AN ATHLETE'S HUMBLE BEGINNINGS: A PLACE-BASED NARRATIVE IN NEED OF REPAIR

by

Barbara Lash

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Approved by:

_____
Dr. Colleen Hammelman

_____
Dr. Heather Smith

_____
Dr. Harry Campbell

_____
Dr. Chance Lewis

ABSTRACT

BARBARA LASH. An Athlete's Humble Beginnings:
A Place-Based Narrative in Need of Repair.
(Under the direction of DR. COLLEEN HAMMELMAN)

Sports play a unique role in American culture and act as sources of entertainment and community identity. Events that include sports are also a microcosm of society that simultaneously reflects and guides cultural and racial differences that are illuminated by the journey of the African American athlete. The media depictions of Black athletes as super-human, aggressive bodies that are products of poor, blighted, and dangerous neighborhoods have created a dominant humble beginnings narrative that stigmatizes Black athletes and marginalized neighborhoods. Such depictions create an imagined Black sense of place and space that travels with the athletes as they move from city to city for their professional careers. Grounded in Black Geographies, this research discusses the intersections of race, the media-framing of male athletes, and neighborhood stigma. It provides a new way in which to evaluate marginalized communities. This research also disrupts the dominant narrative by de-centralizing the Black body and offering variations of the lived experiences that were shared by 30 Black NFL players. Understanding alternate storylines creates new spatial imaginaries of marginalized Black communities and what is needed to improve their quality of life. The dissertation concludes with a consideration that scholars and journalists should highlight variations of the humble beginnings experience and share the stories of Black athletes who do not come from humble beginnings so it may be possible to deconstruct racial and geographic stigma.

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Many thanks also to Kevin Bostic whose tech savviness saved my work after the computer "ate my paper," literally. And finally, I want to express my appreciation for the athletes who participated in this research. I am forever grateful that you shared your personal experiences in an effort to show that your NFL journeys are varied, complex and unique.

DEDICATION

To

All the athletes who trusted me
with their stories, journeys and experiences.

And my husband Jack and daughter Simone
who also sacrificed to make this a reality.

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LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS & TERMS

Hood	A marginalized neighborhood with high concentrations of poverty, crime and violence
League	National Football League
MLB	Major League Baseball
NBA	National Basketball Association
NFL	National Football League
Black Sense of Place and Space	Spatial identity, or what an individual imagines it is like to be a or be around a Black athlete from a marginalized and/or stigmatized community
Community	A socially constructed network of people living in the same place and sharing similar characteristics and/or interests
Neighborhood	A spatial construct, location or area surrounding a particular place
Place	Areas/locations/spaces imbued with meaning
Space	Physical structures and locations with specific boundaries
Spatial imaginaries	Concerned with the spatiality of Black life, and represents the meanings people give to Black people emerging from marginalized communities, based on what they see and what they think they know.

CHAPTER 1
Introduction

In March, 2019, chaos erupted within the Charlotte Mecklenburg Schools system when a high school playoff basketball game was moved from the hosting school to a different school. The decision came from the North Carolina High School Athletic Association, citing the gymnasium seating capacity inside West Charlotte High School was insufficient for the highly publicized quarterfinal matchup (Wertz, 2019a) although it had won the right to host the game because of its winning record. This decision expanded the discussion from one of mere logistics to a debate over the disparities between a school that was housed in a marginalized community and its wealthy suburban counterpart, Ardrey Kell High School (Wertz, 2019b). Such neighborhood polarization was highlighted by many of the West Charlotte Lions basketball players, students, and alumni who turned to social media to publicize their belief that the Ardrey Kell Knights and their fans did not feel comfortable coming to their neighborhood (Wertz, 2019b). That narrative advanced to racial tension after a White player from Ardrey Kell posted a racial slur when referring to the West Charlotte players, most of whom were Black. Yet another social media post the night before the game framed one of the Lions star players as a criminal who was threatening to bring a gun to the game and use it. Police were ready to intervene until it was proven the post was fake (Wertz, 2019b). But why? Why was the perception of a violent Black athlete from a poor Black community such an easily accessible narrative? Why was it almost immediately accepted as a situation that warranted the Black athlete being contained and controlled? Finally, why was there such an imbalance of resources to begin with?

