy and family, fans leave tributes and flowers at the site where the statue once stood (Moyer, 2016). Some fans and former players and coaches even petitioned for the statue to be reinstated (Moyer, 2016), though that is unlikely to ever happen. Paterno's legacy is too complex, too damaging for Penn State to attach to itself, so it will instead be locked away and intentionally forgotten.

Through these forms colleges are able to “transmit culture and meaning to individuals and groups” (Toma, 2003, p. 50). While the effectiveness of each of these cultural forms can vary from instance to instance, just as the effectiveness of any rhetorical move can vary wildly between rhetorical situations, they all work collectively to create and specify institutional culture. For example, Texas Christian University's (TCU) mascot creates culture along with the TCU hands sign, a gesture that resembles a “peace sign” where the signer bends the index and middle finger. The shade of purple creates culture as does Gary Patterson, TCU's head football coach. The stories around TCU's 2010 football season where they finished the year with a perfect 13-0 record after beating Wisconsin in a tightly contested Rose Bowl also build culture and identity. TCU narrowly missed a chance to play for a national championship that year, a fact that most old-guard TCU fans are unlikely to forget. Adding more fuel to the fire, TCU finished the year ranked #3 in the Bowl Championship Series (BCS) poll, the poll that decided which two team played for the national championship at the time, but were #2 in the Associated Press (AP) poll and the Coaches poll. A season where they just “wanted their shot” at beating Auburn for a national title but never got it. When fans or sports writers discuss teams that have “unjustly” been excluded from playing for a national title, TCU fans may ritualistically respond with a brief reminder of their history as an excluded-yet-worthy team. When they were excluded again in 2014 from a spot in the inaugural College Football Playoff, fans



ritualistically recounted the 2010 exclusion again and new fans once again passed through the rite of cheering for a team that gets less respect than a powerhouse like Bama. These various forms all contribute towards building and expanding the culture of TCU in its immediate area and nationally. What was once an up-and-coming program is now nationally respected as a well-coached program that can periodically contend for at least a conference title, if not a national title. These cultural forms, thus, are not just elements of a football subculture, but are actively rhetorical elements of a constellation of rhetorical objects and subjects.

These rhetorical objects and subjects can more succinctly be described as rhetorical “things.” For this project, I am drawing on a very specific usage of the word “thing” from the philosophical school of object-oriented ontology (OOO). In his work on OOO, Bogost (2012) describes the philosophical concept of the “thing” as a general term for anything in existence, “many and variable, specific and concrete, while their *being* remains identical” (p. 12). In his dissection of OOO, Bogost (2012) postulates the idea that all things in existence—be they abstract ideas or physical objects or anything in between or beyond—exist on an equal ontological footing. Drawing on Bryant’s (2011) idea of flat ontology, or an ontology that is equal across all things, Bogost (2012) postulates that the existence of a thing is equal particularly since the bulk of the universe exists and operates outside of a human interaction or awareness. Even within our own planet, we can never have perfect knowledge of something as simple as a banana (Bogost 2012). We can perhaps understand it deeply, but we will not fully grasp its ontology, especially if we frame the universe through purely human-centric interpretive lenses (Bogost, 2012). This equivalent essence is intriguing but has been justifiably criticized for minimizing identity politics by making humans and their agency exist equal to a doorknob or an asteroid or Harry Potter, though Bogost (2012) would contend with this use of OOO. As Bogost (2012) notes in an axiomatic description,

*all things equally exist, yet they do not exist equally.* The funeral pyre is not the same as the aardvark; the porceletta shell is not equivalent to the rugby ball. Not only is neither pair reducible to human encounter, but also neither is reducible to the other. (p. 11)

For Bogost (2012), the equalization of ontology does not reduce the intersections of things, but instead describes their being outside the human framework as much as this is possible from a human perspective, a position he describes as “alien phenomenology” (p. 34). Through alien phenomenology, people can attempt the process of understanding the universe through a more post-human or a-human stance. This perspective can help us imagine outside the inherent narcissism of our phenomenology. The goal is not to dehumanize people but instead to consider the ontology of the nonhuman in the broadest terms possible, even outside the human framework.

Where Toma’s (2003) cultural forms help us describe the specific kinds of things in the rhetorical constellation of the university, Bogost’s (2012) alien phenomenology describes how these things are connected. Toma (2003) identifies the what, but not necessarily how it fully interrelates. While I do not intend to argue that a chant exists equally with a Black football player, they do have equal existence as rhetorical things within the university. The differentiation I am making is while Bogost argues for an ontology of things beyond human phenomenology, I am speaking of their rhetoricity, of their function as signs and signifiers and persuasive things. Because I am only concerned with how rhetorical things enact their force on human subjects, my use of the term thing and the concepts of OOO are limited within a human, rhetorical frame. I recognize that this is a slight bastardization of OOO since Bogost (2012) and Bryant (2011) attempt to move past the human framework and especially past philosophical stances that make a pretense of alien phenomenology without actually moving beyond ontology outside human subjectivity. However, unlike philosophies and theories that may propose to examine things from an object-oriented perspective but fall short of this, I make no attempt to do this. Instead, I want to draw on the concept of thingness as a form of rhetoric, how things have an inherent existence as a rhetorical object/subject. In many ways, I am

drawing on Thomas Rickert's (2013) concepts of ambient rhetoric, where the environment can have a rhetorical purpose and we can be unconsciously attuned to the environment. I make no attempt to argue about the essential ontology of a university's rhetorical things, nor am I convinced of OOO's proposed "democracy of objects" (Bryant, 2011). Instead I intend to leverage this way of thinking within a rhetorical and human context to describe the way that universities privilege connectedness to the network. Within this context, a person exists just as much as a rhetorical object such as a t-shirt and a poster and a stadium and a pebble under the bleachers. To paraphrase Bogost: even though all these things exist as part of the rhetorical construct we call the university, they do not exist equally. A person is able to enact their rhetorical force more actively and leverage the force of argument more effectively than a canine mascot or especially a coaster, but they are all elements of the university. They are the atoms that create and make up the university as a rhetorical subject that seeks to build its brand and propagate itself to maintain its own existence. The orange pants I wear on campus and the Nike wristband at the bottom of a tennis player's closet are all part of the university as it actually functions beyond the physical construct of the geographic campus.

When I say that the university is made up of these cultural forms/rhetorical things, I don't mean this metaphorically. For Toma (2003), the collegiate ideal and uniqueness of the university is constructed through the cultural forms, but his work stops just short of asserting that they are the university proper. Toma treats these cultural forms in much the same way linguists treats the elements of discourse communities: these are language and practices positioned around a topic or interest. While this perspective is not an invalid means of approaching the university and college football, many critics of college football describe the football and the university as separate entities or football as a sort of virus that has crept its way into the university and corrupted it. Football and the university are institutions worthy of critique (and I will do this extensively in following chapters); however, they are far more ecologically entwined than they are often given credit for. As a microcosm of this link, there is evidence that admission application numbers go up for colleges with

successful football programs and that more applications allow for universities to be pickier in who they admit, which in turn raises academic achievement metrics for the incoming class (Pope & Pope, 2009). Even if having successful football program is not the most prominent factor in increasing applications, success still has a measurable effect on applications and enrollment (Davis as cited in Newton, 2018). Wins in football and basketball can attract more local students to attend a university (Perez, 2012), which is significant considering local students are usually the most likely to attend a university if they qualify academically and financially. Football attendance directly correlates to freshmen retention because more widely supported sports cultures better integrate students into campus life (Jones, 2010). The iconography on the uniforms is the same as that of the university and teams are named after the university and its mascot. Mascots commonly appear at non-athletic university events, and sports gestures and chants enter non-athletic events like graduation. Even geographically: most football programs with successful teams have stadiums on or very near their campus and athletic facilities are generally considered “on campus.” When someone is said to have “school spirit,” they have the university equivalent of patriotism or even nationalism. This is usually assumed to correlate directly to sports fandom. Football players exist within the dual position of being considered completely a student and completely an athlete. The reason for this is that both materially and conceptually, the university and football are entangled and one within the university. They are formed from a network of rhetorical things that becomes a rhetorical constellation, a network shape we recognize as a particular university. This rhetorical constellation is what we call the university.

The things within the rhetorical constellation all exist as a part of our conceptualization of the constellation. A mascot is not generally a real, living being but is played by a person or animal for the university, yet this mascot exists just as much within the rhetorical constellation as a seat in the stadium. This does not suggest that it has the same value, that a football player or a fan is worth as much as a pair of crimson and cream socks, but they both have equal existence within the rhetorical constellation of the university. Within the marketing and monetization structure of football, which we

have previously identified as capitalistic, the football player and fan are also equally commodified. The constellation is made up of objects and subjects, places and spaces, publics and individuals, buildings and parking spaces, alumni and advertisement, narratives and slogans, memory and slander, law and curriculum, regents and professors, students and the descriptions of classes offered in the fall. They all collect together based on a variety of principles. Some relate due to space and geography, like a generic green t-shirt becomes a part of the campus of Baylor University or even the town of Waco, Texas, because of its proximity to the campus and because Baylor's school colors are green and gold. Some relate due to direct reference to the constellation. University symbols and names identify the constellation directly. Some relate because we say that they do. Universities like Oklahoma State or Kansas State were founded by the Morrill Act and are land grant institutions. They were founded because lawmakers, citizens, administrators, faculty, and students agreed that the institution would now begin to exist. Future iterations of these rhetoric constellations can relate through history and narrative connection to this original decision. Regardless of how they come into relation, they relate through a series of rhetorical connections to the rest of the university constellation.

A university constellation, particularly that of a public university, connects to the state where it is located. Since states provide significant funding to universities, any department that can produce significant cash flow to the university and can free up more of the state's budget, may have more sway with legislators than a department like English that may have more direct contact with a larger number of students and future alumni. Both departments exist within the university, but their rhetorical connectedness alters their force of action. In a similar vein, college football often takes more precedence than pure academics in decisions regarding gameday parking or holding classes before weekday games. Football, more than even a highly successful STEM or business department, interacts with the public, the network outside the university. Football has more direct connections branching outside the university, so the head football coach may be considered the figurehead and

leader of the university even though the university president or chancellor likely has much more to say about the actual operation of the university. However, the rhetorical connectedness of football makes it far more valuable to the university constellation for helping build and maintain rhetorical connections and for its use in expanding the constellation. After all, if the university constellation privileges connectedness as its primary mode of existence, maintaining and building those connections is crucial to the university continuing to exist.

Having described the way university identity works rhetorically, I will now discuss how constellating can occur in sports events.

### **The University Constellation as Self-propagating**

In this section, I present a variety of examples to illustrate how the university functions as a constellation of rhetorical things and how those things integrate with appeals to the brand of the university. The university constellation in some ways functions as living thing, if not a sentient thing, like algae or a virus that works automatically towards maintaining and expanding itself in all directions, both inwardly and outwardly. I first will show the ways that the beginning ceremonies and rituals of Oklahoma State's football game openers worked to solidify the university as both attached to the land and the people and continuously expanded the constellation. I will then show the general application of the principles of constellated identity and brand at universities that closely resemble Oklahoma State like Mississippi State, North Carolina State, and the University of Miami. I will show the similarities and differences to building a university constellation through appeals to land and geography. Then I will discuss instances where universities must unconstellate a student-athlete from the university and how that process can be handled with distinct risks and rewards for university identity, aside from the rightness of the actual decisions. In this section, I will again discuss Oklahoma State to give a consistent sets of examples to link the principles in both sections. I will also discuss two additional universities, the University of Oklahoma and TCU, and how they treated

unconstellating a student-athlete from the university differently in roughly the same time period. The differences in their treatment of the student-athletes affected the perception of their football and athletic programs as well as the university at large, and I will briefly discuss what those effects were as well.

### *Oklahoma State University's New Jumbotron*

First, I will discuss how Oklahoma State used the beginning of their first home game of the 2018 season to constellate fans into the university. The Oklahoma State University Cowboys opened their football season playing the Missouri State University Bears. While the Bears have had good years and the Cowboys have played them before, Missouri State is not commonly regarded as an FCS powerhouse. This game was incredibly low risk for the Cowboys since they could probably win with little-to-no preparation just solely based on the gap in physique and raw talent. A game like this might potentially have low attendance, but because this is the first game of the season, the stadium was nearly full. OSU leveraged the excitement for the beginning of the season to make this game as affective and well attended as possible. OSU also leveraged the introduction of their new \$5 million jumbotron (Staff, 2018). This jumbotron was the 8<sup>th</sup> largest college football video board in the country at the time of writing (Staff, 2018), and stood 56 feet high and 110 feet wide (Wright, 2018). The screen and the return of the team with a new starting quarterback and a new defensive coordinator made the team seem fresh with potential.

The opening ceremony of the football game attempted to grapple with the complexity of the relationship between the university and football and the new screen and the state of Oklahoma itself. The PA announcer introduced the Cowboy Marching Band, and the band played various cheers and the fight song while they marched into the shape of the state of Oklahoma. Most of these cheers and the fight song involved fans repeatedly spelling “OSU” or “Oklahoma” and making the “Pistols Up” gesture with their hands. All of these gestures and symbols worked to make the pregame experience

filled with activity, but they also prompted fans with an embodied reinforcement of university identity. The university invited spectators to participate and increase their connectedness to the rest of the constellation. The announcer used his cadence and tone to both describe the action and events on the field to inform and entertain, to be sure, but also to instruct fans on how they should have felt. When introducing the band, he elongated his syllables in the same pattern every game to build the excitement and also model the appropriate response for the fans. The announcer told the crowd specifically to cheer for “*your Cow-boy March-ing Band!*” Spectators familiar with this introduction repeated it along in earnest or ironically, but they still repeated it and engaged with the constellation. If they joined in with the fandom even in small or ironic ways, the university grew, its tendrils extending further into the rhetorical landscape.

When the MC on the field introduced the new jumbotron, OSU’s mascot, Pistol Pete, marches onto the field with an enormous, fake remote control. The MC counted down, inviting the crowd to join in, as Pete prepped his hand to hit the “power button” on the remote. Once he hit the button, the jumbotron turned on and displayed a TV-standby visual before launching into the intro video. The intro video, perhaps more than any other part of this event, consciously tried to construct the ethos and ideals of the university. The video had a black, white, grey, and deeply saturated orange color palette. The video weaved shots of the team tackling or scoring with stylized shots of a shadowy cowboy (though distinctly not Pistol Pete), football players in helmets and pads standing in front of a stormy sky or a flat horizon, and rodeo cowboys roping calves or riding bulls. The action of the video correlated closely to a recut and shortened version Aerosmith’s song “Back in the Saddle Again.” The video was structured around a series of text statements. Altogether, the slides read as follows:

[Slide 1]: WELCOME TO

[Slide 2]: THE OPEN PLAINS

[Slide 3]: YOU’VE ENTERED



[Slide 4]: THE HEART OF

[Slide 5]: COWBOY COUNTRY

[Slide 6]: WE WORK THESE LANDS

[Slide 7]: WE DEFEND THIS TURF

[Slide 8]: WE RULE THIS KINGDOM

[Slide 9]: TRESPASSERS

[Slide 10]: BEWARE

[Slide 11]: YOU MESS WITH A COWBOY

[Slide 12]: YOU MESS

[Slide 13]: WITH A POSSE

[Slide 14]: OSU [the logo that looks like a cattle brand]

Below in figures 2-14 I have included screenshots of the video as well<sup>6</sup>.

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<sup>6</sup> Access to this video was granted for a limited timeframe during fall 2018. As such, some of the screenshots are a bit obscured by user interface from YouTube where the video was hosted for me to access and some of the images are blurry or have poor resolution. With limited access, I was unable to go back and retake screenshots of the video or receive additional access to the video. However, based on the other images and the text provided in the transcript, I do think the images are functionally readable enough for these purposes of analysis.



Figure 4



Figure 5

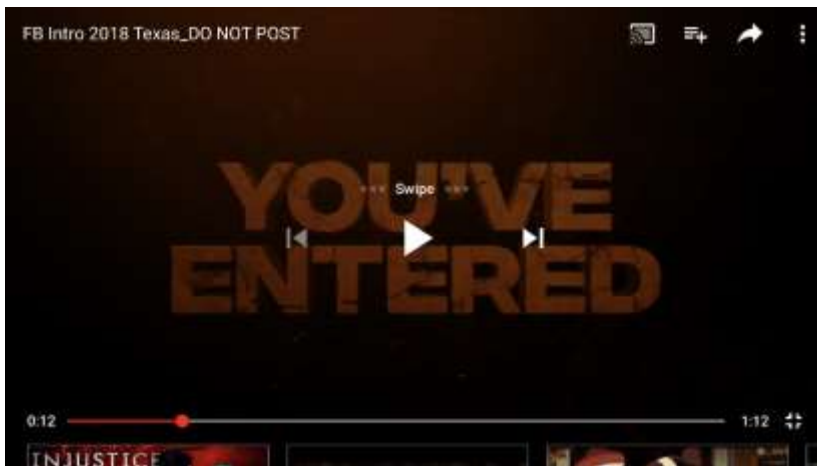


Figure 6



Figure 7



Figure 8



Figure 9



*Figure 10*



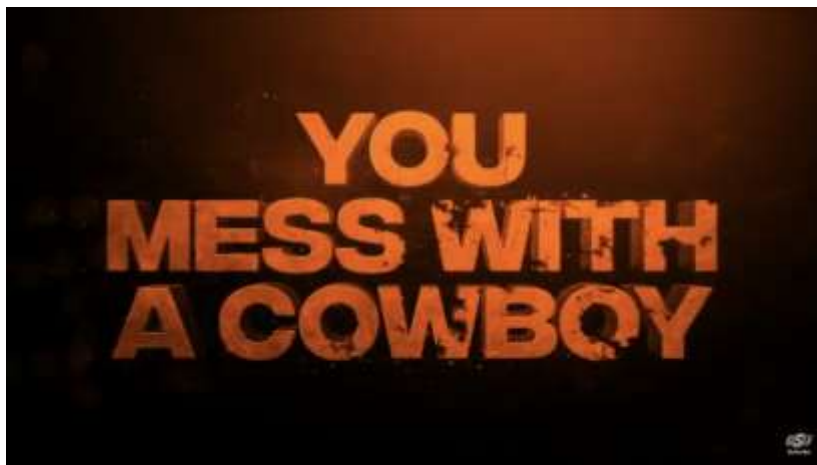
*Figure 11*



*Figure 12*



*Figure 13*



*Figure 14*



*Figure 15*



*Figure 16*



*Figure 17*

The entire video lasted a little over a minute, with a couple dozen shots and cuts between the previously mentioned categories of images. This rapid cutting and similar color scheme (though not in actual game or the rodeo footage) worked with the single song in the background like a montage that represented the constellated nature of the university. Each of the shots existed separately from each other, but when given proximity and connection, they became a single cohesive video that invented the OSU ethos of hard-working, blue collar athletics. OSU's athletic media department not only wanted fans to experience pathos during the video, but they also wanted them to muddle the images together into a relatively unified whole. They implied through constellation that all the images were about the same thing: OSU and its fans. If you were a part of the OSU constellation, you were

part of the team ethos, which was particularly emphasized when the video showed shots of the crowd celebrating, cheering, gesturing, or showed “school spirit” through body paint and costumes. Or, to return to Rickert (2013), you became “attuned” to the constellation and its norms. The video, like the PA announcer, invited and taught the fans what being a fan involved and how fandom should be enacted within and outside the stadium. Fandom here was a multimodal amalgamation of ideas, images, sounds, feelings, aesthetics, movement, people, places (real and imagined), and the fan. In this way, the video was a microcosm of the most visible and athletic side of the university constellation.

In addition to showcasing a portion of the constellation through football things, the video decidedly blended OSU with the physical land and historical ethos of Oklahoma. The text in the video made 5 different references to land with a variety of connotations: “plains,” “country,” “lands,” “turf,” and “kingdom.” In each of these references, OSU and the people that were part of its constellation were directly linked to the land. The land was “Cowboy country” which a non-specific “we” “work,” “defend,” and “rule.” The fans and the players alike earned their place within the geography, figurative and imagined, by stewarding and guarding it with an old-fashioned work ethic. The other team and fans were even positioned as trespassers, outlaws who infringed in particular on the rights of a person to agency over their land and safety. The video consistently punned the football field with the actual plains geography of Oklahoma. The word “turf” could refer to the field itself (even though the grass in Boone Pickens Stadium was artificial) or to the land possessed by the university. Working the lands in this context could be working on the field, exerting ourselves in football, or working as a farmer.

The video ended by reinforcing the idea of collective identity by asking the vigilante “posse” to enforce the law against figurative trespassers and by showing OSU’s cattle brand logo. Cattle brands were developed as a response to the lack of demarcated land in the west when ranchers would graze cattle out on the plains. To keep the cattle distinct, they would be branded so that other ranchers

couldn't claim them based on where they were physically since they carried the mark of their owner with them. All land that they engaged with was their land. This didn't stop ranchers from branding and claiming any unbranded cattle that wandered on their lands. While perhaps not intentionally so, ending this video with the brand evoked this history and attempted a sort of rhetorical branding. All fans that wandered into the stadium without a brand might now have been branded "OSU" and could wander wherever they wanted from here but would carry the identity marker with them. OSU attached to them and enveloped them as part of the constellation of the university. The football program was the primary means by which this happened. This may seem counter to the land rhetorics used earlier in the video since it allows for a decentralization of identity away from the land, but it inevitably relies on the establishment of a land ethos to give it rhetorical weight, like a gold standard for currency. An OSU fan can return to Stillwater, Oklahoma, and point to the stadium as the antecedent of the brand even as much as OSU rhetorically claims them as part of the university. Branding of cattle relies on proximity to occur, particularly for cattle that previously didn't belong to the rancher. Cattle that wander onto the rancher's lands can be branded and made theirs with very little contest. Cattle can be rounded up elsewhere and brought back to the ranch to be branded (or they could be branded on the plains). The connection between the land and the ranch lends the brand more rhetorical force. The land is not a ranch unless that identity is inscribed on it, or in other words, the land itself becomes the ranch through its connections to the rancher and the cattle they possess. A rancher gains ethos for the amount of land connected to them, as well as the cattle, which ecologically makes the cattle and land more valuable as well in a recursive loop. Similarly, the university constellation may not be defined by the physical campus, but its existence is an important nucleus for the constellation since it is the first form of geographic proximity that constellates. Students arrive "on campus" and become Cowboys. They use the ethos of the buildings and the main campus to justify their stake within the constellation and create strong connections to it. Here the existence of the land doesn't necessarily lend more credence to their inclusion within the constellation, their brand, just because the land is physical. However, because the land is physical, it provides far more



rhetorical connections between the fan/student than just watching the games on TV. The brand image at the end of the video attempts to crystalize this rhetorical process within the moment of the image.

So while unveiling the jumbotron and showing the intro video may be one small part of the constellating process of college gameday, it represents many of the ways OSU constellates with fans and vice versa.

### *Land Appeals and Constellations at Mississippi State, NC State, and Miami*

Now I will discuss a similar method of constellating fans at universities of similar size and football culture as Oklahoma State. After all, Oklahoma State is not unique in its use of land appeals to connect with fans. Other universities constantly draw on landscape, though not necessarily through the same frontier and cowboy ethos. Mississippi State in the late 00s and early 10s had a marketing campaign centered on the mantra “This is our state!” As with OSU’s punning on land and field in the video, this slogan punned on the land and the name of the university, particularly since MSU fans typically refer to MSU as “State,” among other things. Billboards would be put up at the borders of Mississippi advertising MSU and saying that Mississippi is “our state!” and any and all aspects of the university constellation could be deployed to expand this purpose. Miss Mississippi was an MSU student or alum for 3 years in a row, which ran counter to the common narrative that MSU’s rival the University of Mississippi<sup>7</sup> is where all the “pretty girls” go. “This is our state!” In one year, MSU had a player drafted in the first round of the NFL, NBA, and MLB and was one of the few schools to do so within the entire country, let alone state. “This is our state!” During this period, MSU was relatively dominant in football against their rival, winning 6 out of 10 rivalry games from 2005-15, called the “Egg Bowl,” including a stretch of 3 in a row from 2009-11. The University of Mississippi also experienced some deep valleys as a program, oscillating between losing seasons and seasons

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<sup>7</sup> The University of Mississippi is commonly referred to as “Ole Miss,” which is a problematic term with a history that, among other origins, can reference the mistress of a plantation. Considering that and UM’s long and recent history with Confederate iconography, I am abstaining from referring to them by that moniker.

where they finished the year ranked in the AP top 25 whereas MSU was seen as a program on the rise that had gone from being a team at the bottom of the SEC most years to competitive within its conference. Additionally, the football rivalry was historically lopsided with the University of Mississippi having roughly 20 more wins than MSU. With MSU moving closer to parity with UM, there was a narrative and sense that the UM's position as the flagship university was slipping during some of the years of the campaign. This football narrative, though complex and not nearly as one-sided as most MSU fans would position it, lent some credibility to their claim over the state of Mississippi. Football was the primary focal point and most potent avenue for the "This is our state!" slogan, but as previously mentioned, it was applied across multiple areas of perceived competition with UM.

North Carolina State University tried their own "This is our state!" campaign, a direct copy of MSU's campaign. However, their campaign was short lived and eventually scrapped because NC State failed to win in football (or basketball) over in-state rivals with any consistency, even losing to all other major North Carolina football programs (University of North Carolina, East Carolina, Wake Forest, and Duke) in the 2013 season (Giglio, 2014). MSU's own campaign fell out of use as Ole Miss began to reclaim some of its former glory defeating football juggernaut Alabama in back-to-back years and beating MSU in the Egg Bowl in 2014, the year MSU was considered the number one team in the country for several weeks before losing two of their last three games. Despite assurances by NC State's athletic director that their choice to abandon the slogan was unconnected to their recent sports slump (Giglio, 2014), the correlation between football (and other forms) of success shows that this slogan while constellated, relied on football for its most rhetorically forceful means of expanding the constellation of branding new fans.

Beyond campaigns, many universities utilize collective and land-based slogans or catchphrases or other land-centric moves to describe their fandom or the reach of their constellation. Coaches and players commonly praise the "family" atmosphere of a campus or town, and the word

“nation” is commonly attached to the mascot’s name to describe the fandom. University of Kansas fans or sports commentators speaking about them may refer to the fandom as Jayhawk Nation, or Iowa State fans may be referred to as Cyclone Nation. Usually this encompasses the landscape and physical community surrounding a campus, but more often it’s used to describe the human members of the constellation. In a more indirect approach, Clemson University ties their football team to the land through a faux graveyard built near their practice fields. Clemson’s athletic department describes the graveyard as a place where away game (games not played at Clemson’s stadium) victories over ranked opponents are documented since they are particularly rare for college teams (Clemson University, 2018). In the graveyard, Clemson erects marble tombstones with the name of the team they defeated, the team’s rank at the time of the game, the location, and the score. Bowl games and national championships will have additional information. For Clemson, this is a particularly effective if ridiculous way to create a direct connection between football and the land. Graveyard memorials contain an element of permanence, a link between human life and the soil as the body decays. This graveyard is a relatively unique football tradition even though other schools like Florida State University and the University of Maryland also erect tombstones for ranked victories. The graveyard encourages a sort of fanaticism among fans and players, hyperbolically implying that football is a life or death event. The stakes for the games take on additional meaning and remind players also of the history of the team in defeating prominent opponents, which constructs a narrative that can inform player performance and fan interpretations of victories. Success has a physical marker with more connections than defeat, which has no markers.

While land has a powerful rhetorical purpose within the constellation, it is not required to create connections. Many fans can gain long and meaningful connections outside the campus and gameday environment, particularly if their family or social group are also fans. What gameday and the campus have, aside from the legitimacy of a permanent physical antecedent, is an intense concentration of constellation elements like t-shirts, mascots, spirit squads, the marching band, other

fans, gestures, chants, and other orchestrated ceremonies and traditions. Connections can be made rapidly and forcefully in this sort of environment as they were in the beginning of Oklahoma State's 2018 first home game, and some fans may even treat traveling back to the campus as a sort of pseudo-sacred pilgrimage. Even the tradition of the homecoming game is one of inviting alumni home to visit and reestablish connections between themselves and the institution, a sort of renewal of constellated effects. However, the effect of constellated community can become stronger the further an object and fan get from the landscape. For example, seeing a Red Raiders t-shirt in Lubbock, Texas, or around the Texas Tech University campus would like not spark much of a reaction from a fellow fan because of the ubiquity of the university things, but if two fans wearing Texas Tech t-shirts pass in the La Guardia airport, they would be more likely to reaffirm the connection to each other directly. They may say the school cheer, "Wreck 'em," or make the "Guns up" gesture with their hands or say something as simple as "Go Red Raiders!" University of Oklahoma fans may say "Boomer" as a sort of call and response. If the other person is a fan, they will likely reply "Sooner" to finish the cheer. Baylor fans can "Sic 'Em," and Texas fans can "Hook 'em Horns." Regardless, the geographical position of the fan in relation to the campus affects the rhetorical situation of the connections within the constellation. Ultimately, the university may center on the physical campus, but its actual identity is distributed across a vast network of things connected rhetorically.

### *Repairing the University Constellation at TCU, Oklahoma State, and OU*

In this section, I will discuss instances where a morally and legally harmful action by a student-athlete was constellated into the athletic and university identity and how several similar universities—Oklahoma State, OU, and TCU—responded. All of these events happened during a relatively similar timeframe, so the cultural expectations surrounding the response were generally the same, which may not have been the case if several decades separated each example. Since a primary rhetorical impetus for the university constellation, like any community, is its own survival, university constellations will adapt and remove any thing that threatens the constellation's existence. Because

football is one of the most rhetorically potent and present clusters of things in the university, many decisions are made by administrators and fans to protect the constellation and not necessarily to uphold legal or ethical rules. This does not mean that every good choice hurts the constellation or vice versa, but that the rhetoric of the constellation can be so powerful that people acquiesce to it rather than break connections and make a more ethical choice.

A scenario that occurs far more often than it should in college football is the discovery that a player or coach has committed assault or domestic violence. While the veracity of the charges can be questionable in some instances so the response will vary, in many cases the same sort of evidence can yield highly different results depending on what administrators and coaches decide best preserves the university. For example, from 2014-15 TCU, OU, and OSU all had prominent players involved in assault. In July 2014, OU freshman running back Joe Mixon punched a young woman in the face, breaking multiple bones. According to the victim, Mixon and his friends made sexual advances towards her and when she adamantly refused, the altercation escalated (Vardeman, 2017). While the cause of the altercation is disputed by Mixon (Clay, 2016), from surveillance video it is clear that Mixon's physical aggression escalates rapidly, responding to her pushing and slapping him when he threatened her and her friends by punching her in the head (SI Wire, 2016). Regardless of the circumstance, his aggression and assault were met with a heavy level of ambiguity from the fandom and administration. Mixon was officially suspended from the team for a year and required to perform 100 hours of community service and attend behavioral counseling (Vardeman, 2017), but he was also present and dressed in OU gear at a pep rally when he was supposed to be suspended (Kersey, 2014). The image of him in OU gear at the pep rally became a part of the OU football program both in the way it documents a constellating moment of colors, gestures, narrative, and physical presence for him at the rally, but in the way it became an object unto itself. Similar to René Magritte's *Treachery of Images*, the picture is not Mixon but it becomes its own thing within the constellation of OU. But the hoodie he was wearing, the people in attendance, the players standing next to him, and so on all

connect with him and the image of him into the university in a way that becomes a part of the collective identity.

OU coaches and fans claimed that keeping him on the team was an opportunity to rehabilitate him, but many commentators and fans saw the move as a “win at all costs” gesture by the coaching staff, particularly because the student he assaulted also attended OU. While the goal of rehabilitation is laudable, his punishment functioned as a de facto “red shirt” where he sat out a year and was allowed to play the next year. He appeared in OU gear at a pep rally and had the support of the OU football community, which could be read as support for his actions, at least indirectly. Mixon played for the Sooners for two years and was drafted into the NFL, but because his stats and presence exists in the memories, narratives, symbols, and language of OU football, his assault also constellated with OU. OU is certainly not unique in choosing to see the playing potential of a player as more crucial than their off-the-field actions and history. Baylor University infamously supported a culture of rape on its campus under the supervision of head coach Art Briles (Mervosh, 2017). While it is suspected that what occurred was far worse than the actual reports, it was reported that “31 Baylor football players committed at least 52 acts of rape, including five gang rapes, between 2011 and 2014” (Mervosh, 2017, para. 1). These assaults were tolerated by administration and coaches, similar to the Sandusky case at Penn State, despite their public claims otherwise (Smith, 2016). This choice is not only ethically and morally problematic, it also can deeply impact the university constellation and cause the destruction of the football program which would in turn weaken the university constellation significantly which is why universities will fight aggressively to keep their football programs, even if it means jeopardizing the actual success of the team.

A little over a year after Mixon was convicted of assaulting the OU student, OSU and TCU both experienced similar situations but decided to suspend and expel the, arguably, most talented players on their teams shortly before bowl games. For OSU, shortly after earning a bowl bid, it was reported that star running back Tyreek Hill had punched his pregnant girlfriend in the stomach and

face and had choked her (Chavez, 2015). Hill was dismissed almost immediately even though he had recently helped lead OSU to a victory over rival OU with a thrilling late 4<sup>th</sup> quarter punt returned for a touchdown (Chavez, 2015). The risk of keeping Hill attached to the university was far too high because his assault, if he was kept on the team, could constellate with the rest of the university negatively. Similarly, TCU dismissed star quarterback Trevone Boykin following his assault of a police officer the night before their bowl game in 2015 (Bonesteel, 2015). In each case, dismissing the player allowed for TCU and OSU to attach at least a perceived ethical standard to the university whereas OU's and, especially, Baylor's enabling or encouragement of violence and/or rape attached these crimes to the university. In the case of Baylor, their team has been significantly impacted by the constellated offenses and they have lost a great deal of ethos as an institution and football program. In the 2016-17 following the firing of Art Briles, Baylor went 7-6 and 1-11 after winning at least 10 games from 2013-15. OU, on the other hand, has mostly gone unscathed because their constellation is incredibly robust with a long history of football excellence and because the head coach, Bob Stoops, who decided to keep Mixon on the team retired shortly after Mixon was drafted so some of the guilt associated with keeping him left with Stoops. While a much more significant scandal in terms of number of people damaged by the abuse and assault, Penn State was able to recover from their Sandusky scandal for the same reasons that OU was: Joe Paterno left Penn State and then passed away, taking many of the connections to Sandusky with him. Penn State's success as a program also afforded them enough positive connections that people, including national media that should call for accountability, described the Penn State football program as heroic as they were "leaving blame in the dust" (Emerick, 2012, para. 11). Others described how Penn State fans found games following the firing of Paterno and the start of the next season to be cathartic since it demonstrated the unity of the campus and community (Simon, 2012; CBS News, 2011). Vint (2013) openly questioned if the 15 players who transferred from Penn State in light of the scandals actually made the right decision, and Penn State decided to honor the 2012 team as if they had won a conference or national championship because they were the first team that played after the scandal (Myerberg, 2012). The university

constellation defended itself desperately even when it likely deserved for the football program to be cancelled entirely. Narratives of resurgence, resurrection, and rebuilding surged in the years following and the scandal is rarely mentioned just a few years later when the actual abuse lasted for decades. The university constellations of OU, Baylor, Penn State, TCU, and OSU all worked to protect themselves through scandal and abuse, and while all were relatively successful, some made varying levels of moral and ethical compromise in the process, which constellates with their program and impacts their identity, whether or not most would like to believe it. This is not to suggest that TCU and OSU are spotless programs or that Penn State, OU, and Baylor have not made appropriate responses to scandal and negative impacts on their constellation, but in these instances the choices each program and fanbase made have constellated the scandals in very different ways.

For us as rhetoricians, this means that whether we like it or not, the choices of athletic administrators, fans, players, and coaches can deeply shape and reflect the public perception of our institution and work. When a university is caught up in a scandal, even if that scandal is genuinely contained within the athletic department or a single sports program, many fans will dismiss the entire university. Because we are also things in the constellation of the university, we constellate with those actions in the same way that we constellate our students into the university through our classrooms. We create memorable experiences, facilitate learning, help them understand and enact rhetoric and writing, and this constellates students into the university as well. The links between ourselves, our students, and the actions of a hotshot quarterback who decided to fight a police officer may be distant, but they are present. As we teach, we are linked with football and football is linked with us.

### **University and Game as Inseparable**

In this chapter I have attempted to demonstrate how the university identity is complex and often created and fostered through the football program. While all things within the university constellation have the chance to connect and influence identity, some are more culturally recognized



and carry a higher rhetorical/connective force, and football may be the most potent thing for creating the face of universities in particular contexts. Physical presence is a significant opportunity for connection and constellation, which is why football game days are so crucial for building university identity. Many detractors of football and sports at universities correctly identify that sports are not necessarily as educationally focused in the traditional sense as a classroom experience; however, students who are deeply connected to the university culture are more likely to have a productive educational experience. Additionally, the American collegiate ideal for university education is not based solely in the curricular educational experience but also in the opportunities for social and extra-curricular learning. This does not justify the abuses that sports can perform or that can be performed through sports, as previously mentioned and as will be detailed even further later. Nevertheless, the presence of football (and sports in general) within the institution has potential for socializing and fostering a more multifaceted and multimodal form of learning, one that can address the complex abuses and benefits that a prevalent sports culture can foster. If we do not grapple ourselves with our full institutional context, it will be difficult for us to properly engage with students who are likely more deeply constellated than we are through their diverse exposure to the university. If our ultimate goal as teachers is to facilitate learning and create learning environments/networks, we must understand the larger networks we and our students move through and within.

Football is a rhetorical institution that allows for universities to manage fan culture and university identity but also one that moves on its own. Football as a game extends far beyond the scope of the field that we typically reserve for it. At OSU, football runs through the institution well beyond the scope of Boone Pickens Stadium, and at Iowa State, football is larger than the 61,500 seats in Jack Trice stadium, and so on at other universities. Football and the university are completely entangled within the same constellations, which can have far reaching impacts on how the game itself is played and what that game can do to student-athlete identity, as I will discuss in chapter three.

## CHAPTER III

### KICKOFF

*Implemented in 2003 as part of an ambitious academic reform effort in Division I, the Academic Progress Rate (APR) holds institutions accountable for the academic progress of their student-athletes through a team-based metric that accounts for the eligibility and retention of each student-athlete for each academic term.... The APR system includes rewards for superior academic performance and penalties for teams that do not achieve certain academic benchmarks. Data are collected annually, and results are announced in the spring.*

-NCAA APR webpage (2018c)

*Sure, winning isn't everything;  
it's the only thing.*

-Henry Russell Sanders (1956), UCLA Bruins football coach

### **Introduction**

Oklahoma State University, like most large universities with athletic programs, has a tutoring and advising facility, called the Athletic Educational Center (AEC). This facility exists to assist student-athletes with their courses and their degrees, and to certify that students stay eligible under the complex and rigorous guidelines set by the NCAA. Within the AEC is the

athletic Writing Center, which is a relatively unremarkable room with computers around the wall. This writing center is distinct from the other one on campus which is affiliated with the OSU English department and serves all students, faculty, and staff on campus. The athletic Writing Center, like most of the AEC, serves only student-athletes. Student-athletes commonly spend time in there working on papers or any sort of homework because they like the environment and people who work there. I work there two days a week and I see firsthand how beset these student-athletes are, how much work they have to do in the midst of adjusting to college life regardless of how well they were prepared by high school. The most resilient student-athletes are ones that treat classes procedurally, trying to learn but also trying to get past the next assignment as successfully as possible. They all want to make straight A's, but that's not a realistic expectation just due to the workload they all have.

Their seasons take over nearly every aspect of their life once they start, but their lives still aren't completely open once the season is over. Football players still have practice and weights in the spring and self-led practice over the summer. They even have a slogan for what the football strength and conditioning coach, Rob Glass, does to players within the first year: #BodyByGlass. Players can come in fairly skinny or unevenly in shape but will be completely "ripped" by the next season, if not sooner. This is not unique to OSU, since most large programs have a coach devoted just to the health and fitness of the athletes. This includes focusing on weight lifting, speed, agility, diet, and even sleep patterns to best help the students function on the field. The amount of focus they put into the praxis of football amounts to a second degree, a double major at least if not more. This is true in other sports as well. So when students are able to complete most of the work for their academic major as well as perform at a high level in their athletic major, it's hard to accept the "dumb jock" stereotype so commonly put upon these undergrads.

A single piece of paper hangs on the wall near the door to the athletic Writing Center. It reads: "If you want to play, you have to be eligible. If you want to be eligible, you have to pass your classes. If you want to pass your classes, you have to do your work. No crying. Go Pokes!" The sign

hangs as a reminder of the rules that supersede all other rules within the AEC. That causality chain quickly dissects for each student and staff member the values hovering underneath every decision a student-athlete makes. Finishing their homework ultimately becomes a matter of play-time which affects how well the team plays. If you're the most talented quarterback in the history of college football but you aren't allowed to play because of poor grades, then your talent can hardly benefit your team on the field. Homework becomes a part of the game and is, in essence, an extension of what happens between the endzones approximately once a week from late summer to winter. This is not the fault or doing of the paper or the staff in the AEC. This blending of sports and classroom is endemic to universities in part because of the constellated nature of university identity. But the more significant reason is found within the rules of football itself. Homework is a part of the game in much the same way as properly executing a screen pass or block. Homework isn't just related to the game: it is the game.

In this chapter, I describe and interrogate the rhetorical processes that envelope all of a student-athlete's life into the sport they play, particularly football. Football not only forms a crucial part of university life and identity, it overwhelms the lives of the student-athletes who play it. Drawing on theories about the nature and rhetoric of games as well as sports, I explain the ways that the rules of football procedurally position students within the game and how this affects their experience of the university. I will focus in particular on theories surrounding the "magic circle" (Huizinga, 1950; Salen Tekinbaş & Zimmerman, 2003) or play possibility space (Bogost, 2008) in game studies and how there are distinct differences between the perceived boundaries of these game spaces and the actual boundaries. Because of the nature of amateurism, as it is defined by the NCAA, football becomes a sport of managing identity and eligibility more than throwing the ball down the field.

### **Research Questions and Methods**

In this chapter I will answer the following research questions:

1. What are the rule structures of football as a college game, and what is the scope of the game?
2. What is the procedural rhetoric of football as a game? What is the guiding ideology and “language” of football?
3. Based on the answers to the previous questions, what is the most effective way to for a student-athlete to play football?
4. What does all this mean for fans and for teachers of writing on university campuses?

To answer these questions I will first establish key concepts and definitions from game studies like the magic circle, procedural rhetoric, and play possibility spaces. I will describe how possibility spaces are not formal, fixed structures but rather have fuzzy, permeable boundaries between themselves and the game. Using these concepts, I will then describe how the rules of football came into being and how they also have fuzzy, permeable boundaries. I will define the idealized possibility space of football, the space the public generally observes as “football,” which is the game played on the field. I will then describe the actual, hidden possibility space of football which is student-athlete eligibility and amateurism and how the rules procedurally define this space. I will conclude with implications for teachers, staff, and fans of the sport.

### **Games and the Magic Circle**

In this section, I will briefly discuss the concept of the magic circle from game studies. The magic circle is the term used to describe the boundaries of a game, thus if we are going to define the scope of football as a sport, we must establish how to define that scope. Game studies may be a relatively old area of research; however, game studies and rhetoric have started to intersect far more recently. Game studies often blurs the lines between the game design and game analysis, with many

scholars designing games and many designers creating in-depth analysis and research on games. Regardless of the approach, game studies has recently become preoccupied with digital games. In a preface to the first issue of *Game Studies* for the year, Aarseth (2017) called for the journal (and field in general) to broaden its scope to include more tabletop games, mechanical games, sports, etc. Game studies scholars have focused primarily on digital games despite the fact that video games are a relatively recent form of play, with sports and board games being far older forms (Aarseth, 2017). Thus, game studies scholarship on sports specifically is relatively nonexistent, especially that focusing on American collegiate football<sup>8</sup>.