The game was ultimately played without any violent outbreaks at Vance High School, a neutral location with a larger seating capacity gymnasium. The White athlete who made the slur was suspended from participating in athletics, and the district cited his racist behavior as "repugnant" (Associated Press, 2019, para. 5). The West Charlotte Lions won the game, but they gained no ground in leveling the playing field in the areas of school resources, and the athletes did not erase any of the racially-charged perceptions about their neighborhood and athletes. What the series of events and sentiments leading up to the West Charlotte-Ardrey Kell playoff game did highlight were the connections between inequitable access to resources between segmented neighborhoods of privilege and poverty, the perception of fear of stigmatized Black communities, and a socially produced and shared humble beginnings narrative of Black athletes (Allen, Lawhon, & Pierce, 2019; Brown, Anderson, & Thompson, 2013; Deeb & Love, 2018; Florida & Adler, 2018; Shields, 1999; Wacquant, 1994, 2010; Wilson, 1997). It also revealed an outsiders' imagined sense of Black place and space—a poor environment with dangerous Black athletes who need to be controlled. It is these connections that this research explored, which is the place-based narrative that Black athletes often emerge from poor Black communities plagued with violence and void of the very basic of resources, and further that the athletes use athletics as an avenue to escape stigmatized geographies.

Research Question

Specifically, this research sought answers to the following overarching question: "What images, stereotypes, and resulting impacts on marginalized communities are created through the humble beginnings narrative of Black athletes?" The path to answer this question included an exploration of the following supporting questions:

1. What is the dominant media-driven humble beginnings narrative of Black athletes and their home neighborhoods, especially the narrative of those who play professional football?

2. How prevalent and accurate is this narrative compared to the lived experiences of those athletes?

3. What do this narrative and the lived experiences reveal about the resources that are needed in marginalized communities?

Brief Overview of Research Findings

The data from this research showed that there is a dominant media-driven humble beginnings narrative of Black NFL athletes. They are portrayed (a) with tremendous emphasis on their bodies and physicality, (b) coming from marginalized neighborhoods with few financial resources, especially if they were raised by a single mother, (c) enduring challenging family dynamics, and (d) relying on athletics as their ticket out of the ghetto. Because this narrative is reinforced by local and national sports media, it cements images and ideas that Black athletes are either dangerous, or that they can be. Another stereotype is that if a Black man lives in a wealthy neighborhood, his money must have come from either athletics or drug deals. While the quantitative content analysis from this study showed that a majority of the Black athletes in the NFL do come from humble beginnings, it was observed through the qualitative analysis of original interviews that their experiences varied, and they had a strong desire to debunk the stereotypes. Additionally, the dominant narrative does not portray what is needed in humble communities. The storylines are relegated to the circumstances the athletes left behind and to short stories of giving back with football camps that athletes sponsor years after leaving their childhood neighborhoods. Meanwhile, the players who were interviewed for this dissertation were very vocal about the needs of their hometowns; they highlighted a variety of resources that were needed that ranged from neighborhood libraries to Black-owned businesses and daily schedules that would hold youth accountable for their free time. To ground the research in

geography and account for the role of race, I used Black Geographies (McKittrick & Woods, 2007) as the epistemological framework to further explore the research questions and the ontological positioning to connect Black athletes to stigmatized neighborhoods.

The social identities journalists assign to Black athletes and their bodies, as well as the National Football League's (NFL) pattern of commodifying their presumed ability to re-direct the perceived grit, strength and power it took to escape the ghetto, make the media and the League complicit in contributing to and normalizing a Black sense of place and space that simultaneously highlights difference, exception, inclusion and exclusion. This Black sense of place and space (or what an individual imagines it is like to be a Black athlete from a marginalized and/or stigmatized neighborhood and community) creates a spatial identity (Eaves, 2017; Hawthorne, 2019; McKittrick, 2011). As a result, most of the athletes interviewed for this dissertation discussed their emotional challenges and frustrations as they tried to co-author and negotiate their childhood environments, and as they tried to make sense of new geographies their NFL career afforded them—geographies from which they had previously been excluded. While Black Geographies does not explicitly state the level of influence contributors have in the making of Black communities, Pierce, Martin, and Murphy (2011) argued, "Individuals (and institutions) may have strong relational ties to multiple communities that allow them to strongly experience and potentially shape competing place-frames simultaneously" (p. 60). Their statement suggests that a privileged political power (e.g., the media, the League, government) can have more influence than the community members themselves. In this dissertation, it was my intention to extend the relational place-making analysis of Black Geographies in order to evaluate the significant influence outsiders possess in the making of marginality within Black neighborhoods, through the lens of Black athletes.