Despite this gap in the literature, many principles from game studies are highly relevant to understanding football as a game. Sport and video games have similarities in much the same way that video games and board games are similar. While the modality of play is different, many principles apply across each other, and there is often a great deal of remediation of the older “technology” in the new. Sports may be largely ignored by game studies scholars because of the cleanliness and neatness of analyzing the small object of a video game. Games appear to be self-contained and game studies has followed literature in its own interpretive movements by initially adopting a sort of formalist approach to games that only wanted to focus on the game or text itself. Sports are a far messier form of play and thus may not be considered as pure as video games or board games because it is clouded by ulterior motives. Sports are generally always conducted in multiplayer, which can be more complex to study than a single-player role-playing game or first-person shooter in isolation. Additionally, sports are more institutionally integrated, which makes them appear more corrupted. Seeing an athlete get paid millions may hurt the ethos of the player because it calls into question if

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<sup>8</sup> Some of this may be because sports and games are often treated as separate. Some of this may be because of the embodied intelligence necessary to play sport, the kinesthetic knowledge required to tackle properly or kick a ball. Games, however, may feel somewhat more democratic as they are not built around limits of the body, supposedly, but of the mind. Additionally, the stereotypical communities that play sports and games have traditionally not had much overlap with one another, so game scholars may not have as much experience with sports to feel comfortable with analyzing it, and vice versa.

they are really playing for fun or the “love of the game” or for money. However, video games are becoming lucrative in the current professional video game streamer and YouTuber economy. Esports are formalizing into similar structures as sports, bridging a sort of gap between digital forms of play and organized institutions. Colleges like Boise State University and the University of Akron have invested considerable time and money into founding esports programs (Boise State University, 2018; Shaw, 2018), so the institutionalization of sports is no longer as distinct from the institutionalization of digital games.

Even if we consider sport as separate from video games in how much it requires of the body to engage, it would be more functional to think of video games and sports as existing along a continuum of apparatus used to play the game. As Keogh (2014) notes, even video game players are utilizing their bodies as they play, phenomenologically existing across multiple mediums in the process. A gamer may move their body far less and mediate their action far more through the controller-processor-display interface than a quarterback would to throw a football, but they both are using equipment and environments crafted around them to facilitate play. The gamer functions within the technological constraints of processors, code, and internet connectivity while the quarterback functions within the technological constraints of the field and stadium, the rules, and the gear and football itself. Bogost (2013) even goes so far as to argue that sports video games are themselves a sports “variant” or deviation from the normal form of sport, much like a game of catch is variant of baseball, etc. (p. 58). Additionally, some sports walk a strange line between game and sport, involving less motion than a sport but more motion than a game. Games like darts or pool are vaguely sports in the way that rhythmic gymnastics and ice dancing are often considered “soft” sports for their overlap with fine arts like dancing. Pool may seem sport-like, but it is difficult to argue that it is a sport based on a false dichotomy of sport or game. I am not suggesting a homogeneity of game, but rather that both sports and video games fall under the broader category of “game” in ways not often acknowledged by the field of game studies. Bogost (2013) also suggests that sports and games are not

wholly different from each other, but rather related even if there are observable differences between the two. After all, some video games, especially sports video games, have more in common with a sport than with other video games (Bogost, 2013). Games and sports may have differences that can be used to functionally distinguish them, but they are not so wholly separate that theoretical principles of one cannot be applied to the other, with the appropriate adjustments for shifting modality.

### *The Magic Circle*

Within game studies, one of the most frequently discussed theoretical and design concepts is the “magic circle.” The concept was originally derived from anthropologist Johan Huizinga’s foundational work within game studies: *Homo Ludens*. In *Homo Ludens*, Huizinga (1950) describes how play works as a part of society and culture, proposing that play infuses existence well beyond just the scope of games or sport. The term itself originates from a section where Huizinga (1950) is describing how play exists within some form of self or socially imposed limitation:

All play moves and has its being with a playground marked off beforehand either manually or ideally, deliberately or as a matter of course. Just as there is no formal difference between play and ritual, so the “consecrated spot” cannot be formally distinguished from the playground. The arena, the card-table, the *magic circle* [emphasis added], the temple, the stage, the screen, the tennis court, the court of justice, etc., are all in form and function playgrounds, i.e. forbidden spots, isolated, hedged round, hallowed, within which special rules obtain. All are temporary worlds within the ordinary world, dedicated to the performance of an act apart. (p. 10)

Within the “magic circle,” the rules for play shift from the rules outside. Certain activities become acceptable that would never be acceptable elsewhere. In football, tackling is regarded as legal and even ideal behavior. A particularly good or brutal tackle will often be replayed in highlight compilations or will garner a resounding and guttural “Oh!” from the crowd, teammates, and



announcers observing the tackle. Tackling a person in the street would likely be met with a very different response, and the tackler would be arrested, not praised.

Game designers, Salen Tekinbaş & Zimmerman (2003) extend Huizinga's work and are, arguably, the progenitors of the current understanding of "magic circle":

The fact that the magic circle is just that—a circle—is an important feature of this concept. As a closed circle, the space it circumscribes is enclosed and separate from the real world. As a marker of time, the magic circle is like a clock: it simultaneously represents a path with a beginning and end, but one without beginning and end. The magic circle inscribes a space that is repeatable, a space both limited and limitless. In short, a finite space with infinite possibility. (Salen Tekinbaş & Zimmerman, 2003, p. 95)

To borrow a phrase from BBC's *Doctor Who*, the magic circle is "bigger on the inside" (Strevens & Chibnall, 2018). The magic circle contains within its demarcated space the potential for play and movement within the circle. Bogost (2008) describes this from a rhetorical perspective, which I will discuss in more depth later, as a "possibility space" (Bogost, 2007, p. 42; Bogost, 2008, p. 120) where the rules of the game dictate the limitations of possible action within the space but do not prescribe what actions should be performed directly. Bogost (2007) emphasizes that the space primarily facilitates invention and thus refers to the area as a possibility space rather than a magical circle, even though the concepts are very similar in nature and focus.

To give an example from football of how the rules can facilitate invention, let's look at one particular play from a November 2018 NFL game between the Dallas Cowboys and the Washington Redskins<sup>9</sup>. During the game, Cowboys quarterback Dak Prescott scrambled on a play where his offensive line was not able to block the defensive line. Prescott stood back to pass the ball, but quickly switched the play and ran 5 demarcated yards for a touchdown. However, in order to achieve

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<sup>9</sup> Censored as this is a racial slur but is also the name of the team.

those 5 yards on the field, Prescott had to run approximately 34.4 yards of actual distance (ESPN.com Staff, 2018). The rules dictate that the ball must move down the field in certain increments, but do not dictate the path the runner must take to get down the field. For Prescott, that path was 29 yards longer than the distance the game will actually measure in its record keeping. Similar quarterback, running back, wide receiver, kick/punt returner, fumble/interception recovery scrambles occur weekly in all levels of football, and all of them are facilitated by the rules but their specific path is not defined in advance. The field for college football must measure 360 feet by 160 feet (National Collegiate Athletic Association [NCAA], 2018b), but nowhere in the rules does it states which plays must be run at most points in the game. There are guidelines for procedures, who may assume what roles, how certain plays must work, basic rules for legal formations, but strategy, tactics, and execution are left entirely up to the players and coaches.

The magic circle/possibility space of a game or sport is not just the literal physical zone of the game, but the recognized zone or state of play. A “pick-up game” of football or basketball can happen anywhere that the group deems suitable to play, regardless of whether it is ideal. A stereotypical rule for children in the United States is that they should not to play in the street because that possibility space is not as suitable as an empty lot, field, park, or playground for playing safely. A game of tag may not have any set boundaries or limits, per se, except those which are dictated by the rules, by the possibility space. Players may traverse the landscape however they want, but may not “tag-back” for a minute or two after being tagged, giving the previous person who was “it” a chance to escape and ostensibly resetting the stakes a bit. The less institutionalized the game, the less likely the possibility space will be as rigidly dictated or bounded to a specific place. Football can be played anywhere, but professional and college football are only played (though I will complicate this assertion later) in officially recognized and regulated spaces for the game.

### *Complicating the Magic Circle*

While the magic circle works as a productive metaphor to describe the shifts in social expectations and rules between play and games, some game scholars have rightly pointed out the limitations of treating the magic circle as a “strong boundary between the inside and the outside of the magic circle” (Pargman & Jakobsson, 2008, p. 237). Scholars like Taylor (2007) and Malaby (2007) object to the idea that games are formalist constructs in which the player has no agency or control over the creation of the game. Taylor (2007) notes that gamers have a deep involvement in the creation of games through their development and maintenance of game assist materials and websites like guides, walkthroughs, mods, and even hacks. These players can so deeply affect a game that developers will sometimes adopt a player built feature into the permanent core of the official game. For Taylor (2007) and Malaby (2007), the distinct and strict separation between the game and the outside world is problematic because of how players cross and modulate between avatar, game, and self. Copier (2005) discusses how tabletop RPGs like *Dungeons & Dragons* or live action roleplaying (LARPing) are games even though their boundaries are fuzzy because they still constitute a series of player actions. Copier (2005) resists the formal definitions of games that would exclude RPGs and LARPing because these definitions focus almost entirely on the game as a construct and not on the player’s movement within that construct. After all, as Juul (2008) notes, “the magic circle is a straightforward phenomenon in which players decide to play and by consent enter into the special social and psychological space of a game” (p. 058). The magic circle of a game only exists if all players recognize and participate in it, just like the invisible walls of the painted lines on roads are only there if we choose to obey them.

Other scholars have objected to the very idea of separating itself, calling attention to how Huizinga appears to position play as frivolous (Calleja, 2012; Malaby, 2007). Calleja (2012) describes the magic circle as a problematic and constricting term that begins with separation and hierarchy between the “real” world and the “fake” world. This dichotomy between the “real” and the digital is one that game and digital scholars have been combating extensively because of its false

claim that digital things are not real because they lack the same physical embodiment as a physical thing. Calleja (2012) argues that even if the magic circle's boundaries are permeable, analysis that draws on this metaphor will inherently be flawed, so the magic circle should be done away with entirely. More (2011) argues similarly, except he takes the stance that the magic circle doesn't actually exist for the player. In his discussion of play and mobility, Moore (2011) draws on Benjamin's flâneur to describe the video game player as a "gameur" who

adorns him or herself with different characters and digital artifacts, seeking out and moving between play experiences in games, forums, blogs, machinima and mods. Gameurs are the modifiers of the software and hardware of their game experiences...they reinforce, shape, resist and change the commodification of the experiences of play. For the gameur there is no magic circle. (p. 384)

Gameurs wander between play states and semiotic domains so consistently and seamlessly that their entire environment and existence is a play space, or rather, they embody play so that no space is without play. Keogh's (2014) phenomenological reading of games describes a similar concept, though from a perspective of cybernetics. Keogh (2014) is more concerned with how the player exists over and through the interfacing that positions them within a game. So a game cannot be analyzed solely as a text in isolation but as an embodied experience that melds the player with the tech they use to play the game. Similarly, Holmevik (2012) describes identity as "pervasive" (p. 93), existing across both the digital and the physical. Rather than seeing one as false or less true than the physical one, Holmevik (2012) suggests that identity exists across each modality that we interact through, regardless of how ephemeral it may seem. Digital identity is just a part of the "pervasive life" (p. 95) all people have, online and offline. Moving away from player identity as spread across technology, Consalvo (2009) and Pargman & Jakobsson (2008) both propose that players are constantly negotiating between different "frames." The magic circle doesn't exist, but different frames that are always present exist and the player can be aware of them or even move between them easily.

While the concerns about a “strong boundary” (Pargman & Jakobsson, 2008, p. 237) between the inside and outside of the circle are well founded, some scholars and designers are concerned that many of the arguments against the magic circle come from a place of misunderstanding or strawman arguments (Copier, 2005). Many have pointed out that Huizinga’s use of the magic circle as a metaphor was merely as a way to describe how people behave and think differently depending on the recognized rules of situation. For Huizinga (1950), the magic circle was a metaphor that described any space where the rules were relatively unique. After all, the magic circle appears in a list of what Huizinga sees as representative spaces for this idea: “[t]he arena, the card-table, the magic circle, the temple, the stage, the screen, the tennis court, the court of justice” (p. 10). Huizinga (1950), many have pointed out, was not attempting to sketch a non-permeable membrane, but to describe the reason for the shifts in societal expectations through play, something he describes as preeminent. Daniel-Wariya (2017) notes that Huizinga’s use of the concept of the magic circle was also a direct response to the positivism of his WW2 European context. Huizinga described play as something frivolous as a way to counteract the positivist attitudes of his era by drawing attention to how play has immense value but can exist outside of scientific and purely material concerns (Daniel-Wariya, 2017). Both Stenros (2012) and Juul (2008) stress that no scholar is arguing for a strict separation of games from the exterior world. Juul (2008) suggests that instead of using a magic circle as the metaphor of choice from how video games work, scholars could describe a game as a puzzle piece. For Juul (2008), the puzzle piece metaphor is particularly useful because “We can then analyze *how* a game fits into a context, no longer arguing *whether* games are separate or not” (p. 64). In response to this misunderstanding of magic circles, Zimmerman (2012), one of the game designers credited with inventing the term magic circle, even refers to the strawman created by the misunderstanding as the “magic circle jerk”<sup>10</sup> (para. 11) or the jerk who aggressively pushes the idea

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<sup>10</sup> Yes, Zimmerman (2012) is aware of the incredibly suggestive nature of that nickname. He clumsily clarifies that he does not mean that people attacking the magic circle are engaged in a metaphorical “circle jerk”: “Note that the word is “jerk” as in *annoying person* -- I’m using it as a noun, not a verb” (Zimmerman,

of the strong boundary magic circle. For Zimmerman (2012) and others, the magic circle has become a sort of theoretical boogeyman, an argument that has been rebuffed even though no one made it in the first place. So while the magic circle has its detractors, the function of the magic circle is a fairly productive metaphor for describing the social shifts between one space and another, between one play space and another. As Stenros (2012) notes:

The magic circle does not travel with a game product, but is social, produced by the people present in the act of playing. It is not the line drawn on the ground, but the social contract attached to it. However, it does often align with the dormant possibility space provided by the rules of a ready-to-play game. (p. 175)

Magic circles are upheld by the players and can be as flexible and permeable as the players want them to be.

While the magic circle may be complex and permeable, it describes how a game has social and functional boundaries. In theory, a football player should have boundaries between their obligations as an athlete and their obligations as a student, that at some point the game should not be a part of their life or they should be able to step outside the game in some way. However, as I will show in the rest of this chapter, the magic circle of football encompasses far more of their lives than most fans recognize from the distance of fandom. While the magic circle for most games might have some practical boundaries, even if they are fuzzy and permeable, the magic circle of football is nearly all encompassing while they are on the team. As I will show, the game attaches itself to the identity of the student-athlete and makes their existence as an amateur the primary mode of play.

### *Play Possibility Spaces and Procedural Rhetoric*

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2012, para. 11). This is only slightly believable as a definition since there are dozens of other words that would have conveyed a similar idea without evoking a sex act. Regardless, that's his story and he's sticking to it.

To fully describe how football works beyond its usually accepted boundaries, we must examine the rhetoric specific to games and the magic circle. Ian Bogost's work on the rhetorical affordances of video games takes the idea of the magic circle and extends it. Where the magic circle was described by Huizinga (1950) as a place where rules and behavior can often shift, how people decide what the rules for various magic circles should be, Bogost (2008) tries to describe a video game through the ways the rules can affect the player. Bogost terms the play space of the game (and really any space that has rhetorical structure) a "possibility space" (p. 121). For Bogost (2008), "the possibility space refers to the expressive opportunity afforded by rules of composition, form, or genre" (p. 121). A possibility space is not exclusionary of the outside world, per se, but rather it has limits on reach, just like any rhetorical thing (Bogost, 2008). Within a possibility space, players with have free mobility and the opportunity to create and act however they want within the confines of the possibility space, though of course most play is going to discover and stretch the boundaries of any possibility space (Bogost, 2008). For a game like football, this could involve players tackling in ways that are against the rules or possibly taking a cheap shot in a scrum for the ball because the ref can't see. The possibility space of football allows this, so players do it. The game routes its officiating through particularly prescribed types of referee. Because referees are only allowed to call what they see, if they can't see something a player is doing, then the player usually can't be penalized for it.

When speaking about games from a rhetorical perspective, some of the easiest areas to focus on are the visual and auditory moments of the game. Some scholars focus on how the avatar or visual design of the game acts persuasively (Abraham, 2018; Sarkeesian, 2016a; Sarkeesian, 2016b; Sarkeesian, 2016c). There has also been extensive work on the rhetorical implications of digital avatars on the player and how avatars can normalize hegemonic views of the body (deWinter & Vie, 2008; Colby & Colby, 2008). However, games also work rhetorically through the rules governing the play (Bogost, 2007). In his work on the persuasive nature of games, Bogost (2008) defines the way game rules and processes work on the players as "procedural rhetoric" (p. 125). For Bogost (2008),

“procedural rhetoric is a general name for the practice of authoring arguments through processes....procedural rhetoric entails expression—to convey ideas effectively” (p. 125). Procedural rhetoric accomplishes this expression or effect by “the authorship of rules of behavior” (Bogost, 2008, p. 125), causing behavior or the uptake or critique of ideas through governed action<sup>11</sup>. While not games in the strictest sense, obvious examples of procedural rhetoric can be found in bureaucracy. A free trial for a streaming service like Hulu+ or Sling TV may be easy to sign up for on your phone through a well-designed app interface, but once you try to cancel the subscription, you may have to access the website or even call them on the phone and speak to a person who will try to convince you to keep the service. Puschak (2018) and Brignull (n.d.) describe those sorts of user experiences as “dark patterns,” or essentially rhetorical mazes designed to trap users in a system or agreement they didn’t want. Dark patterns run on a procedural rhetoric of frustration, trying to force the user/player to become so exhausted with the pursuit of escaping the maze of design that they give up (Puschak, 2018). Procedural rhetoric can work in far less invasive ways, like how the Aldi grocery store in Stillwater, Oklahoma, forces shoppers to walk down a long aisle of snack food before entering the main store proper or how many fast food drive-thrus have a small landscaped curb around the drive-thru lane to keep potential customers from driving away. Procedural rhetoric is relatively ubiquitous as a form of creating an effect or conveying an idea or set of values<sup>12</sup>.

In games specifically, procedural rhetoric describes how the mechanic and code side of the game position the player to have certain reactions or responses to events within the game. The rhetorical effects can persuade beyond the game, but the amount of persuasion should be taken with a reasonable level of qualification. For example, a game like *Grand Theft Auto V* (2013) is built entirely

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<sup>11</sup> While procedural rhetoric is generally accepted within the field of game studies, there are some like Sicart (2011) who see procedurality as a limited way of approaching games.

<sup>12</sup> While ubiquitous, Bogost does confine his use of procedurality to discussing video games. Some of this is because video games are almost entirely procedural objects and their procedures are incredibly obfuscated by their interfaces. In order to describe procedural rhetoric in its purest and most concentrated form, Bogost confines most of his analysis to video games.



around killing, theft, and other illegal activity. Procedurally, the game convinces players to be violent within the gamespace, though that hasn't stopped some players from trying a more pacifist playthrough (Smith, 2015; Goldvision, 2014). This does not necessarily mean that these players will commit these acts outside the gamespace, but it can mean that their understanding of violence and identity, how to connect with other humans, can be affected by experiencing hundreds of hours of violent interaction. Games like *Super Mario Bros.* (1985) don't inherently cause people to go out and stomp on animals or each other, even though players in Mario games likely commit more violence than those in most Grand Theft Auto games. This is part of the psychological and sociological phenomena that the magic circle seeks to explain. Players can commit certain acts in procedurally crafted digital spaces, but that may have little direct implication on if they would commit those exact acts outside the game. Procedural rhetoric seeks to describe how that encouraged behavior can be created by the games, and how the game encourages players to react in certain ways and, by extension, think in certain ways within a possibility space. Or, as Nelson (1994) puts it: "The playing rules in some sense are a part of a moral philosophy that explains in the simplest terms what can and cannot be done, and what is penalized and to what extent" (p. 16).

### **The Idealized Possibility Space of College Football**

Now that I have fully defined procedural rhetoric and the magic circle as rhetorical moves, I will apply these concepts to the rules of football to show how football envelops student-athletes' lives entirely. First, I will discuss the football rules in general and how they are far more constructed than is often believed. Strictly speaking, the game of football is structured around 12 "rules," though these rules have hundreds of sub-rules and sections that construct the game's possibility space. These rules (almost more like categories) are as follows:

Rule 1—The Game, Field, Players, and Equipment

Rule 2—Definitions

Rule 3—Periods, Time Factors, and Substitutions

Rule 4—Ball in Play, Dead Ball, Out of Bounds

Rule 5—Series of Downs, Line to Gain

Rule 6—Kicks

Rule 7—Snapping and Passing the Ball

Rule 8—Scoring

Rule 9—Conduct of Players and Others Subject to the Rules

Rule 10—Penalty Enforcement

Rule 11—The Officials: Jurisdiction and Duties

Rule 12—Instant Replay. (NCAA, 2018b, p. FR-3)

In brief: these rules define the game as a one where teams oppose each other on a grid and attempt to advance the ball down the field. In a sense, advancing the ball claims territory, but players only have a certain number of structured attempts or “downs” to advance the ball 10 yards down the field. Once the ball is moved 10 or more yards, the downs reset. Points are scored by crossing the goal line into a zone at either end of the field, also called the endzone, by kicking the ball between two posts placed behind the endzone, or by forcing the opponent backward into their own endzone. These are respectively called a touchdown, a field goal, and a safety and are respectively worth six, three, and two points. After a touchdown, the scoring team can elect to kick a short field goal for an extra point or attempt a short single-attempt at crossing the goal line again for two points. After scoring, that team kicks the ball to the defending team who will now have a chance to advance the ball. Teams also kickoff at the beginning of the first and second halves, with one team typically kicking off for the first and the other for the second, though there have been some exceptions to this. Kickoffs, field goal

attempts, and instances where the offense elects to punt the ball back to the defense without scoring are called special teams since they are not the primary mode of the game. During any time of play, no team is allowed more than 11 players on the field, for a total of 22 players for both teams combined on the field. Several referees officiate the game and are named for the position they observe on the field. They signal a penalty or infraction by throwing a yellow flag that they carry in the direction of the foul. There is a referee in a review booth whose sole job is to review footage of every play as a way to assist the main group of referees on the field.

Players advance the ball on offense and stop the other team's advance on defense. The ball can be advanced in basically two ways: throwing the ball through the air or running with the ball in hand. Player progress is stopped when a player is "downed," which has a relatively complex assortment of rules but essentially happens with a player steps out of bounds or is tackled. Play continues in four 15 minutes quarters, divided into two halves. The clock stops during a timeout, an incomplete pass, a player is downed out of bounds, or after a score. If the clock runs out with the teams tied, they have a succession of overtimes where each team starts with 25 yards left to score. Each overtime gives both teams a chance to score and will continue until one team ends an overtime with a higher score than the other. The current record for most overtimes in one game is seven.

I lay out all these rules, which genuinely only scratch the surface of the procedures undergirding football, to demonstrate two concepts: 1) Football is hopelessly complex in some instances. Even seasoned fans and coaches can forget rules from time to time or a loophole that can be exploited may be discovered years after it was officially made a part of the rules. 2) The rules structure the possibility space of football heavily and make the sport highly bureaucratic. Rules and procedure are deeply ingrained in the game, and an entire component of the game is challenging rulings on the field and submitting them for further scrutiny. Football, like most sport, has evolved very heavily from its simplistic student-activity origins into an "institutional game." In his discussion of sports video games, Bogost (2013) describes this process by building on Brunvand's (1998) idea of

“folk and institutional games” (p. 53) and notes how intrinsic “variation” is for sport (p. 58). Bogost (2013) notes that

There’s clearly a strong evolutionary aspect to sport, and sports more often evolve than they invent themselves. Variation seems to be the only thing that holds a sport together. Indeed, even the successful invented sports (like basketball) then evolve away from their common origins. (p. 58).

This evolution of a sport through constant “iteration” (Bogost, 2013, p. 56) and variation makes sports incredibly fluid and apt to change. College football is no exception to this. As outlined in chapter 2, football was birthed during the mid-to-late 1800s and evolved from an organized fight into a highly structured (though still violent) sport with rules and grid-like structure. The game was further modified at the direction of US President Teddy Roosevelt because of rampant death, injury, and corruption within the sport, and the National Collegiate Athletic Association (NCAA) was founded as a governing body to oversee the sport, as well as others, eventually.

Football has iterated heavily and continues to do so. Starting off as a kicking game, football quickly moved into a rugby style running game and then a passing and running contest (Nelson, 1994). Now there are teams that utilize a variety of systems and focuses. Where teams once ran the single-wing or veer for offense (a power and strength-centric formation designed to run the ball almost exclusively), now teams utilize a wide variety of approaches like the run-and-shoot<sup>13</sup>, the West

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<sup>13</sup> An offense built around players controlling their routes and reading the defense to change the play on the fly.

Coast<sup>14</sup>, the air raid<sup>15</sup>, the triple option<sup>16</sup>, the spread<sup>17</sup>, the run-pass-option (RPO)<sup>18</sup>, the pro style<sup>19</sup>, the power run<sup>20</sup>, the wildcat<sup>21</sup>, and many others. Football philosophy can also vary drastically from the scrum of bodies first found in the game. Some coaches prefer the “basketball on grass” approach where teams score often and quickly in a “shootout” and the score looks more like a basketball than a traditional football score, while others opt for a more conservative approach built around controlling which team has the ball and for how long and controlling starting field position through punts. Defense has also evolved, though not in the exact same structure, since the role of defense is more reactive than offense. Defense is no longer a polar opposite to offense, composed of the same players playing in similar positions on the field as a way to counter their same role on the other team. Now some teams focus on defensive philosophies like “bend don’t break” where they give up a lot of yards but hold off the other team from scoring enough to win the game, or on zone coverage where defenders protect certain areas of the field rather than particular players. Some coaches focus on blitzing players out of defensive positions to try to sack, tackle, or harass the quarterback so that the offense doesn’t have time to run the right play. Others will position players in “the box” (an imaginary box that corresponds to the offensives line) to stifle the run game of the opponent and force them to pass almost exclusively. There are tactics like the “psycho blitz” where all defensive players line up on the line of scrimmage in the same relative stance so that no one on offense knows who on

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<sup>14</sup> Similar to the run-and-shoot, the West Coast will often focus on passing plays that are highly scripted and timed, relying on footwork from the quarterback as well as his decision-making.

<sup>15</sup> Also similar to the run-and-shoot or West Coast, the air raid typically avoids running the ball as much as possible, even opting to complete a short pass rather than a traditional run play. Running, when it does occur, functions almost as a trick play.

<sup>16</sup> A run centric offense built around the quarterback being a runner along with at least 2 other running backs. Usually the offense works as an inversion of the air raid and avoids passing. Passing, when it does occur, functions almost as a trick play.

<sup>17</sup> A collection of concepts built mostly around spreading out the defense by having receivers line up far apart to spread out the defense and make it more vulnerable to the run and skilled individual athletes.

<sup>18</sup> Often used with a running quarterback or single running back, this offense focuses on optioning between a run and a pass on every play, making it difficult for a defense to adequately defend both plays.

<sup>19</sup> An offense usually predicated on a balance between running and passing the ball.

<sup>20</sup> A run centric offense that will try to overwhelm the defense with size and force, usually using large receivers, tight ends, and/or fullbacks to help block.

<sup>21</sup> When the running back lines up as the quarterback and takes the snap directly, typically initiating a run without the quarterback needing to be present.

defense will defend and who will blitz, or like “jamming” wide receivers by having defensive players collide with wide receivers during the first 5 yards of their route to disrupt their timing and ability to make a play. While these lists are far from exhaustive on what football has iterated into, it is worth remembering that a game that can appear fairly homogenous at points, particularly in professional leagues like the NFL or the CFL, is incredibly varied and dynamic within the collegiate frame. This variation is in large part due to the possibility space created by the rules.

### *The Rules of the Game*

The rules of a game, especially for a sport as popular as football, can often be naturalized through the repetition of their use. Fans will watch the sport and assume that it is “meant” to be played this way or that football has a Platonic ideal which can be achieved and should not be deviated from. However, as I will show in this section, even rules around something as simple as tackling can be heavily contextual and shift over time as public perception and opinion on the sport shift.

In his exhaustive history of the development of football and its rules, football historian David M. Nelson (1994) notes that football, more than most sports, is a game obsessed with rules. Nelson (1994) asserts that “[t]he rules—seven hundred in total—make college football unique among the world’s team sports” (p. 13). For Nelson (1994), “[t]he foundation of college football is the playing rules, which provide the laws, regulations, and the spirit of the rules. These rules have been in a state of change since the game’s beginnings” (p. 13). For example, a more recent change in football’s rules on tackling has arisen out of the recent public awareness of the concussions, brain injury, and eventually chronic traumatic encephalopathy (CTE) sustained by many football players. In order to counteract some of the risk to player safety, the NCAA instituted harsh penalties against tackling or hitting that involves “targeting.” If a player commits targeting, their team is assessed a 15 yard penalty and the offending player is disqualified from playing for an entire game. This means if the player commits targeting in the first half of the game, they are not allowed to return for the rest of that

game; however, if the player is disqualified in the second half, they are not allowed to play in the first half of the next game, even if the next game isn't until the next season. Rule 9-1-4-1 of the NCAA Football rulebook defines targeting as when “a player takes aim at an opponent for purposes of attacking with forcible contact that goes beyond making a legal tackle or a legal block or playing the ball” (NCAA, 2018b, p. FR-88). Referees can determine if targeting has occurred based on some of the following criteria:

- Launch—a player leaving his feet to attack an opponent by an upward and forward thrust of the body to make forcible contact in the head or neck area
- A crouch followed by an upward and forward thrust to attack with forcible contact at the head or neck area, even though one or both feet are still on the ground
- Leading with helmet, shoulder, forearm, fist, hand or elbow to attack with forcible contact at the head or neck area
- Lowering the head before attacking by initiating forcible contact with the crown of the helmet (NCAA, 2018b, p. FR-88)

A significant point of emphasis for this particular cluster of definitions and rules is the need to protect the player being tackled from taking any unnecessary contact or injury to their head or neck.

Additionally, these rules are designed to protect the tackler since a defensive player tackling helmet-first can face significant injury. For example, Brian “The Boz” Bosworth was a dominant and contentious linebacker for the OU Sooners, known nationally for his incredibly physical style of play and his ostentatious personality (Matula & Rives, 2014). The Boz eventually retired early from the NFL despite being highly touted because his aggressive tackling had damaged his body so drastically that he was unable to play (Matula & Rives, 2014). In a more recent event, a high school player in Georgia died on September 30, 2018, after a routine tackle from an apparent brain injury (Vera, 2018). In broader terms, NFL players are at a high risk of having CTE because of how long they have

sustained repeated jostling of the brain common during nearly every football play (Resnick, 2018). CTE has a variety of symptoms, including violence, memory problems, impaired cognition, and others (Resnick, 2018; Mayo Clinic, 2019). Prominent former Boston Patriots and University of Florida Gators tight end Aaron Hernandez has become a synecdoche for the potential damage of CTE. After he committed suicide in jail following a conviction for murder, his brain was found to have a severe case of CTE despite being young for that level of damage (Resnick, 2018). While CTE is not a conclusive cause of Hernandez's suicide and murders, it likely played a role in his decision-making (Hohler, 2018). All of these factors have led to youth participation to decline steadily in recent years, with prominent celebrities saying they will not allow their sons to play football (Resnick, 2018). Therefore, targeting has been instituted with extreme enforcement because of the crisis surrounding the sport and head injury.

The trouble with targeting as a rule, however, is that the penalty for it is fairly severe and can deeply impact the outcome of a game. In the first year the rule was instituted, targeting could be called but not reviewed, meaning that if a player was penalized for targeting, they were disqualified whether or not the call was correct, which caused a great deal of consternation among fans, particularly when slowed down video showed that a tackle was "clean" by the strict definition of the rules. This rule was eventually updated to reflect the severity of the punishment so that once a player is penalized for targeting, an automatic and mandatory review of the play is instituted and the head official and the review booth official will watch the footage again to confirm that targeting was the right call. This does not mean most fans will be happy when their player is assessed for targeting, particularly since the rule drastically shifted the possibility space of college football. The rule was initially created in 2007, but the disqualification penalty was not added until the 2013 season. This drastically shifted the scope and enforcement of tackling and made the game "softer" in the eyes of a lot of fans. In the 2013 Outback Bowl (played on January 2<sup>nd</sup>, but a bowl for the 2012 season), the University of South Carolina Gamecocks played the University of Michigan Wolverines in a close



game. In the middle of the 4<sup>th</sup> quarter, Michigan had just gotten the ball back with only a one point lead. Hoping to extend their lead, Michigan wanted to make sure they scored on this possession since it could ensure a victory. However, on a first down, Gamecock defensive lineman Jadeveon Clowney “stunted”<sup>22</sup> past the Michigan offensive line and tackled Wolverine running back Vincent Smith so violently that his helmet came off and he fumbled the ball. The Gamecocks recovered the ball and scored on the next play, going on to win the game by 6 points. “The Hit,” as it came to be called, earned Clowney an incredible amount of buzz and helped ensure he was selected first in the NFL draft a year later. The moment also earned the ESPN ESPY Award for Best Play and was widely shared and rewatched during the off-season and following football year. Even now, searching for Clowney online will generally bring up an account or video of this hit. It was considered the height of football dominance and brutality. However, in the next season, when the disqualification rule was added to the targeting rule and the enforcement of targeting was ramped up, this tackle would likely have been called for targeting because Clowney led and hit Smith with the crown (top) of his helmet. Clowney would have been disqualified for the rest of the bowl game and the first half of the first game of the next season, Michigan would have retained possession of the ball, and Michigan would have been moved 15 yards down the field automatically. In one year, the play was laudatory and considered one of the greatest moments in college football, while in the next year it would have been erased by a penalty. With one small but crucial shift to the rules, the whole tenor of the game moved dramatically from one of more open and sanctioned violence to one infused with the fear of a targeting penalty. Player behavior and coaching lagged for the first few years, meaning targeting was not properly coached around and players did not adjust their tackling technique as quickly as they would in following years, resulting in a rash of penalties and disqualifications. Many fans of the sport

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<sup>22</sup> A “stunt” by a defensive football player is a move used to get around a blocker, like a juke or rapid change of direction. So a defensive lineman like Clowney might stunt to make the blocker miss their block and hopefully sack the quarterback.

despised the rule for how it changed the game because it eliminated possibilities for plays like Clowney's hit.

The rule is not only unpopular among fans because of how it shifts the possibility space of the game, but it is also unpopular because it appeared to be enforced inconsistently. The difficulty with enforcing the targeting penalties comes in the openness of the rule. The rule is designed to protect the offensive player and is written in a reactive and not proactive context. The goal of the rule was to reduce violent impacts in football by eliminating extreme forms of tackling that could lead to severe injury or death, but because the rule allows for some ambiguity, it is very difficult to enforce well. As mentioned previously, the rule defines targeting as “forcible contact that goes beyond making a legal tackle or a legal block or playing the ball.” This rule would be clear, for the most part, except that tackling is merely defined in rule 2-26 as “Tackling is grasping or encircling an opponent with a hand(s) or arm(s)” (NCAA, 2018b, p. FR-39). Other rules throughout the rulebook govern consistently instances where tackling is inappropriate or not allowed, meaning that in the targeting definition, a “legal” tackle here is defined by the degree of contact being made, not by the action of tackling or not. Or, in other words, with a less clear threshold for a legal tackle or legal force, the ambiguity of the rule makes the possibility space of tackling blurry. Rather than opening up the play potential of players, it makes the boundary between acceptable and unacceptable violence much fuzzier. Players have to be concerned with style and speed rather than choosing whether or not to tackle at all, which are more difficult to control in a game that encourages violent movement and speed. Tackling a player who calls for a fair catch or is out of bounds is an illegal instance of tackling, but targeting is an illegal method of tackling that has tautological boundaries. Targeting is targeting because it looks like targeting. Rule 9-1-3 describes it this way: “When in question, it [an instance of targeting] is a foul” (NCAA, 2018b, p. FR-88). In essence, targeting is a rule that diametrically opposes the “moral philosophy that explains in the simplest terms what can and cannot be done, and what is penalized and to what extent” (Nelson, 1994, p. 14). In defining tackling as openly as it does,

the targeting limitation on tackling is functionally difficult to perform well for most players at all times, especially since the game has a history of encouraging targeting-like tackling before the 2013 season. While the rule has the best of intentions and exigency, the fuzziness of it does little to practically protect players from violence, especially when the large impacts of football play are not the primary mode of brain injury for most players. However, limiting the larger hits does fix the optics of the sport and make it appear safer, as fewer players are being knocked out from big hits but are still sustaining chronic head trauma from the repeated small hits.

While the targeting rule is a relatively small one in the scope of the entire game, it functions as a sort of microcosm for the troubled boundaries of play of football as an ever-evolving game built around a complex series of rules. Changes and adjustments to the game like this occur on an annual basis, and while this is not unique to football as a sport, in a game so rife with violence, it can make the game feel unstable at times. The complex set of rules eventually breaks down as they form minor inconsistencies in tone or enforcement from the refs. As more rules are added, the game's complexity seems to almost eat itself. The clearest boundaries of the grid-on-grass that maps out the geography of play are easy for fans, players, coaches, and referees to grapple with, but the fuzzy boundaries of style and method are far more difficult. Football controversies over rules are not unique to targeting, as controversies over the definition of a catch, a fumble, sportsmanlike conduct (which I will discuss further in chapter 4), and other rules make the game feel as if it is deconstructing itself as it constructs itself, that the game does not seem to know what it is meant to be. In many ways, football rules are reactive and not proactive, which makes them lag behind the play on the field and gives them this fuzzy quality, especially though not exclusively with violence. Football is always attempting a pretense of not being a violent game while the base code or DNA of the game is violence. Despite some proponents suggesting football is not defined by violence (Kirk, 2017), the notion of a "good, clean hit" or "clean violence" infuse the rhetoric of football. A tackle is legal as is blocking, but targeting is not. Football can profess to be a sport of rules alone, but it speaks in the language of

violence, a fact which many fans have trouble reconciling or even dealing with. Football may promote and assist some disenfranchised youth with getting an education or even carving out a career, but its possibility space is far from safe.

### **The Functional Possibility Space of College Football**

Now that I've described how the rules of football work and how they are far fuzzier and less Platonic than many fans may feel while watching the sport, I will discuss how the possibility space of college football is formed from these fuzzy rules. As mentioned before many fans look at college football as a game that takes place on a green field in the middle of a stadium; however, the actual possibility space of football extends much further than this iteration. Some of this extension can be found in the name used to describe the social position of the football player: student-athlete. By the very hyphenated nature of the term (though sometimes it appears unhyphenated), the name "student-athlete" denotes a dual identity tied together. For many traditional fans of the sport and "[f]or the NCAA, *student-athlete* contains highly esteemed notions of amateurism—and the NCAA has long lauded amateurism" (Rifenburg, 2015, p. 2). Student-athletes are student and athlete, caught in an identity Venn diagram. The NCAA did partially create this term (and the amateurism ideal that accompanies it) to protect athletes from the influence of sports betting and gambling (Rifenburg, 2015). The idea of amateurism also sprang up as a response to the trend of athletes functioning as journeymen who wandered from campus to campus, essentially selling their talent as a player, a trend that helped instill the stereotype of the dumb jock (Toma, 2003). The NCAA attempted to continue the legacy of the sport as a student activity by requiring students meet a certain athletic standard and be enrolled at the school, which is laudable in a certain measure. However, the approach of the NCAA has been far more capital-driven than student- or even game-centric. As Rifenburg (2015) notes, "[t]hrough rhetorically crafting *student-athlete* and embarking on a media blitz to implement this term, the NCAA ensured that all students playing NCAA-sponsored sports were unable to organize for political action" (p. 2-3). Student-athletes function as impactful agents of the school

constellation rather than fully autonomous selves. According to NCAA rules, student-athletes are not allowed to be compensated for their play (NCAA, 2018d) in almost every possible form, thus all profits that they generate via their image or merchandise or ticket sales as a result of their play go to the school, the conference, or the NCAA and not to them. Students are deployed to build connections and integrate more things into the university constellation, including and especially money. When football players at Northwestern University attempted to unionize to protect their interests, they were demonized by fans and sports media, and their efforts were ultimately not supported by their coach or other labor unions (ESPN.com staff, 2015). Similarly, when players like University of Wisconsin basketball player Nigel Hayes (Bahr, 2016) or OU player Brian Bosworth (Matula & Rives, 2014) protest their disenfranchisement, they are generally demonized in the public eye as mercenary or not true to the spirit of the game. Student-athletes, particularly football players, are supported in a limited fashion despite being given scholarships which can be fairly lucrative considering how much tuition, room and board, and books can cost at some universities, but this support pales in comparison to how much most major athletic departments and the NCAA itself generate off of their performance. Nigel Hayes in a social media post preceding his protest pointed out that the Big Ten conference made \$450 million in 2015 but his scholarship was only \$160,000 to cover his tuition and everything else for four to five years (Bahr, 2016). While \$160,000 is a substantial sum, it also merely follows the cost of attendance and tuition at the university like most scholarships and is ultimately a drop in the bucket compared to the profitability of sports like football or men's basketball. After all, the Big 12 reportedly earned \$371 million in 2017 while the ACC earned \$373 million and the SEC earned \$650 million (Berkowitz, 2018). With that much money flowing through the conferences from TV contracts and other sources, conferences and the NCAA have little-to-no motivation to adjust the system in any way that would jeopardize potential future profits.

Because the NCAA and major football conferences are willing to use football players to produce these massive earnings, amateurism and eligibility becomes the most important part of a

student-athlete's existence at a university even if their actual status as amateurs is as fuzzy as the rules on targeting. After all, as rule 12.01.1 of the *NCAA Division I Manual* notes, "Only an amateur student-athlete is eligible for intercollegiate athletics participation in a particular sport" (p. 61). In the rule immediately following this one, the NCAA justifies this need for amateurism by positioning the student-athlete as "an integral part of the student body" and "athletic programs" as "an integral part of the educational program" (NCAA, 2018d, p. 61). For the NCAA, this creates a clear separation between the student-athlete as necessarily an amateur and the professional athlete (NCAA, 2018d). While there are some minor exceptions to the forced amateurism of student-athletes, the identity marker of eligibility becomes vital for a student-athlete if they want to continue to receive what little compensation they have for their play. If a student-athlete loses their amateur status or eligibility, they are no longer allowed to play and getting eligibility back in the same sport it was lost in is very difficult (NCAA, 2018d). This makes eligibility and amateur status part of how every college sport, including and especially football, is played. Without available players, the game could not be played. Plain and simple. There are countless examples of players losing eligibility for a variety of reasons, and despite their impressive talent, are unable to play their sport or can't play on the largest stage. The Netflix documentary series *Last Chance U* catalogues just a handful of these sorts of situations as a microcosm of how football players struggle with eligibility at even the junior college level (Leibowitz & Ridley, 2018). Many prominent players and programs have had their eligibility threatened or even ended due to implications of being paid for their play (Associated Press, 2011), for profiting off their image through autographs (Berkes, 2013) or services like tattoos (ESPN.com staff, 2010), or even for simply lying to the NCAA about having supper at a pro athlete's house (Watkins, 2009). Whole programs can be threatened, which would jeopardize an enormous revenue stream for most major athletic departments because football programs at most Division 1 institutions create so much profit that they often offset the costs of having non-revenue earning sports like tennis or most women's teams. Keeping players as amateurs has significant implications for the financial earnings of

the institutions where student-athletes play. Thus the rules of the game must procedurally ensure that players remain amateurs who cannot share in the earnings of the schools, conferences, and NCAA.