Road Map

As a road map to this research, I examined the intersection of geography, race, and African American male athletes through an analysis of media-driven representations of stigmatized neighborhoods and Black NFL players. I used the versatility of Black Geographies, an interdisciplinary approach, as well as determined examples of its relational place-making, the politics and power dynamics in the making of place and space, and Black agency to illustrate this intersection. While scholarship in each of these areas (geography, race, and Black athlete identities) exist in solidarity, I struggled to find a body of literature that connects them and grounds the journey of the African American athlete in geography and the making of marginalized and stigmatized Black neighborhoods. The information from this research project fills a gap in the literature by creating a new approach to studying neighborhood marginalization and stigma in Black geographies through the lens of Black athletes. Knowledge gained from the study contribute to the literature by incorporating theory from media framing and the concepts of space and place.

Neighborhood stigma literature was consulted to establish what classifies areas, as marginalized (especially in Black and Brown communities), and how those characteristics result in stigma that reflect on the citizenry (Besbris, Faber, Rich, & Sharkey, 2015; Sampson & Raudenbush, 2004; Wacquant, 2016). Embedded in this analysis were found evaluations of space and place in the making of neighborhoods. Media framing literature placed African American athletes within racialized stereotypes by framing them solely in relation to their bodies versus White athletes who were depicted in more "passive images" (Johnson & Romney, 2018, p. 12). The literature also provided two pivotal connections to geography. First, media framing connected Black athletes to stigmatized neighborhoods by depicting their rise to fame

and fall from grace in relation to their humble beginnings (Cole, 1996; Hartmann, 2000; Hylton, 2018; Nike, 2019). The other connection came from framing their superstar status as the reason they were an exception to the "breakdown, disorder, and impoverishment of the inner city" (Cole, 1996, p. 368). Along with its interdisciplinary approach to understanding Black agency in the making of place and space, Black Geographies revealed opportunities and approaches to disrupt the dominant humble beginnings narrative and re-envision images of what it means to come from a marginalized and stigmatized community. Scholarship on Black Geographies also provided an ontological framework to evaluate the actors in relational place-making and encourage new approaches to evaluating the needs of stigmatized neighborhoods (Allen et al., 2019; McKittrick, 2011).

Chapter 2 provides the review on three primary literatures: (a) neighborhood stigmatization, (b) racial media framing of African American athletes, and (c) Black Geographies. Chapter 3 outlines the mixed-methods design for this research, including a quantitative content analysis to establish how many Black NFL players come from humble beginnings and a discourse analysis of pre-existing media stories to establish the dominant media-driven narrative. Original interviews with sports journalists are discussed to understand how, when, and why the narrative is dominant, and original interviews with athletes are studied to understand the lived experience. Chapter 4 presents the results of a discourse analysis that firmly establishes the dominance of the humble beginnings narrative and also situates marginalized neighborhoods as a lived experience for the majority of Black NFL players who were active in the 2020 season. The chapter includes an evaluation of why journalists continually push forward the humble beginnings narrative. Chapter 5 discusses the lived experiences of current and former NFL players who grew up in humble beginnings. Along with highlighting

experiences that directly correlate with the dominant narrative, this chapter also illustrates significant variations and shares more than a dozen resources athletes feel are needed in marginalized communities. Chapter 6 concludes the study with a discussion of how this research expands the application of Black Geographies, portrays the professional Black athlete journey in a new way through which to study neighborhood stigma and introduces future research opportunities. Throughout the paper, several terms are used interchangeably. These include (a) *Black* and *African American*, (b) *Brown, Hispanic,* and *Latino*, and (c) *sport, sports,* and *athletics*.

Significance of the Research

This research is significant because of the role of sports in American culture. Not only is it a microcosm of society, but "large numbers of Americans across racial lines interact with sport and are impacted by its remarkable racial dynamics" (Hartmann, 2000, p. 231). Through their celebrity status, African American athletes are positioned to both illuminate struggles of marginalized communities and sensationalize the ability to transcend their circumstances. This research study is grounded in geography and presents the connection between race, the media-framing of African American male athletes, and neighborhood marginalization and stigma—a connection that needs further study in modern academic scholarship. As a result, it contributes to the literature on neighborhood marginalization and stigmatization, racial media framing of athletes, and Black Geographies. In traditional studies on marginalized neighborhoods and stigmatized communities, researchers spend significant time unpacking what constitutes marginality and stigma and their impact on everyday residents. This research project provides a new lens through which to evaluate marginalized communities and determine what is needed in them by understanding the unique positionality of athletes to circumvent social problems.