However, calling players amateurs is tenuous at best. As noted above, football players are often compensated in a variety of ways by universities themselves through legal channels even if that compensation is woefully inadequate compared to the earnings they pull in for their respective universities. Aside from the obvious scholarships and housing, football players receive “free” gear from their athletic programs. Since most athletic departments have some form of brand sponsorship for their workout clothes, shoes, cleats, jerseys, helmets, etc., players and anyone associated with the football program are often provided free shoes, hoodies, shirts, pants, socks, and so on. The most significant brands are Nike, Adidas, and Under Armour, though some minor or sub-brands like Jordan have begun sponsoring athletic programs as well. Additionally, when a football team makes a postseason bowl game, most games have gift “suites” where players are either awarded a package of gifts or allowed to select from a set of options. Player meals are often provided on some level, though this food is not necessarily sufficient for the appetite of a 20-year-old, 6’5”, 300 lb. defensive tackle who spends hours a day running and lifting weights. Student-athletes often receive tutoring services and their books as part of their scholarships, as well as most of their healthcare taken care of, especially if it is sports related. Walk-on players—that is players without scholarships—may not receive all of these financial benefits, but they do still have access to many of the services in this list. Additionally, players can be awarded cost of living scholarships and a per diem when travelling for their meals. This is not to imply that these players are paid fairly, but that some compensation is allowed and even encouraged to provide football players with some resources for their play. Like rules for tackling, these rules surrounding amateur status are decidedly fuzzy and not usually to the benefit of the student-athlete. If a student-athlete slips up, they can lose eligibility, even if that slip up was an accident.

Some student-athletes ignore following the fuzzy rules altogether, though, and embrace compensation that comes through less official channels. While the game explicitly forbids paying players “under the table” in this way, it also does nothing to actively discourage this behavior as long as it doesn’t impact the public’s perception of them as amateurs. As long as they stay within that possibility space of appearing to be an amateur which enables massive profits, players can in fact be quietly paid for their labor. So while it is often heavily frowned upon, most division 1 football programs have “bag men” or “shadow boosters” who provide football players with money under the table (Godfrey, 2014). These networks can be highly structured and will work parallel to the university (Godfrey, 2014), though on some occasions universities will unwisely allow their coaching staff and the network of bagmen to interact. Some notable cases of networks crossing include SMU’s infamous “slush fund” in the 1980s or the U of Miami’s boosters paying players in the 1980s and early 2000s or the University of Mississippi’s coaches arranging payments for players directly in the 2010s. When working correctly, coaches will be aware that a network exists, but they won’t know who is in the network or how the bagmen make contact with players (Godfrey, 2014; Godfrey, 2018). These bagmen can be effective in getting recruits to commit to universities or in helping players who come from poor backgrounds provide for their families. In many cases, players are getting a few hundred dollars here and there once they arrive at the university, though they may receive much larger gifts during the recruiting process. Recently, Mississippi State University star linebacker Leo Lewis was paid at least \$10,000 to play at Mississippi State (Godfrey, 2017; Godfrey, 2018). This is, of course, merely a single instance of a widespread practice (Godfrey & Robinson, 2018).

Every school in the NCAA, including the Big 12, likely has bagmen, and players have likely interacted with them on some level even if they refused payment. Because the player’s primary concern is managing public, amateur identity, they may decide the risk of interacting with a bagman is too high and risks them losing the ability to play. Institutions try to combat the pull of bagmen through constant upgrades. Institutions upgrade facilities and uniforms, and most programs engage in



a sort of arms race for recruits and team performance. Recently within the Big 12 conference, teams have been aggressively upgrading football facilities to keep pace with market trends<sup>23</sup>. And these upgrades don't include coach salary raises or contract buyouts to fire a coach for performing poorly, new uniforms, or any of the other day-to-day improvements and escalation. However, despite all of this public push to make the football programs top notch, the bagmen are the ones that help them land the top recruits by paying them directly (Godfrey, 2014; Godfrey & Robinson, 2018). As facilities and opportunities to win a conference championship seem to equalize among comparable programs, the bagmen are the difference makers. A lot of competing concerns can inform a recruit's choice about which school they will commit to, but the bagman can be a significant influence on that process, especially if the player comes from extreme poverty, which some players do. Even without the presence of poverty, perks like extra money can shift the balance for a player, and good recruiting can cover over a multitude of poor coaching decisions. If a team recruits well, even a pedestrian football coach can win games and build the constellation of the university. The bagmen, hidden yet influential hubs in the university constellation, are a potent force for improving a football program. A while they are specifically forbidden by the NCAA rules from doing this, because the rules focus more on the appearance of amateur status, the bagmen are in a fuzzy position because of the role they serve as paying players a small portion of what they deserve for their labor.

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<sup>23</sup> In 2015, K-State debuted a \$65 million new football facility, which brought the total for football related upgrades and building to \$145 million since 2013 (Gaines, 2015). K-State plans an additional \$53.5 million in upgrades and new construction for football as part of a \$230 million plan to upgrade the entire athletic program (K-State Athletics, 2018). Baylor completed construction on a \$266 million new football stadium in 2014 (Werner, 2015). In 2012, TCU finished a \$164 million renovation on their football stadium and is planning to spend \$100 million to further upgrade their football facilities in the coming years (Texas Christian University Athletics, 2018; Davison, 2018). West Virginia plans to spend \$55 million renovating their stadium as part of a \$100 million upgrade to all athletic facilities, and Iowa State will spend at least \$65 million upgrading their football stadium (Fischer, 2018; Miller, 2018). Texas continues to upgrade their already opulent facilities with a planned \$175 million upgrade to their football stadium after spending \$7 million in 2017 just overhauling their locker room (Najmabadi, 2018; Gaines, 2017). OU finished a football facility renovation project in 2017 that cost \$160 million while Texas Tech opened a new \$48 million Sports Performance Center that can function as an indoor football practice facility (Stavenhagen, 2017; Texas Tech Athletics Communications, 2017). In 2013, OSU completed a \$19 million football indoor practice facility just a few years after finishing a \$185 million upgrade to the football stadium in 2009 (Mizell, 2013). Even lowly Kansas is spending \$26 million to construct an indoor football practice facility (Newell, 2018).

Thus, even though players receive little of the true profits they should for their labor, their status as amateurs is dubious at best and is mostly about the appearance of amateurism, and the NCAA is very aware of this. In the documentary series *Foul Play: Paid in Mississippi*, Steven Godfrey describes the recent scandal of U of Mississippi and Mississippi State paying players and how this practice runs far deeper than the NCAA will publicly let on (Godfrey & Robinson, 2018). Instead of addressing the problem on a massive scale, the NCAA works more through scapegoating certain players or programs that allow the practice to come into the light (Godfrey & Robinson, 2018). This, of course, is not a new problem for football. Walter Camp, Yale football coach and early innovator of the sport, was known for having a slush fund for his players (Watterson, 2000). President Teddy Roosevelt's early call to college football head coaches was in part a response to the corruption within the sport as well as the brutality (Watterson, 2000).

While this corruption has existed for a while, the NCAA can do little to uproot it since that could likely result in one of a few possible outcomes: 1) systematic destruction of the sport, 2) widespread reform that would result in paying players and reducing profits, or 3) both of the above. Instead, the NCAA maintains the mythos of college football more than it strictly enforces the rules. Managing outrage and the constellation of college football is far more important for the NCAA than ensuring that the game is played by the strictest adherence to the rules. Some of this is evident in how the NCAA enforces eligibility through institutional oversight. According to rule 12.1.1 of the *NCAA Division I Manual*, "As a condition and obligation of membership, it is the responsibility of an institution to determine the validity of the information on which the amateur status of a prospective student-athlete...and student-athlete is based" (NCAA, 2018d, p. 63). Each institution is trusted to uphold this ideology of amateurism, and while the NCAA can enforce sanctions on the program, the most crucial power it has is through naming and narrative. If a student-athlete is not eligible to play college athletics, that can jeopardize the eligibility of the entire program. If an ineligible student-athlete is allowed to play on a team, the team may be ruled ineligible and thus miss out on potential

profits and constellation exposure by not being allowed broadcast coverage. Thus, the status of a single student-athlete can jeopardize the institution, but each institution is forced to manage themselves semi-autonomously with a looming threat of disastrous consequences always hanging over them. By extension, the football program positions student-athletes to take ownership of their own track through the university, which extends to their eligibility. While the program will support an athlete to the fullest allowed extent, this support is procedurally in service of maintaining eligibility and the student-athlete's viability as a product, as a thing. The rules of the game explicitly require them to remain eligible and amateur, but the procedural structure of the game encourages them to take money or cut corners and focus on the sport over athletics. They are caught between a rock and a hard place.

For a student-athlete to fully play the game of football, they have to successfully balance these competing narratives and states. On one hand, they must compete well to earn a starting spot and have a chance at progressing to the professional level or winning a championship of some sort. On the other, they need to actually attend and make decent grades, a task that is particularly hard in the fall semester during football season when they have meetings, practice, workouts, and are expected to watch film. Football coach Les Miles once infamously demonstrated this dichotomy when he was head coach at OSU:

Shortly after Les Miles took over as Oklahoma State's football coach in December 2000, he introduced an exhortation that he would use often at the end of team meetings during his four years in Stillwater. "Academics first," Miles would say. "Football second."

Miles's words encapsulated one of the central pillars in the mythos of major-college football: that nothing, not even wins and losses, takes precedence over educating young athletes. The reality is that when jobs and money are at stake, priorities quickly skew.

As Miles said, “Academics first,” he would hold up two fingers. And as he said, “Football second,” he would hold up one. (Dohrmann, 2013, para. 1-3)

Football players are interpolated into a narrative, but the procedures of preparing for the game and surviving life in the institution push them to defy that narrative. Game studies scholar John Ferrara (2012) distinguishes these as the “environmental” and “formal constraints” of a game (p. 18-20). For Ferrara (2012), the environmental constraints of a game “include the boundaries and structure of the play space” (p. 18) where the formal constraints are the rules agreed upon by both players. In college football, this means the environmental constraints are those of the physical field but also of player eligibility, resources, and NCAA enforcement of physical participation in the sport. The formal constraints are what the player is allowed to do within that environment, what they must do or avoid to maintain eligibility and what they must do or avoid to succeed in football. In public it may appear that football players need to be “students first, athletes second” (to paraphrase Les Miles), but the environmental constraints of the game conflict with the formal constraints. In other words, in the same way that football has a public booster and a shadow booster network, football has a public ruleset and an actual ruleset. The NCAA rules position the first and most important rule of the game around player identity, around a quality that they must possess, and thus the possibility space of the game is nearly all encompassing. Every action a student-athlete takes is part of the environmental constraints of their game once they begin the recruitment process. When a football player is hanging out in their dorm room, their first requirement is to maintain their eligibility. When they are out at a restaurant or bar, their eligibility follows them. When they sit down in class, they have to consider how their behavior will affect their eligibility. When they are on the football field, eligibility. In this way, a football player is nearly always playing football because they are always maintaining their eligibility. Any discoverable infraction outside the sphere of the football field can still affect their presence on that field, so they are always playing. 24 hours a day, seven days a week.

This principle of always football explains how players and coaches committing certain infractions outside the game can result in dismissal from the team. While grossly reprehensible and inexcusable, the culture of rape and sexual assault nurtured and hidden at Baylor during coach Art Briles's tenure technically has no effect on the game itself (Mervosh, 2017). Ferrara (2012) would distinguish this as a formal rule of the game, one directly positioned as part of the play of the game as opposed to an environmental rule that governs behavior around the game itself but isn't technically part of the game. A player committing rape or murder technically has no bearing on the formal constraints of the game, but as I have discussed above, the possibility space of football is nearly all encompassing. Additionally, that player is able to actively connect the university to rape and sexual assault as long as they are still officially on the team. This is why when in 2014 OSU player Tyreek Hill strangled and punched his pregnant girlfriend, he was dismissed from the team almost immediately (Chavez, 2015). Hill went on to play for the University of West Alabama, a small Division II school in the small town of Livingston, Alabama. Because the university and community were so small and competing with rhetorical football juggernauts like Alabama and Auburn, Hill disappeared into relative anonymity while he spent his last year of eligibility there. For an incredibly fast and talented player<sup>24</sup> playing for West Alabama is a form of penalty. Shifting down multiple levels of the sport to a team that only went 3-4 in their own conference (University of West Alabama, 2015a) reduced Hill's ability to play football well because he could not constellate well with any institution or have much chance at advancing to the professional level from Division II. However, like most players caught in a PR situation created by an egregious wrong, Hill leveraged this anonymity to rebuild his narrative. On West Alabama's roster description of him for the year, they list his time at OSU as:

All-Big 12 all-purpose player ... Gained 1,811 all-purpose yards ... 92-yard punt return for a touchdown vs. Oklahoma ... Rushed for 534 yards and a touchdown ... Caught 31 passes for

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<sup>24</sup> Hill would eventually go on to start for NFL's Kansas City Chiefs despite his being only 5'10".

281 yards ... Had 740 kickoff return yards and 256 punt return yards ... His 996 combined return yards ranked second in the nation ... Was 11th nationally in all-purpose yards per game. [sic] (University of West Alabama, 2015b)

While it would be unusual to include history of assault and domestic violence on a player's page, this omission of any circumstances surrounding his presence is not without an effect. First, it allows Hill to erase the record of the crime. For his West Alabama participation, it is as if he had never committed the domestic violence, even though the violence was required for him to make the transfer in the first place. Second, Hill was able to present a public form of penance. Because the violence was committed as a component of football, a football punishment was required. Hill might never serve extended sentences in jail because of his relative celebrity, but he would potentially experience a significant risk to or even the destruction of his career. If he could come out of this and still appear to be a competent player on the field, he would be thought of as having "earned a second chance" because he'd served his penalty. The refs had backed his career up 15 yards and he still managed to get a first down.

When Hill was welcome with some level of concern onto the Kansas City Chiefs' roster, the coaches and managers of the Chiefs admitted that Hill was a risk (Chadiha, 2016). However, because Hill had been undergoing counseling and seemed to reform himself, he was given a chance to play the game (Chadiha, 2016). Chadiha (2016), columnist for the NFL, argued in a propaganda-esque news release about the Hill situation that Hill has earned a chance and that the Chiefs didn't merely draft him in a morally bankrupt, win-at-all-costs move. While this may be true in some respect, Hill's drafting was entirely about him being a good football player, though not in the way that idea might often be intended. Hill's repentance and reform may well have been genuine (and I hope for his sake that it has been and continues to be), but Hill also managed his eligibility well and leveraged it in repositioning himself as a player. By accepting the institutional penalty of playing at West Alabama, Hill followed the "rules" of the game well and was able to play the game for one more year and show

he could be viable. Hill proved that even if the reform and repentance were all an act, he could at the very least follow the unspoken procedures of the game as well as the official ones. Should he have gotten that shot even if he was a truly changed man? Probably not, and certainly not as soon as he did before he could actually show growth and progress away from his abusive behavior. But because the NFL and Chiefs were willing to bet on his ability to play football well holistically, they were willing to give him a try and he has done fairly well for both. Regardless of his intentions and true character, Hill's handling of his eligibility makes him a "good" football player.

There are countless other examples of similar or converse scenarios, where players manage or control their eligibility and position within an institution well enough to continue playing the game at the collegiate or professional level. In 2013, Texas A&M football star and Heisman award winner Johnny Manziel was suspended for half of a game when he was caught selling his autograph for tens of thousands of dollars (Berkes, 2013). Manziel accepted a brief suspension and cooperated just enough with the NCAA to be allowed to play for the majority of the year. On the opposite end of the spectrum, a OSU star receiver was suspended for the majority of the 2009 season for initially lying to NCAA investigators about being at pro football star Deion Sanders's house for dinner (Watkins, 2009). Bryant did not help the NCAA maintain the amateurism narrative, even though he didn't break any significant rules, and he was harshly penalized. Previously mentioned Mississippi State linebacker Leo Lewis cooperated with the NCAA in their scapegoating of the University of Mississippi, but by flaunting his power as a witness and the money he received "legally" through a loophole, Lewis made his eligibility on the team ambiguous (Godfrey, 2017; Godfrey, 2018; Godfrey & Robinson, 2018). Lewis cooperated with the NCAA but failed to balance the public narrative with the hidden rules of the game and now is at risk of losing some of his potential earnings if he ever plays in the NFL (Godfrey, 2017; Godfrey, 2018; Godfrey & Robinson, 2018). Lewis is a complicated football player despite his dominance on the physical field. Many other cases play out every year of student-athletes fumbling or recovering their eligibility in the public eye, but the most

common instance of this comes in the day-to-day mundane interactions between the player and possibility space. When a student-athlete chooses to finish their homework on time or a tutor refuses to give more than the allowed amount of help, their eligibility is preserved. When a student poorly paraphrases in a paper in a way that could constitute plagiarism or when they don't put enough time into an assignment and fail it, they risk their eligibility. Each moment carries a rhetorically heavy weight since each interaction between a student-athlete. Their university constellation is part of their game because the game embodies itself in their status as eligible student-athletes. In this instance, it's possible that the magic circle for college football players is not escapable or permeable. They are always playing football, even when they don't want to be.

### **Football as Hegemony**

As bleak a prospect as it may sound, football encompasses the entirety of a student-athlete's experience of university life. The ecology between sport and life is tight and their position within the rhetorical constellation of the university makes the pressure for them to succeed all the greater. This also applies to those who interact with them on a daily basis, though that does not necessarily turn that person into a player. Every person functions as a sort of referee or component of football since every person has a potential to disrupt or permit their eligibility in some way.

In rhetoric and composition, this means our classrooms are part of the football field for them in a real and almost tangible way. They play football in our discussions and papers just as much as they do in the film and weight rooms. We are actors within the game that encompasses their lives just as we are points in the university's rhetorical constellation. We extend and work within institutional and rhetorical forces that we rarely notice or attend to, often to the detriment of ourselves and especially our students-athletes. Not recognizing this rhetorical situation means our response to these student-athletes can only come from a half-thought-out position. In chapter five, I will discuss ways that our understanding of college football can inform our interactions with students and our own play



within the university constellation. For now, suffice it to say that the rhetorical pressure of college football may be overwhelming, but we still have points of leverage that we can use to help ourselves and our student-athletes stay afloat and even potentially adjust the possibility space somewhat to our own generative designs. However, for now, I will consider in chapter four the ways that the function of student-athletes within the university constellation and the rules regarding their conduct are far more fluid and culturally defined<sup>25</sup> than is often apparent from the rules themselves.

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<sup>25</sup> Read: racist and sexist.

## CHAPTER IV

### FLAG ON THE PLAY

*No player, substitute, coach or other person subject to the rules shall use abusive, threatening or obscene language or gestures, or engage in such acts that provoke ill will or are demeaning to an opponent, to game officials or to the image of the game...*

-Rule 9.2.1.a.1, NCAA Football Rules (2018)

*I think the whole thing has been blown way out of proportion. It's a shame our play was overshadowed by some celebrations. I'm not for taunting, but I think reasonable celebrations are OK. I don't think there's anything wrong with a little cha cha.*

-Luis Cristobal (1991), U of Miami guard on the “Miami rule”

*Harvard football coach W. Cameron Forbes, the grandson of Ralph Waldo Emerson, in 1900 called the sport no less than “the ultimate expression of Anglo-Saxon superiority.” It was a game of clout. It was about, among other things, authority.*

-Sally Jenkins (2007), *The Real All Americans*

#### **Introduction**

During the second half of the 1980s and first half of the 1990s, one of the premier college football programs in the nation was the University of Miami, or the U as they came to be known. Beyond winning four national championships in eight years, the U brought a new image to football. While football had featured prominent African-American athletes like O.J. Simpson who had been nationally respected, few teams showcased what Miami players called “swagger”

(Corben, 2009). Miami players in the 1980-90s were known for talking trash, taunting, dancing, celebrating, and aggressive play that became permanently constellated to the Miami brand (Corben, 2009). This style of play conflicted with the White mores that, as discussed in chapter 2, had been previously constellated to the sport during its early years as a traditional, White form of masculinity. As such, the response from the largely White audience of college football to this brand of confidence from the U's mostly Black athletes was fraught with racist comments and stereotypes. In an article analyzing the national hatred of the U, Cane (2017) notes that along with developing a reputation for football excellence and confident play came a hatred for a kind of stereotypical Blackness that the U was thought to represent. White audiences and media regularly referred to the U by the monikers "Thug U" or "Convict U" because of racist stereotypes and cultural anxiety regarding Black male bodies (Cane, 2017). A prominent rivalry for Miami with the University of Notre Dame was dubbed "Catholics vs. Convicts." This nickname largely came about because of a bootleg T-shirt created and sold by White students on the Notre Dame campus (Creadon, 2016). Regardless of the origins of the nickname, the name for the rivalry stuck in large part because of the other racist nicknames and attitudes towards players on the U. In fact, Notre Dame's head coach at the time, Lou Holtz, once joked that the "Catholics vs. Convicts" nickname wasn't entirely fair because not everyone at Notre Dame was Catholic (Christie, 2016), of course implying that all of Miami's players were convicts.

College football is rife with this kind of racist dog whistling, just like the culture that has produced and served as the context of the sport. The racist resistance to non-White players runs far deeper in the sport than hateful nicknames and stereotyping, as I will discuss in this chapter. The exigency for many rules in football came from racist stereotypes or opposition to minority student-athletes. Even early in its inception, colleges like the Carlisle Indian School were actively opposed by the rules and gatekeepers in Ivy League schools, then football powerhouses. These rules and the hateful stereotypes forming their justification still inform how players are allowed to exist as representatives of their university constellations. Rules about player conduct are read

through a phenomenon Hum (2015) calls the “racialized gaze” (p. 192), a concept Hum applies to political cartoons though it can readily be applied beyond this scope. This gaze applies cultural expectations onto the rules and players themselves, generally not to the benefit of minority athletes.

As discussed in chapter 2, college football arose from a collegiate context, which informed its position as an arm of university culture. In a similar way, college football arose from a predominantly White institutional (PWI) context that also informs the game. As discussed in chapter 3, the possibility space of football is nearly all encompassing for college football players. Thus, their lives are subjected to an additional layer of racialized and racist scrutiny from fans and “referees” of the game in its on and off the field settings. In this chapter I will argue that rules on player conduct and even play style itself have continued to be defined through this racist lens. Specifically, I will be examining how the rules have been consistently adjusted to limit the play and success of non-White players throughout the history of football through the rhetorical force of the rules as elements of the game’s possibility space.

### **Research Questions and Methods**

In this chapter I will answer the following research questions:

1. How has student-athlete racial identity intersected with the exigency for conduct rules in football?
2. How does the racialized gaze inform the enforcement of conduct rules in football?
3. How do these rules affect football players used as representatives of the university constellation?

I will answer these questions by first describing the historical impact of the Carlisle Indian School and its participation in college football and how rules were intentionally changed to make it harder for them to succeed. I will then discuss how this practice was continued with the 1991 “Miami Rule” which came as a significant referendum on player conduct, largely as a response to behavior by players at the U. Next, I will analyze student-athletes and their identity

formation as representations of their respective universities. As embodiments of the university constellations, racially biased and racist rules around conduct become increasingly problematic for college football. I will conclude with implications for the field of rhetoric and composition.

### **The Roots of Conduct and Play**

Football rules have a serious impact on how players interact with the sport. Even small rules about legal forms of blocking can have drastic effects on the bodies and performance of players. In brief video on Vox Media's main YouTube channel, Haubursin and Barton (2017) describe how a small rule to blocking changed the body type of lineman on both sides of the line of scrimmage. In the 1970s, the NFL made blocking below the waist illegal, which meant that the knees of offensive and defensive lineman were more protected by the rules, since low blocks can cause serious damage to a player's knees (Haubursin & Barton, 2017). Because of this and a natural trend up in player size and weight, the linemen went from being roughly the same size as most players on the field, in the 200 pound range, in the 1960s to typically weighing over 300 pounds in the 1990s (Haubursin & Barton, 2017). One small rule change significantly shifted the playstyle of the game and the body type of a significant portion of the league. In a similar sense, football rules have been similarly leveraged to benefit White players and hinder non-White players throughout the history of the sport. One of the most significant examples of the rules being racially biased came in 1991 when the player conduct section of the rules on college football were adjusted in response to the actions of some of the Black players from the University of Miami. However, before discussing the outcomes and implications of this rule, I will show how racially biased rule changes have existed within football from the beginning and how minority players have still managed to carve a relevant space within the sport despite open prejudice.

As the arbiter of the rules, the NCAA has been from its inception one of the main enforcers of racist rules. As noted in chapter 2, the NCAA was primarily formed to oversee and manage college football as administrators took control of the game away from the students

playing the game (Farrell, 1989). Economist Paul R. Lawrence (1987) notes in his analysis of the origins and business model of the NCAA that an early form of the NCAA was instrumental in changing the rules of the game in 1905 to make the game safer and less damaging to players. This early organization, also known as the Intercollegiate Athletic Association of the United States (IAAUS), was formed as a response to Teddy Roosevelt's threats to make the game illegal because of the numerous deaths caused by the game and the rampant corruption (Lawrence, 1987).

What Lawrence (1987) and many popular histories neglect to mention is how the game became a brutal and physical game largely as a response to minority athletes excelling in the sport. In her monograph on the Carlisle Indian School and its football program, Sally Jenkins (2007) describes how the boarding school for Indigenous youth were innovators in the genesis of the sport, primarily out of necessity. The students at Carlisle were often smaller and lighter than their competitors from the Ivy League schools. In many ways, this was because of the draconian nature of the school and its curriculum, founded and headed by R.H. Pratt. Pratt notably wanted to remove all traces of Indigenous culture from the children brought to Carlisle, actively making children forget their languages, traditions, and customs and replacing those with English and White American traditions (Jenkins, 2007). This led to countless youth being dragged away from their families and returning to them strangers, if they returned at all. Dozens of Indigenous youth died at his school, largely because of the huge shift in diet and environment as well as being separated from their families for years (Jenkins, 2007). However, within this cruelty was hidden a strangely progressive idea: Pratt firmly believed there was no inherent difference between Indigenous and White Americans, an idea that clashed heavily with the eugenic perspective growing in popularity during this period (Jenkins, 2007). As such, many of Pratt's students and staff defended him as ultimately having the Indigenous students' best interests at heart (Jenkins, 2007). While we can clearly see the deeply troubling nature of Pratt's axiom "Kill the Indian, and

Save the Man” (Abumrad & Krulwich, 2015), his perspective had some elements of relative progressiveness for his era, however problematic it also was.

Because of the horrifying life for students at the school, many of the students were not as bulky as the students at Harvard or Princeton, so the Carlisle team had to rely more on innovation and misdirection to move the ball down the field as opposed to the brute force of their opponents. Their head coach Pop Warner (whose name is memorialized in the Pop Warner youth football league) was particularly interested in this approach. According to Jenkins (2007):

The Indians [the Carlisle team name] had always favored shifty, quick-firing plays, to neutralize superior force. But now they were more deceptive than ever. Warner installed crisscrosses, feints, and a piece of razzle-dazzle called a double pass....the shifting Carlisle lines looked like a shuffling deck of cards. (p. 197)

Warner was willing to bend and even break the very nature of the game, “so long as there wasn’t a rule against it” (Jenkins, 2007, p. 197). Tricks like hiding the ball inside the jersey of a player, the double pass, sewing patches that looked like footballs onto uniforms, and even running out-of-bounds and then returning back in-bounds to catch a ball were all pioneered by Warner and Carlisle players (Jenkins, 2007). These tricks were also promptly outlawed by the arbiters of the league. In fact, as Jenkins notes in an episode of the podcast *Radiolab*, Carlisle’s innovative play was consistently outlawed as a result of anti-Indigenous prejudice (Abumrad & Krulwich, 2015). Even innovations, like the forward pass, that were not inherently diminishing to fabric of the game were opposed by the Ivy Leagues, and brutal formations like the “flying wedge” which caused numerous injuries were permitted. According to Jenkins, the brutality Teddy Roosevelt objected to was at least partly a result of the Ivy Leagues shifting the game towards one based on size and strength so that Carlisle couldn’t compete (Abumrad & Krulwich, 2015). Even during these years of maiming and death, Carlisle showed that at the very least they could play with the same fervency and spirit as any other school, even if they didn’t win many games early in the program’s history. This competitive spirit was regarded as a veritable “credit to their race,” which

while still deeply problematic, was relative progress from early newspapers describing the Carlisle student-athletes as degenerate savages (Jenkins, 2007).

Even though Carlisle was fortunately disbanded in 1918, their imprint on the game of football was unmistakable. Towards the conclusion of her monograph, Jenkins (2007) summarizes their contribution to the sport:

Much in the long story of Carlisle was depressing. The history of the school was one of tribal capitulation, cultural destruction, and endless racial axe grinding. Carlisle's football record, therefore, is all the more striking: between 1911 and 1913, the Indians won thirty-eight football games while losing only three. It was a triumph amid so many other crushing kinds of defeat.

The numbers alone didn't fully express what the Indians accomplished. They were unique. Nobody before or since has played the way they did. Somehow, out of the uniformed, shorn, catechized student body came a team that was absolutely unmistakable. Not even Pop Warner was in command of that process—he was the first to ruefully admit how often the Indians played the game in their own way. The Indians' contributions to the game were original, and the game belonged as much to them as to anyone. (p. 295)

Carlisle innovated in a variety of ways, most of which were opposed by the White establishment because of their Indigenous background. Adding the forward pass to the game was a direct result of the dangerous nature of the game, which itself was a result of Ivy Leagues trying to shut out the Indigenous school. When Roosevelt called for reform, it was not to help Carlisle have an equal playing field with the other schools, but because of the danger posed to White students. Even there, Carlisle innovated and created one of the first pass-heavy offenses in the sport, even mastering the technique of passing the ball that is still more or less used by quarterbacks today (Jenkins, 2007). In many ways, the game is what it is in large part because of the play style and competitive attitude of Carlisle despite the best efforts of White schools to disenfranchise them.



Now that I have discussed some of the history of racism within how rules are managed in college football, I will move to the most recent change to the rules: 1991 Miami rule of sportsmanlike conduct.

### **Rules of Conduct**

Compared to other rules governing the game of football, specific rules for on the field player conduct are relatively brief which leaves more room for interpretation by the referees. Despite this brevity, these rules have perhaps the most expansive applicability of any rules in the entire rulebook. Some of this is by design to account for unknown negative behavior. However, even with this purpose in mind, these rules are at times unproductively vague, especially the rule on unsportsmanlike conduct. This rule reads:

There shall be no unsportsmanlike conduct or any act that interferes with orderly game administration on the part of players, substitutes, coaches, authorized attendants or any other persons subject to the rules, before the game, during the game or between periods. Infractions for these acts by players are administered as either live-ball or dead-ball fouls depending on when they occur. (NCAA, 2018b, p. FR-94).

As a subsection to this rule, the NCAA prohibits some specific behaviors like taunting, gesturing to the crowd, altering stride as a way of showing off, and other gestures and interactions of greater and lesser innocuousness (NCAA, 2018b). Though these specific behaviors are prohibited, the referees can call anything unsportsmanlike as long as it “interferes with orderly game administration” even if there is not specific rule against it. A referee would need to provide a justification, of course, because of the litigious nature of rule enforcement in football, but anything can be considered a personal foul under the right circumstances. For example, in the 2018 football season, West Virginia beat the Texas Longhorns on a two-point conversion near the end of the game. West Virginia quarterback Will Grier ran the ball in and scored the conversion and promptly made a “Horns Down” gesture which received ire from the Texas fans, players, coaches, and even the refs as West Virginia was penalized twice during the game for the gesture

(Lyles, 2018). Even though this gesture is commonly used by Texas's rivals, Oklahoma in particular, and is rarely penalized, the referees decided to enforce a penalty for the gesture in this case. The Big 12 even announced that it would be limiting the presence of the gesture on the field when Oklahoma and Texas played in the conference championship game at the end of the season (Carlton, 2018). Because the refs in the moment decided to penalize the gesture, the Big 12 officially adopted a new interpretation of the rules for the conference. During the same play, Will Grier also altered his stride minutely before reaching the endzone but was not penalized for this. If the penalty had been called, Grier would have been ruled down at the spot, the conversion would have failed, and West Virginia would have lost. Instead, the gesture following the play was penalized and West Virginia won. So these rules on conduct are far more wide-ranging and fluid than rules controlling out-of-bounds or even scoring. Rules about scoring or out-of-bounds are only activated when the player interacts with that part of the possibility space, but players are always interacting with each other, so a penalty for conduct could potentially happen on any play. This definitional ambiguity makes the enforcement of these rules highly contextual and more permeable to cultural norms we often assume are exterior to the game. To be fair, the vagueness of the rules about what constitutes disrupting "orderly game administration" (NCAA, 2018b, p. FR-94) does serve the function of anticipating new ways that players could cause injury or harm. However well intended they are, when the rules address non-violent behavior, the ambiguity makes the enforcement subject to definitions outside the rules of the game as they are written.

In the rules hierarchy, the NCAA general rules about student-athletes and athletics institutions have far wider effects. Ideally these rules would elucidate the definitions of sportsmanship the football rules draw on, but sadly they do not. The NCAA establishes "The Principle of Sportsmanship and Ethical Conduct" as:

For intercollegiate athletics to promote the character development of participants, to enhance the integrity of higher education and to promote civility in society, student-athletes, coaches, and all others associated with these athletics programs and events

should adhere to such fundamental values as respect, fairness, civility, honesty and responsibility. These values should be manifest not only in athletics participation, but also in the broad spectrum of activities affecting the athletics program. (NCAA, 2018d, p.

3)

The concepts of “respect, fairness, civility, honesty, and responsibility” would be difficult to define in anything other than a long treatise, and even then may not be functional for use. That being said, these concepts being left as open signifiers in the definition depend on cultural definitions which are often shaped by a concept Hum (2015) calls the “racialized gaze” (p. 192). In Hum’s (2015) work on the racialized gaze, she discusses how racial imagery and potential rhetoric is always already shaped by the “dominant cultural habit for perceiving race-related visual phenomena” (p. 192). According to Hum (2015), even the available tropes and “design” elements are limited to fit what the dominant culture considers “authentic” (p. 196). In much the same way that the male gaze positions women as always under surveillance by a patriarchal standard for a woman’s image, so the minority figure is always under surveillance by a racist standard for minority images. Since the racialized gaze both shapes interpretation of composition as well as the available materials for composition themselves, what fans, refs, coaches, teammates, and administrators may see as appropriate may vary significantly based on identity.

As with many systemic forms of racism, statistical research proving the presence of prejudice empirically can be difficult to come by, and this is the case in how Black players are penalized vs White players<sup>26</sup>. However, Hall and Livingston (2012) attempt to establish some

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<sup>26</sup> More research has been done on racial bias over perceptions of black and white athletes, specifically how this bias limits opportunities for black athletes. Mercurio and Filak (2010) found that black quarterbacks in the NFL draft are typically described based on physical characteristics while white quarterbacks are described based on mental characteristics, reinforcing the racist stereotype that white people are more mentally capable than black athletes. Similarly, Buffington and Fraley (2008) find that fans also use more physical descriptions of black athletes and mental descriptions of white athletes, and Kaiser, Williams, and Norwood (2016) found that people’s views on whether or not black players should play quarterback match cultural ideologies about race. Perchot, Mangin, Castel, and Lacassagne (2015) found that in professional basketball white players are typically “stacked” in the point guard position, a position often considered to be the more mentally demanding, while black players outnumber white players in the other positions. Turick, Darwin, and Bopp (2018) found that college football fans were more willing

baseline for statistical analysis of a phenomenon many athletes recognize through personal experience. Hall and Livingston (2012) note in their statistical analysis of penalties and excessive celebration that Black players in the NFL are penalized more often for unsportsmanlike conduct than their White counterparts. While 65% of NFL players were Black and 31% were White during the 2010-11 season, Black players received 92% and White players received only 8% of all penalties for Unsportsmanlike Conduct (Hall & Livingston, 2012). Beyond on the field penalties, “being perceived as arrogant was associated with a salary penalty for Black players but not for White players” (Hall & Livingston, 2012, p. 902), impacting their ability to create capital and reach the economic status of the White elite. In short, if a Black player wishes to build generational wealth and perform well in the game, he must conform to White norms of conduct much more than a White player likely would work. Hall and Livingston (2012) conclude that their findings “confirm that the acceptability of an act will depend, not only on the valence of the behavior, but also on who is performing it” (p. 904). So while the rules move behavior towards a White moderate norm, it also permits more flexibility in adhering to the rules for White athletes.

Beyond statistically demonstrating some of the racial bias in the enforcement of penalties and sportsmanship conduct rules, the exigency for the Miami rule has even clearer roots in racial coding. Behavior like Will Grier’s high stepping was commonly popularized or introduced by minority players like Deion Sanders<sup>27</sup>, and thus penalized, much like Carlisle’s innovations on

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to forgive black players for drugs use than white players because they expected black players to use drugs and white players to not use drugs, following stereotypes around deviant behavior. Equally telling are Bopp and Sagas’s (2014) findings that black quarterbacks have a disproportionately high number of rushing plays compared to their white counterparts because they are “racially tasked” (p. 140) with rushing more because of stereotypes about Black mental acuity.

<sup>27</sup> While he was not the first to high-step, Deion Sanders was known for high-stepping during a big play, and his entertaining style of play earned him the nickname “Prime Time” (Dorsey & Witt, 2019). As a sometimes brash and outspoken Black man, Sanders was a lightning rod for conversations about sportsmanship, in particular the way he showboated during the game. The objections to Prime Time’s celebrations arise in part because, as Andrews (1998) notes, notions of sportsmanship trace their origins back to colonial England. From this context, sportsmanship comes about as a way to treat play seriously and not frivolously but also to reinforce traditionally masculine and upper class notions of civility (Andrews, 1998; Hall & Livingston, 2012). Sportsmanship works to “civilize” the poor and non-white masses and make their behavior emulate wealthy culture (Andrews, 1998; Hall & Livingston, 2012). Prime Time’s high stepping, a relatively small gesture and one that was arguably earned by his phenomenal play,

playstyle and technique were often actively opposed within the rules. In the next section, I will turn directly to how behavior seen as transgressively “Black” was formally penalized in the possibility space of college football in 1991.

*“It’s all about the U”*

To fully understand how the U was the primary excuse for the NCAA’s 1991 expansion of the conduct rules, I will now give more context to the rule that shows how this mechanical change was a direct response to what was perceived as the U’s “Blackness.” I will first start by giving a brief history of the program’s development and institutional history, because this context informs why they were so vilified on a national level, and then I will expand into the cultural context of their development and how that interacted with the formation of the rule.

The University of Miami is a private college and, prior to arrival of Coach Howard Schnellenberger in 1979, was mostly irrelevant in college football. However, in just four years Schnellenberger had led the U to their first national title and built a program that would eventually go on to win 4 national championships with 3 separate coaches from 1983-1991. From the years 1985-1991, the U had a 77-7 record and only lost to highly ranked teams, many of whom went on to win national championships themselves. What enabled Schnellenberger to build the program so rapidly and effectively to where it could be self-sustaining was his recruiting strategy. Corben (2009) outlines this approach in detail in an ESPN documentary called *The U*. Schnellenberger famously established a precedent for his coaching staff that they were only going to recruit an area of Florida that he called the “State of Miami” (Corben, 2009). While they might

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strayed outside the White norms of civility and defied the “civilizing” influence of the rules on his behavior. Sanders, of course, was aware of how incendiary his behavior was and has often described himself as two distinct personas: Deion and Prime Time (Sanders, 2019; Dorsey & Witt, 2019). For Sanders, defying the norms of football civility was a means of self-promotion, a way to build his brand and draw attention to his play, but it also allowed him to psychologically intimidate his opponents (Dorsey & Witt, 2019). Sanders was not alone in being seen by White audiences as a transgressively “Black” figure that changed the nature of American sport. Players like Allen Iverson brought a more distinct hip-hop aesthetic and persona to the NBA (Beatty, 2014), as did the early 90s University of Michigan players nicknamed the “Fab Five” for college basketball (Hehir, 2011).

get some recruits from outside the area, he firmly believed there were enough talented players in that area, and even Miami itself, to win national championships (Corben, 2009). By focusing so narrowly on the city of Miami and southern Florida, Schnellenberger was able to involve the community almost immediately by using the close proximity to constellate new fans rapidly. Additionally, pride of place and locality made it easier for fans to cheer for Miami, especially once they started to win a lot of games. With such a small geographic area to focus on, the coaching staff could more easily visit and scout players thoroughly without having to travel long distances<sup>28</sup>. This practice of recruiting Miami and the “State of Miami” well would be continued to great success by many of the coaches who followed.

Schnellenberger’s other recruiting strength was his willingness to recruit young Black players from inner city and poor neighborhoods of Miami. This was seen as a huge risk for a PWI like Miami, but would likely have been seen as risky at any essentially non-integrated campus<sup>29</sup>. As most universities are PWIs (Musu-Gillette et al., 2016) and have a tradition of being PWIs, most of the values and traditions at universities are formed from a White context. As Watterson (2000) notes in his history of college football, this sport “celebrated primal loyalties to race, economic class, and social caste” in its early formations (p. 308). Many immigrant populations were attempting to assimilate rapidly into the American social framework, so becoming “White”

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<sup>28</sup> Recruiting at this time was limited by scouting and exposure, and typically focused on areas that were seen as fertile ground for successful recruits, like Texas, California, or even other parts of Florida. Schools commonly recruited their immediate geography well, but would also try to look nationally as much as they could. Some schools recruited Black players consistently, but a large portion of poorer Black players would get little to no attention regardless of their talent level and would wind up playing at more poorly funded institutions. In some respects, Schnellenberger turning his attention to Miami’s poorer neighborhoods was a normal move geographically even if it was not socioeconomically or racially.

<sup>29</sup> In his documentary on former University of Colorado coach Bill McCartney, Podhoretz (2015) discusses how during the 80s McCartney also brought Black players to the predominantly White campus of Colorado. In a similar fashion, this was seen as a risk by the largely White fanbase. Even iconic Alabama football coach “Bear” Bryant had to fight tooth and nail against a segregationist state government just to integrate his team in the 1970s (Sims, 2017). When universities like Mississippi State integrated, most rhetoric and coverage surrounding the new Black players evoked a “colorblind” perspective on them that privileged what was seen as White values (Downs & Love, 2017), which was part of why the integration was allowed by White fans and administration alike. While integration was not always this directly opposed by state and university administration, integration for many colleges happened years after segregation was outlawed.

in a generic sense was an integral part of that, and collegiate culture and football was a part of that becoming (Watterson, 2000). Black students were not allowed to attend most White universities and were thus not allowed to be student-athletes either. There were some exceptions, of course, but these were rare and mostly resulted because, as Watterson (2000) puts it, “they possessed a talent so boundless that football and, more precisely, their institutions needed them to win” (p. 308-9). Those football players who broke the color barrier in pre-civil rights era were often the subject of brutal injuries, like Johnny Bright having his jaw broken during a game by an Oklahoma A&M player in 1951 (Watterson, 2000). As a result of this incident, facemasks became mandatory to protect players, but it took an act of racist violence to create this rule. In other instances, players were hazed, insulted by fans, and asked to sit out games played against schools in the Jim Crow South (Watterson, 2000). Jack Trice, a Black football player at Iowa State University in the 1920, died during a game with the University of Minnesota in what is suspected to be a case of targeting a Black player, much like the Johnny Bright incident. Black collegiate football did have a vibrant and competitive scene within historically Black colleges and universities (HBCUs) like Howard, Jackson State, and Grambling State (Freedman, 2013; Watterson, 2000; Demas, 2010), but this segregation still largely defined the image of what was permissible within dominant university culture as essentially White. So when Schnellenberger decided to recruit athletes from the inner city of Miami, many fans and media personalities were skeptical these players could fit the college ideal of a student-athlete. Even when the players were accepted, racist stereotyping, as discussed above, was used by many media and fans from other teams. Ignoring the outside pressure against recruiting Black players, Schnellenberger essentially integrated the U of Miami campus and brought more Black players into the public consciousness of college football (Corben, 2009). However successful Schnellenberger was at establishing the infrastructure of the U’s program, the coach who truly established the “swagger” and aesthetic culture of the U was Schnellenberger’s successor: Jimmy Johnson (Corben, 2009).

In 1984 when Jimmy Johnson took over, he openly embraced the players and did not appear to oppose any form of celebration the players wanted to do. According to many players and Johnson himself, he even encouraged the players to dance, taunt, and celebrate often as they played (Corben, 2009). While the team appeared to be in total chaos to some of the more traditional fans, Johnson purportedly told players “What you see on that football field is one of two things: what I coach you to do or what I allow you to do” (Corben, 2009). For him, the possibility space for behavior was broader for his players because that helped them play well and validated their experience of the game from their high schools where players from the U during this era have said dancing, taunting, and trash talking were more acceptable aspects of play. Johnson recognized the difficulty and value of their background because even as a White man, he had come from poverty and was a first-generation college graduate (Corben, 2009). While he had not experienced the same level of prejudice as his players, some players and journalists like Dan Le Batard still went so far as to call Jimmy Johnson the U’s first “Black coach” (Corben, 2009).