Juxtaposing the dominant media-driven humble beginnings narrative to examples of the athletes' lived experiences also advances the debate on what is needed to improve the quality of life in marginalized neighborhoods. In my interviews with athletes, I asked them what resource they felt their childhood neighborhood could have benefited from. It took 25 interviews before I heard the same primary resource repeated (see Table 6). This is important in prompting scholars, planners, governments, and other change-makers to not generalize the needs of marginalized communities, but rather, to evaluate them and interpret their needs individually.

In racial media framing of athletes, scholars have firmly established socially constructed stereotypes of Black athletes and the role of sport to "reinforce and reproduce images, ideas and social practices that are thoroughly racialized, if not simply racist" (Hartmann, 2000, p. 230). Those racial undertones shape how others perceive racial difference (Deeb & Love, 2018; Johnson & Romney, 2018). What is missing is a definitive and in-depth evaluation of Black athletes and their connection to urban geography that is grounded in the geography discipline. Other than sociology of sport and behavioral science disciplines, scholars rarely explicitly discuss Black athletes as representatives of inner cities (Andrews & Silk, 2010; Cole, 1996; Edwards, 2000; Hartmann, 2000; Hylton, 2018). Instead, the conversations are typically mapped out in popular media (Nike, 2019) and relegated to sport identity and the commodification of ghetto-centric marketing rather than creating new spatial imaginaries of race and urban landscapes (Andrews & Silk, 2010; Carrington, 2010). Even sports geography literature that acknowledges the spatial and location properties of athletics (including global identities through sports facilities) omits the connection at the micro and inner-city level (Bale, 2002; Connolly & Dolan, 2018). My contribution to media-framing and geographic literature is the specific consideration that while Black professional football players are more often than not

products of concentrated urban geographies and subject to marginalization and stigma, that is not the only scenario. Instead, their lived experiences are more complex that often presented in the media. This research expands on the evaluation of athletes' experiences and conversations about them to provide a greater understanding of the variety of needs of stigmatized communities. Geographers should reframe the conversation to leverage the many versions of the lived experience and the privileges offered by sports to push past a singular way to see Black athletes and marginalized neighborhoods.

Black Geographies account for multiple articulations of place and encourages the use a variety of methodologies to better understand Black agency and provide the glue that holds race, place, and spatial imaginaries together (Allen et al., 2019; Hawthorne, 2019). It has been used to study feminism, the carceral city, Black queer communities, Latinx geographies, public health disparities, and ecological injustices (Black Geographies Specialty Group, 2021; Hawthorne, 2019; Ramírez, 2015). My research contributes to Black Geographies literature by expanding its application to the study of marginalized and stigmatized communities, especially as experienced by the journey of a Black male athlete and those who manipulate neighborhood politics and power structures to support his escape from the neighborhood. Furthermore, Black geographical scholarship does not see place as a fixed geographical location, but as an ever-evolving sense of place constructed by social, political, socio-economic and other fixed and fluid factors, including how Blacks relate to those environments (Allen et al., 2019). My findings build on the flexibility of this relational place-making to firmly establish a mobile Black sense of place and space that adheres to Black professional athletes whether or not they come from marginalized communities. According to the data from the interviews conducted for this dissertation, Black athletes experience tremendous stress trying to counter racialized stereotypes

that relegate them to nothing more than strong, mindless Black bodies, especially if their physical locations have changed from humble beginnings to more affluent neighborhoods. By elaborating on Black Geographies' acknowledgement of an imagined sense of what it means to be from Black neighborhoods, expanding its application as a framework to understand neighborhood stigma and marginalization, and pulling in the contributions to Black athlete media framing, this research also provides recommendations for the media, academia, athletes, and the NFL to re-envision multiple articulations of place and space within and outside of marginalized communities.