After Jimmy Johnson left, Dennis Erickson joined the program and continued the trends in behavior management and recruiting established by Johnson and Schnellenger, winning two more national championships in the process but also receiving intense censure for player behavior. Under Erickson’s tenure, the NCAA debuted the “Miami rule” which made many of the celebrations practiced by Miami players explicitly against the rules (Corben, 2009). Players on the Miami team especially noticed how many of the clips in a video disseminated by the NCAA explaining the rule changes featured players from the U (Corben, 2009). Adding these specifically prohibited behaviors and expanding the guidelines on the what is not permitted behavior was one of the most significant changes to the player conduct rules in the modern era and was only implemented because some fans and administration saw the U’s influence as a genuine disaster to the culture of college football. The NCAA cited the impetus for the rule changes as crisis in college football player conduct, as if players dancing and taunting could destroy a game built around throwing your opponent to the ground (Mell, 1991). One of reasons



for this panic about player conduct was how the behavior was positioned by the racialized gaze (Hum, 2015). As Hum (2015) notes, the racialized gaze both limits the materials of expression while shaping how those materials are seen. In the case of the U, player celebrations and actions were seen in direct opposition the White, middle-class norms that were so vehemently enforced during the Reagan and Bush Sr. presidencies (Andrews, 1996). The available materials for defining “Black” behavior involved a perspective Andrews, Mower, and Silk (2011) define as “ghettocentrism.” Andrews, Mower, and Silk (2011) define “the logics of ghettocentrism” as the aesthetic and spatially grounded fetishizing and essentializing of Black sporting bodies for their perceived, and indeed conjoined, athletic ability and urban authenticity; they are unproblematically assumed to be products, and/or progeny, of the mythologized (equally romanticized as demonized) American ghetto. (p. 70)

This mythologized space of the ghetto was one built on assumptions about the nature of Black life in America, that all Black young men came from the ghetto and had a rough childhood, likely with a single-mother raising them (Andrews, Mower, & Silk, 2011; Sailes, 1998a). Even Black athletes who don’t have that particular past or an extreme version of that past have to at least address it and may need to appeal to their connection to it to gain credibility as Black athletes (Andrews, Mower, & Silk, 2011; Grainger, Newman, & Andrews, 2006). Black athletes were also treated as genetically more athletic, an idea born of out eugenics, racism, and stereotypes of lower intelligence and higher physicality in Black people in general (Carrington, 2010; Sailes, 1998a; Grainger, Newman, & Andrews, 2006; Harpalani, 1998). Conceptions of the Black athlete, of course, are more about White attempts at maintaining power than about the nature of Black athletes. As Carrington (2010) points out in his work on the connections between race and sport, “Historically, the black athlete developed out of and from a White masculinist colonial fear of loss and impotence” (p. 3).

Thus, when a White audience watched Black football players who they knew were often from a disadvantaged background, they responded with a combination of disgust and fear. The U

players were known as powerful and physical players, which made their celebrations all the more threatening to a White audience that feared losing power to Black players. Beyond upending the established image and power structure of the game, the U also troubled White audiences because:

This accusatory racial politics [of Black people as their own worst enemy] reached maturity during the Reagan-Bush administration when the hegemony of the New Right fashioned a network of racially focused, affective epidemics that mobilized White fears and insecurities in the face of what became articulated as the increasingly threatening black presence in America. (Andrews, 1996, p. 132)

This fear actuated through how Miami players were vilified by non-Miami fans and sports journalists. Rusnak (1991) notes how TV broadcasters covering the 1991 Cotton Bowl against the Texas Longhorns vehemently complained about Miami's players. Miami received a Cotton Bowl record 202 yards worth of penalties for their behavior and established "themselves as college football's outlaws" (Rusnak, 1991, para. 2) in this game. This behavior seemed to confirm the anxiety of the White audience and frightened the NCAA, the fans, and the football establishment. The U's combined penalties flew in the face of the White norms the game had been built around. Miami players were not just seen in opposition to White norms, but also to depictions of Black people who fit White norms. During this period, *The Cosby Show* was wildly popular and Michael Jordan had achieved superstar status, both because of their relative "Whiteness" (Andrews, 1996). The U, on the other hand, was seen as "Thug U." Part of the success of athletes like Michael Jordan, O.J. Simpson, and others was their willingness to play the game of Whiteness and appeal to the racialized gaze by not acting "Black" even when they looked Black. They embodied a sort of "colorblindness" that was both appealing to the White viewer and also promoted the myth of the America dream (Leonard & King, 2011; Grainger, Newman, & Andrews, 2006; Smith, 2007). The U was dangerous both in the way they beat teams from PWIs and replaced them at the top of the football hierarchy, but also in how they embodied a sort of White anxiety over being ousted by minorities in a post-Civil Rights era.

Even though anxiety over the U's dominant play and celebrations led to the rules being adjusted to police behavior by Black players, many fans still justified collegiate sports based on how well it provided Black athletes with a route to escape difficult circumstances. The reasoning goes: many of these young men come from difficult backgrounds and playing sports provides them a way out of this hardship. On one level, this is true. For some student-athletes from underprivileged backgrounds, athletics can give them a potential avenue to receive scholarships or even a career in athletics. However, as Harris (1998) notes in his discussion of sports in the Black community, this is largely an oversimplification of the role of athletics. The racialized gaze positions these players in a ghetto-centric role and ignores the presence of any narratives that don't reaffirm this. Not only is stereotyping Black players into a singular, convenient narrative problematic, but the narrative of professional sports as a viable career path for underprivileged students is also mostly false. Not only do fewer than 1.6% of high school football players ever make it to the professional leagues (Sailes, 1998b), but the brutality and intense competition of playing professional football is such that players average 3.3 years in the league (Keim, 2016). Smith (2007) describes this narrative of sports possibility in his work on race and sports as the "Horatio Alger Myth" (p. 86). According to Smith (2007), this myth puts special emphasis on the desires and work ethic of the athlete themselves: "you can get an education through the offer of an athletic scholarship, but if you fail to exert your own ambitions and set your own goals this will not happen" (p. 86). Black players who "gentrify" themselves into White norms and get an education and work hard are told that they will be given the chance to make millions of dollars. In essence, if the U football players who celebrated and taunted would just conform, they could be handily rewarded by White capitalism.

This conform-reward construct works to assuage the guilt of the White audience by giving them an easy way to "support" these players getting out of the "ghetto" by supporting the sports team. Supporting the U could be seen as a way to help the disenfranchised without relying on welfare, which Reagan, Bush, and even Clinton's administration argued would lead to

dependency instead of self-reliance (Demby & Marisol Meraji, 2019). Rather than having to actually engage with the systemic racism perpetuating poverty and poor funding for predominantly Black schools, White fans can use their identification with their collegiate sport team to provide players with a means of escaping a horrible fate and falling into a “life of crime” or “selling drugs” or “dead in an alley,” depending on the preferred stereotype. From a Reaganomic perspective, this allows for the false meritocracy of sports to seem justified and in turn justifies all the abuses and racism inherent in the sport. Research by Harris (2014) shows that participation in sports indicates no predictable trend in their performance academically. For a Black player to be more harshly penalized is fine for this audience because at least the player has a chance to break out of poverty through sports as long as they work hard enough and stay out of trouble. The U caused discomfort for many White fans because the celebrations by players seemed like evidence that they were not being assimilated through college athletic careers. The players were not espousing the White norms when they celebrated or taunted and would potentially not constellate cleanly into the role of student-athlete and eventual proponent of the athletic system. Since football is such a game of identity through the myth of amateurism, Black players at Miami in the 80s and 90s were not playing their identities properly by remaining “Black” while at the U. Because of this, the NCAA adjusted the rules of football to force the players into those White norms and consequently assuage the anxiety of the White audience. When the Miami rule debuted, it was presented as a way to save the sport of football. In a sense, this was true, but only because the game is preoccupied more with identity than play on the field. For some, this was the NCAA’s way of “saving” these players from themselves, from their own “Blackness.”

The wrinkle in all of these ideas of attacking “Blackness” as the NCAA, sports media, and fans were attempting to do through the Miami rule is that this attack was based on stereotypical rhetoric. The available materials for expressing Blackness were inherently limited to behaviors that were seen as transgressive towards the White norms of conduct. Dancing,

celebrating, taunting, spinning the football, gesturing to the crowd, these were seen as essentially “Black” behaviors, even though White players also performed these actions. Because some of the players at the U were from underprivileged backgrounds, their behavior was taken as indicative and representative of all Black people because of ghetto-centric rhetoric. Any Black narrative or image positioned outside the monolithic vision of a particular kind of Black poverty was inauthentic and dismissible. White players who behaved in similar ways during this period received some censure, but the NCAA did not change its rules because how they behaved and did not view their actions as a threat to the very nature of the sport. After all, a White player constellates more readily into a historically White constellation.

Now that I have discussed contextually how the 1991 Miami rule was motivated primarily by racist ideology, much like rules changes in response to the Carlisle Indian School, I will turn to how this impacts the lives of student-athletes who are given totemic status for a university. While the constellation of the university is networked, as discussed in chapter 2, football is the most rhetorically persuasive tool of constellating new fans and rhetorical things. The most persuasive figures in college football, aside from coaches, are the student-athletes, which puts additional pressure on them to match the racialized image of the student-athlete at PWIs. The importance of their ambassador status motivates the NCAA, coaches, referees, and fans to enforce the rules more proactively than they might for regular students.

### **Student-athlete as Totem**

Student-athletes are certainly not the first instance of a public figure functioning as an embodiment of a larger constellation and culture. While discussing Habermas’s work on the history of public vs private life, Warner (2014) notes that the monarchist court was often considered a public space, a place where the public of the country was “embodied and authoritative” (p. 47). The behavior of the monarch and the court represented the public of the country, and their intrigue was both in the public eye and was done as a synecdoche of public life (Warner, 2014). Nations have continued to find representation and embodiment of the public

through key figures, particularly athletes. Student-athletes are imbued with a sort of representational signification. As they are highly constellated, their interconnectedness attaches much of the larger assumptions about the university constellation to them. The university ideal becomes embodied through them and their experience of life at the university.

National athletic representation typically flows through Olympic and professional athletes. Cole & Giardina (2013) note this phenomenon, particularly in how female Olympic athletes during the Cold War came to embody American democracy and Russian communism through the lens of anti-communist sentiment. America's White female athletes represented a sort of delicate, heteronormative femininity that was affirming of the cultural norms of the United States while also reinforcing traditional views of the female body (Cole & Giardina, 2013). American athletes were "free" from the industrialized and queer aesthetics of U.S.S.R. athletes (Cole & Giardina, 2013). The athletes showcased American superiority through the lens of American exceptionalism, a mirror of our constructed ideal of America. Of the people, by the people, and for the people. A similar process of selecting and cultivating cultural representatives occurs with professional athletes, though they may not necessarily be as nationalized. Figures like LeBron James, Michael Jordan, or O.J. Simpson become highly important to regional and national identity as representations of something "American." People look at Michael Jordan's iconic "flu game," where he played an incredible game of basketball while violently ill with the flu and risked his health, as embodying the fighting spirit of Chicago, among other things. Or a figure like O.J. Simpson represents the Buffalo Bills or the University of Southern California and the triumphant ascendancy of the individual through effort. But more than a simple "this figure = this idea," football players have a complex relationship with their institutional constellation, as I will explain below.

To give an example of how this representation can work, let's return to O.J. Simpson, because his rise and fall works as a microcosm of this concept. As mentioned in chapter 2, universities are a constellation of rhetorical things that consistently appeal to their geographic

position as a means of materially justifying their existence.<sup>30</sup> In a similar fashion, prominent sports stars like O.J. represent the universities as their totem and pseudo-military force. In his analysis of O.J.'s career and position as a cultural icon, Hutchinson (1996) describes the fervor on USC's campus about O.J. winning the 1968 Heisman award through the single image of a note carved into a desk on campus. The note, referencing Nietzsche, simply read, "God is dead. But O.J. isn't" (Hutchinson, 1996, p. 121). Up until reports of his domestic abuse and subsequent murder of his wife and her lover, O.J. was a key figure in USC and football history. He played for a dominant and integrated USC team that would go on to win a pivotal game in 1970 after he graduated against the Alabama Crimson Tide, a game many credit as a turning point in integrating universities in Alabama and the nation at large. O.J. was also a significant Black celebrity at the end of the Civil Rights movement and into the 70s and 80s. This led to him getting a prominent, and lucrative, position as Hertz rentals' spokesperson (Hutchinson, 1996; Edelman, 2016). In fact, his popularity was often seen as a sign of softening racial tension and progress (Edelman, 2016). Despite being a highly controversial figure due to his violent past, USC still lists him among their Heisman winners on their official athletic department website (University of Southern California Athletic, 2017) and the official site of the Heisman award still lists him and his university affiliation without mentioning any of his more troubling life after college (Heisman, 2018). Even though his accomplishments as a college and then professional football star profited him immensely, O.J. knew that this fame came with a heavy cost. As Hutchinson (1996) notes, "O.J. did not ask to be anointed a hero. He knew what the cost would be: 'You realize if you're living an image, you're just not living'" (p. 128). Despite his deep flaws and horrifying crimes, O.J. was and still is a part of USC's image as a sort of totem for the quality

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<sup>30</sup> As an exploration of this idea, Bingham (2018) has even created a map that assigns the local areas of each of the Football Bowl Series teams and each week awards the land of a team that lost to the team that beat them. Slowly, as the season progresses, the map gives more and more land to teams that win the most games or the most key matchups. This map, of course, doesn't represent the actual control (rhetorical or material) of college football, but nevertheless demonstrates the way that universities are often thought of as states unto themselves with their own military/athletic program.

of their athletic program and university. His post-USC sins are buried and excluded when he is presented as an image of the university, a principle Prelli (2006) calls “rhetorical selectivity” (p. 12). As Prelli (2006) puts it, “whatever is rhetorically manifested through displays also necessarily conceals” (p.10). Well-beyond just his raw visual presence, O.J. is an image of USC in the same way so many other student-athletes are images for their institutions, even if their history is fraught and could potentially damage the integrity of the university constellation.

As described in chapter 3, the game of football encompasses their entire life because it attaches to crucial identity markers like “amateur” and “student-athlete.” Without these markers, the student-athlete loses the game and is unable to play. Through this process the university shapes their entire image holistically into an adequate representation of the university. A thin, unsure 18-year-old football signee is adjusted by coaches, strength and conditioning, academic advising and tutoring, and faculty and staff into a 23-year-old redshirt senior starter who makes well above adequate grades and helps lead his team to victory. He is a product of the system and his quality as a product of the system speaks to the quality of the system, or so we’re tacitly told. As mentioned previously, players are commonly referred to as a “product of” a university when they turn pro, and athletic clothing often features the phrase “Property of [institution]” on it. Universities and athletes regularly refer to themselves as being part of a family, and some universities even promise to follow the athlete into life after playing for the university. When players make a mistake or do something unwise or even illegal, part of the common apology is to the entire university family along with a promise to reflect the university values better in the future. Coaches tell players to play for the name on your chest (the university name), and fans will often refer to a player as “Our man” or “That’s our boy!”

However welcoming and open this may appear, this is a relationship that demands athletes match a certain set of unspoken norms and behaviors to be seen as part of the “family” of the university. While a player like O.J. can still be claimed by a university in a focused way, very few fans would likely ever wear a commemorative O.J. Simpson jersey. Fans at Oklahoma State



University will wear Barry Sanders jerseys because Sanders has never had significant trouble with the law and has never failed to embody the predominantly White consciousness of the university.

Because the university is a constellation of rhetorical things, the collective rhetoric of those things influences how new things are constellated into university. As outlined in chapter 3, attending a university is a generally accepted method of constellating into a university while wearing a rival jersey is not. At times, bandwagon fans are rejected as illegitimately constellated because of their approach. For objects and iconography, universities have narrowly defined rules for what constitutes an official image or iteration of the brand, but even beyond that, fans will generally also self-regulate. For example, at Oklahoma State football games, old guard fans will sometimes complain when fans wear any color besides orange to a game, even if they're wearing other school colors. Fans have built the cultural idea of a "sea of orange" that makes up the crowd, and anything that infringes on that will face resistance. Or when singing the school alma mater, many younger fans will yell "So True!" after the line "Loyal and True," which is seen as an apocryphal tradition. While changes to these aspects of a university's identity can be made, they may face resistance and the make-up of the change will be in direct dialogue with the older expectations.

Thus, when a student-athlete plays football at a PWI, how they constellate into the university can be affected by what came before them. This is particularly true for minority student-athletes. A Black football player, for example, is under institutional scrutiny because they are an embodied image of the university. The football player, as noted in chapter 3, is always playing football as a game of identity, so they are constellated into the university through specific norms of behavior and expectations of performance and are in turn expected to constellate others into the university in particular ways. To return to a previous example, when Oklahoma State running back Tyreek Hill punched and choked his pregnant girlfriend (Chavez, 2015), OSU dismissed him almost immediately because of how it constellates with the university. When

Oklahoma Sooner quarterback Baker Mayfield grabbed his crotch and yelled “Fuck you!” at the Kansas Jayhawk sideline (Moriarty, 2017), the University and sports community saw this as a poor representation of OU sports and university culture. He was lightly punished with a narrative of reprimand from the university even if the actual punishment was more symbolic in nature. When a player dances after scoring a touchdown some fans call aggressive players “thugs” whether those players are Black or not because that behavior does not align with White norms surrounding sportsmanship. The racialized gaze of the university constantly assesses the actions of players as appropriate or inappropriate depending on how those behaviors code racially, but the enactment of that assessment can be fairly complex and contradictory as I have shown above.

### **Implications**

When we consider how the rules of football function, we cannot treat them as a totally closed system. While they pervasively encompass a student-athlete’s life, they are not without influence from the outside culture that forms the basis for definitions of sportsmanship, amateurism, student-athlete, and even the university itself. While the rhetorical things in the university constellation may all exist with some equity, the rhetorical links between these things are certainly not equal. Student-athletes are incredibly potent hubs of rhetorical potential who can constellate new fans into the university far more rapidly and easily than the long, slow, and expensive process of attending the university. Thus, the norms and rules governing the possibility space of their lives showcase just how much pressure is applied on student-athletes like football players and how our institutions do this through hidden and pervasive means. As members of university communities, writing teachers and Writing Program Administrators (WPAs) can become a part of that governing apparatus. Since Rhetoric and Writing studies as a field is moving towards a more antiracist stance, our participation in these structures is both troubling and under examined. Our writing programs and departments can be implicit participants in the racist structures of the NCAA. In chapter five, I intend to address how antiracist pedagogy can best serve WPAs in resisting NCAA governance and policies.

The entire weight of the racialized gaze, the institutional process of constellating new things into the university, winning actual games, making adequate grades, maintaining amateur status, and even existing as a totem of the university falls on the student-athlete all at once. While in a much reduced way, this process is also happening to all students, undergrad and graduate, as well, and even to faculty and staff. However, because we are not the same sort of public face as student-athletes, we don't have the same rhetorical force or expectation. The ecology of a university constellation is, of course, as complex and shifting as the things present within it, so some situations and expectations may vary across institutions and sports as well. Women's sports are given less cultural capital, so they will likely have fewer rhetorical expectations but will also have to fight harder for athletic legitimacy in the eyes of fans. Athletes of differing ethnic and national backgrounds or sexual orientations will likely have unique difficulties and expectations. However, football players, especially Black football players, because of the cultural capital of their sport are under an exceptional amount of pressure to succeed in a system that seems designed for them to fail in some respect. They are not the only student-athletes who face difficulty balancing the expectations of the racialized gaze, but they are given an exceptional amount of the spotlight.

## CHAPTER V

### CALLING THE PLAY

*“Shit,” I said. “We both look worse than anything you’ve drawn here.”*

*He smiled. “You know--I’ve been thinking about that,” he said. “We came down here to see this terrible scene: people all pissed out of their minds and vomiting on themselves and all that...and now, you know what? It’s us...”*

-Hunter S. Thompson (1970), “The Kentucky Derby is Decadent and Depraved”

#### **Introduction**

Like many composition programs at larger state schools, Oklahoma State’s First-Year Composition program has a pre-semester orientation and training every fall. The sessions in these orientations run the gamut from logistical hurdles specific to our university or department to reconsiderations of our pedagogy in the classroom. In one session a few years back, we read materials on antiracist pedagogy and discussed the concepts and how to practically enact these in our classrooms. During the discussion, an American literature teaching faculty discussed the difficulty of antiracist positionality. He expressed the difficulty of really checking his privilege. At this moment, he admitted that he “probably [is] a white supremacist a lot of the time” when he teaches writing because he will naturally default to teaching Standard Academic English despite his best efforts and intentions. By reinforcing a racist, classist hierarchy, he’s falling into the

same trap so many of us do constantly: tacitly endorsing ideologies we outwardly oppose. As antiracist scholar Asao Inoue (2016) says, “Race and language are closely associated, and when we judge language in order to categorize and rank, the act of judgment becomes racist in our world. It’s racism by consequence, not by intention” (p. 135). The teaching faculty’s statement was not defeat, but a realization of how deeply implicated we are in the systemic racism that pervades the university and writing instruction across the country and became a rallying point for many folks in the program to work towards a more antiracist classroom even if we knew that might be impossible to achieve 100%.

Recent scholarship in and adjacent to writing studies also addresses this work. While there has been some writing related to antiracist pedagogy, antiracist pedagogy has more recently taken off building from and responding to work by Vershawn Ashanti Young (2010). Young’s (2010) foundational article “Should Writers Use They Own English?” responded to the traditional and prescriptive work of Stanley Fish. In the essay written entirely with casual, minority diction and syntax, Young (2010) asserts:

dont nobody’s language, dialect, or style make them “vulnerable to prejudice.” It’s ATTITUDES. It be the way folks with some power perceive other people’s language. Like the way some view, say, black English when used in school or at work. Black English dont make it own-self oppressed. (p. 110)

Young (2010) notes that no form of English is intrinsically superior to any other, but racist attitudes about various speakers create that hierarchy. Young (2010) points out, Standard American English (SAE) has been used as a billy club against anyone who speaks outside the White norms enforced in SAE. In a similar sense, American writing programs have been crafted intentionally to reduce or omit deviation from White dialects. Of course, it goes beyond speech itself because the prejudices against Black writers and speakers are not just because of their linguistic deviation, but their linguistic

deviations are punished by racism (Inoue, 2015; Young, 2010). For Young (2010) and many others, giving writers more control over their language is one way to combat the inherent racism of academic language, which I will discuss further.

Writing and rhetoric studies has begun addressing how our pedagogy should be adjusted to become more proactively antiracist; however, we have not given adequate attention to how racist institutions like the NCAA undermine that mission. Often unbeknownst to writing program administrators (WPAs), our composition programs function as NCAA watchdogs and enforcement officers. As discussed in chapter 3, the game of football pervades the student-athlete's life where every action that could jeopardize or confirm eligibility is part of the game, including the classroom. Thus we as administrators are not only instruments of the game, but in many ways referees of NCAA policy. We are encouraged by coaches, advisers, and upper administration to report student behavior, but even more fundamentally than that, the grades we report function as a part of the NCAA enforcement apparatus on the individual athlete and the athletic department itself. Our grades, through eligibility and APR, form justifications for budgets and reports, scholarships and careers beyond just the student-athletes themselves, and even program funding through bowl games and postseason opportunities. This is not a pressure inflicted upon us by the student-athletes or by becoming aware of the pressure, but one that is fused to the DNA of American university life as much as athletics itself. For example, at the time of this writing, instructors of freshmen level courses at my institution are required to report grades after week six of a 16 week semester for all freshmen students; however, they must report additional grades after week 10 for student-athletes. This is often presented by the athletic department as a way serve student-athletes. By knowing how the student-athletes are doing, athletic support staff can intervene on behalf of student-athlete academic progress, but it invariably functions more as a way to collect excessive data on their lives and manage them even more closely than before. Even if a college does not employ this specific tactic to monitor grades, the NCAA similarly pushes our programs to monitor student-athletes. This monitoring, as I will discuss in more

detail below, extends the rules and authority into our classrooms, into our grading and interactions with student-athletes, even those who don't play football.

In this chapter I will discuss how WPAs can deconstruct the inherent control of the NCAA over writing instructors and the student-athletes in our classes through antiracist pedagogy and training. By assuming an antiracist pedagogy, we can not only address the White supremacist ideology of SAE and the university, but also create an academic space where student-athletes can take more agency over their identities.

### **Research Questions and Methods**

In this chapter I will answer the following research questions:

1. How do writing programs participate in regulating student-athlete identity as members of the university constellation?
2. How can WPAs generatively challenge the pervasive control of the NCAA in our classrooms?
3. How can antiracist pedagogy assist us in teaching our student-athletes effectively?

In this chapter I will answer these questions first by giving a brief survey of antiracist pedagogy in rhetoric and writing studies. Then I will describe and analyze the ways the NCAA exerts control over composition classrooms and writing center spaces. I will then discuss how antiracist pedagogy and empathy in our teaching can help us challenge NCAA control without jeopardizing the futures of student-athletes, and how legislation can be leveraged to destabilize NCAA control in the political arena.

### **Antiracism in the Writing Classroom**

Among their many purposes, writing programs have historically functioned as agents for assimilating and indoctrinating immigrants and non-White citizens (Hammond, 2018; Lederman & Warwick, 2018) as well as subjects of American imperialism (Harms, 2018; Gomes, 2018; Inoue, 2015). As Susan H. McLeod (2007) notes in her outline of the history of WPA, first-year composition (FYC) courses arose as a response to the influx of the masses into the university<sup>31</sup>. As less privileged students enter the university, the need to standardize their experience and competency arose (McLeod, 2007). Standardization, as Young (2010) argues, has not historically been a racially inclusive practice. As such, assessing student work in writing classrooms can be fraught because SAE has been naturalized so that we can often teach White supremacy without realizing it (Inoue, 2015). Some scholars have proposed ways to combat this history of White supremacy in our FYC programs. Krista Ratcliffe (1999) argues that rhetorical listening as a practice can help instructors and students extend past their cultural biases and create a more equitable learning space. Christie Toth (2018) notes that allowing students more agency in placing themselves in basic writing or FYC courses had potential to be more socially just and ethical and to counter the White supremacist bent of testing that places students in various courses in the first place.

A significant amount of research in antiracist pedagogy has focused on writing assessment as the most actionable and effective site for antiracist work. This focus is primarily because, as Asao B. Inoue (2015) notes:

Classroom writing assessment is more important than pedagogy because it always trumps what you say or what you attempt to do with your students. And students know this. They feel it. Additionally, writing assessment drives learning and the outcomes of a course. What students take from a writing course may not be solely because of the assessments in the

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<sup>31</sup> This corresponds closely with university administrators investing in college football to create a cultural touchpoint for fans and communities, as outlined in chapter 2. Additionally, this also corresponds directly with the rise of the dumb jock stereotype when less privileged students were brought into Ivy League schools to play football (Toma, 2003). Both FYC and collegiate athletics in American universities arose from the same exigency of universities becoming more democratized.



course, but assessment always plays a central role, and good assessment, assessment that is healthy, fair, equitable, and sustainable for all students, determines the most important learning around writing and reading in a course. (p. 9-10)

For Inoue (2015), writing assessment should work as a dynamic ecology that is determined in conversation with the students, which has led him to advocate for labor-based grading over product-based grading (Inoue, 2018). Klotz and Whithaus (2015) have similarly discussed a “rhetoric of ambiguity” (p. 72) in classrooms about racial identity and racism that allows for complexity and contradiction in how students discuss their experiences with race. Inoue (2015; 2018) and other scholars including Burns, Cream, and Dougherty (2018) and Sassi (2018) argue for including students in assessment practices to proactively attack what Lederman and Warwick (2018) call the violence of assessment under racist language hierarchies.

As we attempt to create equity in our classrooms, we can run the risk of simply reifying old structures. One of the more important methods for avoiding this reification is not to treat antiracism as a passive pursuit. Implicit in the term *antiracist* is the active destruction of racism. At times, White instructors may not recognize privilege or position and may assume a space to be antiracist when it is simply not actively racist. To be truly effective in antiracist pedagogy, we have to take a proactive approach to deconstruct our own privilege (Pimentel, Pimentel, & Dean, 2017; Kim & Olson, 2017). One method of proactive antiracism advocated for by the Council of Writing Program Administrators (CWPA) (2014) is outcomes assessment. Using outcomes in writing classrooms focuses on assessing student work based on concrete and measurable “results” in student work (CWPA, 2014, para. 1), and not mere abstract notions like “understanding” or “critical thinking” which can quickly devolve into inherent bias. What counts as critical thinking can be filtered through unperceived bias about a student’s body. Even by progressive faculty and administrators, minority or other marginalized students may be seen as automatically less capable of critical thinking because of longstanding historical bias, in much the same way that Black quarterbacks are rarer than they should be because of

hateful stereotypes about the intelligence of Black players. By using a standard of concrete yet flexible results, teachers can give room for students to arrive at an outcome in a variety of ways. Of course, this pedagogical tool is not without its risks or detractors. Gallagher (2012) and Lederman and Warwick (2018) question whether or not outcomes are just another form of norming wrapped in a different package. They argue that by holding all students to the same prescribed standard created before the course begins and without student input on the process teachers can easily punish student writing that deviates from these norms (Gallagher, 2012; Lederman & Warwick, 2018). However, CWPA (2014) asserts that these standards are not abstract concepts but rather skills that can be demonstrated through measurable work performed by the students. The specific nature of the work is left up to the specific program and teacher, but CWPA (2014) calls programs to prepare their students to be able to apply rhetoric in a way that best suits the student in their future academic work and life. While static assessment models can revert back to formalist approaches a la Strunk and White (1959), outcomes are intended to be preemptively flexible and open while grounded in measurable work. Of course, no system is without flaws and completely uprooting White supremacy from writing instruction is likely impossible, as Lederman and Warwick (2018) themselves note. Nevertheless, we can continue to improve our practice for our students, whatever their identity. Now I will discuss how NCAA governance functions as a unique form of White supremacist pressure on our writing programs.

### **NCAA Hegemony and Writing Programs**

As discussed in chapter 2, football is intrinsically connected to the university constellation, and in many ways functions as the most public aspect of the constellation. As such, university functions are ecologically linked with sports even when they may not directly interact. As noted previously, a university's constellation is incredibly complex<sup>32</sup>. We can even see an insinuation of this

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<sup>32</sup> This does not mean that the entire function of a university is supporting or creating an excuse for the football team, but instead that these entities coexist within the same space and feed off one another, as I have

complexity in the land-grant mission many universities, including non-land grants, have: research, teaching, and service. It may be more accurate to rewrite that list as research, teaching, service, and athletics, but that does not mean the official three missions are absent from the university constellation. Nevertheless, what happens in research, teaching, and service invariably influences the sports side of university life through a variety of means, with the main one being constellating fans into the university. As mentioned in chapter 2, being on the campus constellates a person more readily because of the numerous points of connection between the person and the university. Thus, students in our classroom are being constellated into the university identity simply by being in our classrooms. The more successful the student, the higher their retention, and the higher their retention, the more likely they are to graduate. A graduate will tend to be far more constellated than someone who dropped out of college, so even by being successful teachers, we participate in this ecology.

Beyond functioning as constellating agents, we also act as referees for the NCAA rules about student-athlete conduct and eligibility. As discussed in chapter 3, the NCAA's rules about eligibility attach to student-athlete identity in such a way that the student-athlete is always managing their own eligibility. They are always playing their sport. Our gradebooks, attendance reports, communication with advisers, and general compliance with NCAA policy become part of this eligibility management. As mentioned in chapter 3, the NCAA calculates the academic success of an athletic program with a metric known as Academic Progress Rate (APR). Among other data points, the NCAA calculates this number based on how well the student-athlete is making progress towards a degree. Is the student making grades sufficient to play? Are they passing classes that apply to their current degree? Will they graduate in four years? Are they enrolled full-time as a student? APR is intended to answer all of these questions, in part because student-athletes are "supposed" to be playing their sport to receive an education (NCAA, 2018c). While grading may be a necessary element of teaching at a university and

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discussed in chapter 2. This relationship is never quite as simple as, for example, "universities exist for only football" or "universities only exist for classroom instruction" because neither is precisely true.

can be one of many useful tools for giving students feedback on their work, grades are also a way of assessing student-athlete performance in their sport. Poor grades likely will result in the student-athlete losing their scholarship and spot on the team. Whatever our intent in our grading and assessment of a student-athlete's work in our class, we must also be aware that we are part of the NCAA apparatus that monitors their every move. If NCAA rules are as racially biased as I explain in chapter two and chapter four, then even participating in this system constellates our work with its racist ideology.

The naturalization of NCAA control is not that different from the naturalization of SAE. While these concepts can, as Young (2010) notes, seem normal or like essential standards because they are so ubiquitous, they are constructed. As detailed in chapters two, three, and four, the NCAA and its presence within the university has been intentionally crafted to monitor and control student-athletes. At times, this control has been racially coded and motivated by racism, as discussed in chapter four. Much like conduct rules in football, rules around language are read through identity and punish Black writers for sounding non-White but also consider them inauthentic if they sound too White. We may be able to account for aspects of racism in our classrooms through assessment and proactive pedagogy, but if we don't deconstruct or resist hidden systems like NCAA, we will miss a crucial piece of our antiracist mission.

I will now discuss two approaches to resisting NCAA hegemonic control: labor-based grading and proactive empathy.

### **Antiracist WPA Praxis**

Beyond simply recognizing the pervasive reach of the NCAA, we must be proactive in our resistance to NCAA control. In keeping with Inoue's (2015) assertion that assessment is the most important piece in antiracist pedagogy, I argue that we must adopt more labor-based and outcomes-

based assessment ecologies across our curriculum, practices well described in scholarship. To these practices I add the importance of a proactively empathetic stance towards our student-athletes.

As I have already outlined above, outcomes language is designed to provide WPAs, writing instructors, and students with concrete and measurable ways to assess student writing. Outcomes can help instructors and students recognize specifically what competency or praxis goal needs to be met, but not how that goal should be reached. This gives students more agency within the writing classroom which makes decisions about genre, form, and modality for their work far more dynamic and conversational. Instructors and students can work out what the student will do based on the student's interest and comfort with the direction their work is taking, and WPAs can very easily assess if this relationship is occurring when observing or speaking with instructors during professional development sessions. If the language of their outcomes does not clearly express a concrete goal, then they need to revise the language to make their assessment ecology more approachable. For example, instead of assessing students on "critical thinking" which is a nebulous concept that can easily be influenced by hidden racial bias, instructors and programs can assign students to "craft a clear analysis which directly describes and evaluates" a text. The moves of analysis, description, and evaluation are clearly outlined and easily assessed, where critical thinking is not. By setting this sort of praxis as standard in our writing programs, we can not only systematically combat racist praxis, we can also play to the strengths of our student-athletes, who are deeply trained in reaching measurable goals through their athletic education and intelligence (Rifenburg, 2018).

In addition to assessing student work in a concrete way, we must account for the importance of student labor as a component of each assignment. As mentioned above, Inoue (2019) advocates assessing student work with labor-based contracts, where the terms of the contract are agreed upon by the student and instructor before the assignment is started. These contracts are assembled around the complexity of "mindful labor" as opposed to a raw final product because academic labor is the most effective way for students to learn (Inoue, 2019, p. 121). Inoue (2019) asserts

A fundamental aspect of labor-based grading contract economies is slowing down, experiencing labor and time differently, or mindfully. I believe students usually learn best when they can just be in the labor, when they can stop thinking so centrally about the end product or goal and center all of their energies and attention on the labor they are engaged in right now. What we do now is all we really have, so I remind them continually in my labor instructions and through our mindfulness practices each class session, to be mindful of the fact that they are laboring in particular ways, to savor that laboring. It is all you have. We are lucky to be able to do this work for each other. One might think of mindful laboring as the act of self-consciously laboring at something, doing something while simultaneously noticing that you are doing that work, that you are doing it in a particular way, that you feel a certain way as you do it, that that laboring makes you feel, see, hear, understand, and experience other things that are wrapped up in the labor. (p. 121)

Even though Inoue (2019) recognizes that product-based grading resulted from an understandable pragmatic problem: instructors had to create a grade from something and a product is the most straightforward and standardized approach to this. However, Inoue (2019) argues that by focusing so much on product, we reduce the mindful time spent laboring and learning and more time maximizing our product per labor ratio. Minimal labor to produce maximum product. Rather than immersing students in the ecology of a literacy through their labor, we instead have students focus on producing a high level product. Producing a product of certain quality is not inherently wrong as outcomes assessment engages directly with measurable production, but for Inoue (2019) immersing students in mindful labor goes much further in helping them learn writing and rhetoric. Labor-based contracts also allow the instructor to collaboratively account for the complex intersectional identity the student possesses, giving a standard level of labor for all students regardless of the end product.

Labor-based contracts and outcomes assessment each have their risks as policy in addressing the racist nature of the classroom and providing students and student-athletes with agency over their

own work. While outcomes gives students a great deal of flexibility in reaching the final concrete product, incorrectly applied outcomes can overly focus on the product at the expense of learning. On the other hand, labor-based contracts are incredibly equitable in treating student work with a similar level of concern. If incorrectly applied, these contracts could also potentially feel as if the quality of the labor does not matter as much as the quantity, that all class work is a form of busy work. Both methods give student-athletes a surprising amount of control over their learning and over their grade, and thus over their sport. In an environment where they are procedurally limited and their identity is so closely controlled, any rupture that allows them more agency over their possibility space seems like a transgressive and progressive act. Regardless of the potential stumbling blocks in applying these practices, using a blended form of outcomes- and labor-based grading can construct a more robust and dynamic grading ecology that proactively constructs the possibility space of the class as inclusive. A consciously antiracist pedagogy in our writing programs is important because it matters to our own mission as a field and because our classrooms have the potential to be one of the only spaces in their academic careers that can be intentionally antiracist. However, I also argue that these practices must met with an intentionally empathetic stance towards our students.

### *Empathetic Teaching as Antiracist Practice*

Empathy is a simple principle as a teacher, but it can be one that is institutionally defeated by the rules surrounding sports and by cultural stereotypes surrounding athletes. As I describe in chapter 4, NCAA rules of conduct procedurally and culturally position football players, particularly minority players, as unsympathetic figures. In a writing classroom setting, this can often lead to instructors misinterpreting student-athlete behavior. Exhaustion can read as not caring, struggling with new concepts can be seen as inability, and kinesthetic learning habits like fidgeting or moving frequently can be seen as not paying attention or distracting to other students. Classrooms are inherently set up as spaces where bodies are expected to not act. Desks are screwed into the ground or are too small for most large or tall bodies, and they usually fill the classroom to the point where they can't be

rearranged. So when a 280 pound, six foot, six inch defensive tackle looks uncomfortable and exhausted in a classroom, the widely held stereotypes surrounding student-athletes can influence the teaching of even a progressive and empathetic individual.

While some scholars have argued for teaching empathy itself in the writing classroom, I am arguing even more generally for an empathetic pedagogy. In a response to Newcomb's (2007) article on compassion in rhetoric, Fleckenstein (2007) argues that empathy is rational and is crucial to dialogue and social action. Leake (2016) similarly argues that empathy is productive in how it helps students relate to each other but also in how it helps them to generate ideas and analyze texts. Both Fleckenstein (2007) and Leake (2016) emphasize how empathy in a classroom can enable social justice as a component in student work, and this as well as the other concerns are vital parts of the work of rhetoric and composition teachers.

Integrating empathy into our classrooms means more than just teaching students how to empathize and use rhetoric. Empathetic teaching requires us to actively engage empathetically with our students as well. This may seem obvious, but to draw on Fleckenstein (2007), Leake (2016), and DeStigter (1999), I propose that we engage with our students in a critically empathetic way. As Destigter (1999) notes, critical empathy is not based solely on uninterrogated feeling, but on a thoughtful acknowledgement of connection between people that can encompass feeling. While their work isn't explicitly concerned with antiracist pedagogy, empathy can be easily leveraged as an antiracist strategy when working with student-athletes. Some scholars like J. Michael Rifenburg are indirectly applying a form of empathy in their work. Rifenburg has called for scholars in writing center studies to consider how their pedagogy can differ and be enacted in spaces more directly controlled by the NCAA, like an athletic tutor center (Rifenburg, 2012). Rifenburg (2018) discusses at length how student-athletes compose in embodied ways through how they create and apply texts like playbooks and how this practice is one we can model and utilize in our own classroom spaces. Other scholars have begun focusing on how sports and sports literacy can be used in the classroom to



teach critical literacy (Rodesiler, 2017a; Rodesiler, 2017b; Rodesiler & Premont, 2018). Beyond these specific applications, having a proactively empathetic approach can create space for student-athlete possibility. In a general sense, this means trusting student-athletes when they describe why they are behind on work or tired. This means anticipating student-athlete travel requirements and crafting alternate assignments for them to keep up with the outcomes for that class. This means actively communicating with them about their comfort level with an assignment. This means anticipating how many student-athletes have significant training in modalities but may not feel confident in their ability to craft formal academic writing. This means looking for opportunities to connect with them and understand their identity and context. This, like most antiracist praxis and approaches, will invariably benefit all students in our classes, but will also help instructors in our programs create relationships and community with their students in ways that will make them more effective teachers and gives them opportunities to grow along with their students. Student-athletes exist within a series of dehumanizing systems, so we must actively push against these systems to humanize them in our classrooms and give them as much agency as possible.

Empathy as a subset of antiracist practice will not only give us space to support student-athletes within the classroom but also in the public sphere. Advocating for student-athlete rights is an important component of practicing our antiracist pedagogy to its fullest extent. In 2015, football players at Northwestern University held a vote to form a union which would give them rights over their labor and profits of the program (Strauss, 2015). After the union was initially approved, their vote to unionize was rejected by the local union board and their votes were never even counted (Strauss, 2015). In more recent news at the time of writing, California's legislature has passed the Fair Pay To Play Act which would give student-athletes the rights over their own likenesses, which bar any public university from penalizing student-athletes for profiting off their own images (Murphy, 2019). The NCAA (2019) of course objected to this measure, but this bill has the chance to significantly shake up the rights of student-athletes. Other potential areas that could significantly

benefit them would be supporting universal healthcare and public university education, which together would reduce the NCAA's leverage over student-athletes significantly. Beyond these issues supporting student-athletes in their petitioning for rights or speaking on their behalf by voting for similar measures will help shift the balance of power back in their favor. They carry a significant rhetorical and material weight, and asking for them to be their own, sole advocates puts even more pressure on students-athletes in precarious positions. Taking as much of that rhetorical weight upon ourselves as we can will begin structural change that will benefit more student-athletes than our individual work could hope to assist in a lifetime.

### **Conclusion**

Racism and White supremacy are systemically integrated into our field and institutions. Because of this systemic quality, we cannot only combat them on an individual basis, but we must construct and leverage counter-systems. Labor-based contracts, outcomes, and proactive empathy along with supporting legislation and student-athlete labor movements are ways we can construct these counter-systems. At the time of writing, there is a job posting for a WPA position at a public land-grant university with an FBS football program with a section describing the position's relationship to the NCAA. On the posting, in the job description it asks if "This position requires a clear and unambiguous commitment to compliance of all National Collegiate Athletic Association (NCAA) regulations for Division I (FBS) universities." In response to this query, the job description simply responds "No." This is a good place to start.

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VITA

Josiah Philip-David Meints

Candidate for the Degree of

Doctor of Philosophy

Dissertation: THE RHETORICAL PLAYBOOK: FOOTBALL, RACE, RHETORIC,  
AND PLAY POSSIBILITY SPACE IN THE AMERICAN UNIVERSITY

Major Field: English

Biographical:

Education:

Completed the requirements for the Doctor of Philosophy in English at  
Oklahoma State University, Stillwater, Oklahoma in December, 2019.

Completed the requirements for the Master of Arts in English at Mississippi  
State University, Mississippi State, Mississippi in 2011.

Completed the requirements for the Bachelor of Arts in English at Mississippi  
State University, Mississippi State, Mississippi in 2009.

Experience:

Presented at national conferences CCCC and RSA

Professional Memberships:

Rhetoric Society of America