CHAPTER 2

Literature Review

The research for this dissertation was based on literature in three primary areas of study: neighborhood stigmatization, media-framing of African American athletes and Black Geographies. Chapter 2 provides a literature review of each area, while also incorporating supporting concepts from spatial stigmatization and Black athlete identity. The review of literature includes a discussion of neighborhood stigmatization, with particular attention to the making and impact of place and space, the meaning people give to their respective spaces and places, the production of advanced marginality, and the role of storytelling and media in creating and reinforcing the stigma. One of the goals of this dissertation was to give a thorough and vivid picture of stigmatized neighborhoods and their Black and Brown citizenry in order to better understand how African American athletes are depicted in the media as products of humble beginnings.

Neighborhood Stigmatization

Regions, counties, cities, towns and neighborhoods are often divided and categorized by a combination of socially constructed factors including socioeconomic status, race, property values, school performance and crime. Whether an area is rural or urban, has a population in the thousands, hundred-thousands or millions, whether it is close to jobs and cultural amenities —all of these characteristics help define neighborhoods and how they are divided (Anderson et al., 2003; Florida, 2017; Ley, 1996). Studying these physical, cultural, social, political and economic geographical aspects can help scholars understand physical and environmental conditions, the people who inhabit various places, and capitalistic agendas that shape their space (Delmelle, 2017; Hernandez, 2009; Hertz, 2015). These studies can also be used to frame neighborhoods in one of three broad categories: rich, middle/working class and poor. More

specifically, neighborhoods are often understood to be one of three types: (a) rich, affluent or advantaged areas that house the professional creative class, (b) middle and working-class communities for white- and blue-collar level workers, and (c) disadvantaged or marginalized neighborhoods that house the poor and service class (Florida & Adler, 2018). The latter is often accompanied by stigma that defines how outsiders view and regard a neighborhood and its residents (with the help of avenues like politics and the media), and artificially position residents living within marginalized neighborhoods so that the stigma are incorporated, or individuals feel the need to defend their neighborhood and community's reputation (August, 2014; Keene & Padilla, 2010). The affluent communities are traditionally populated by Whites while poor, marginalized, and stigmatized neighborhoods are historically comprised of mostly Black and Brown citizenry (Florida, 2017; Florida & Adler, 2018; Wacquant, 1994, 2010, 2016). Importantly, the impressions and expectations of neighborhoods (and community) are socially constructed through relationships, discourse (such as media framing), and material circumstances. During my review of the literature, I observed that many of the scholarly works used for this paper were rooted in traditional geographical thought, including economic geography, and did not specifically correlate stigma and poverty to Black and Latino communities. However, Darden's (1987) work introduced significant connections between race and geography, explaining the power of education, occupation and income in determining the access racial groups have to neighborhoods. Additionally, all literature were evaluated with a particular emphasis on African American citizenry, as well as geographical thought and economic geography since all of these factors influenced participants of this study, Black athletes.

Significance of space and place. Understanding neighborhood stigma requires comprehending the physical characteristics and outcomes of marginalized geographies as well as the meaning attached to them. A neighborhood's reputation, for example, denotes the meaning insiders and/or outsiders have attached to the area (Keene & Padilla, 2010). In this case, a neighborhood's bad reputation or stigma operates on a place-space continuum with visible and non-visible boundaries and characteristics. Understanding this factor is crucial to evaluating the foundation of my research question that dealt with what it means to come from a humble beginning and the criteria ultimately used to measure it.

Neighborhoods are the products of physical as well as non-physical components. Physically, they are defined as homes, buildings, and land locations with fixed boundaries, that provide "a deeply held human need to organize space by creating arbitrary borders, boundaries, and districts" (Cutter, Golledge, & Graf, 2002, p. 308). The need for physical locations, boundaries, borders, and districts highlights the existence of different realities for people living in ghettos versus those in single family suburban homes separated by white picket fences**.** But the very idea that an area would be referred to as a ghetto introduces the abstract nature of place (Relph, 2013; Tuan, 1974, 1977). According to Tuan (1977), spaces start as areas that can be occupied, and over time, they transform to locations with memories, values, and impressions to help explain how individuals act in their environments (Tuan, 1974). While those values and what they symbolize can vary from person to person, group to group, and community to community, the cultural constructs that denote one area as a suburb and another as a ghetto also represent bounded spatial representations (Keene & Padilla, 2010; Wacquant, 1994). And when those physical spaces are characterized by high poverty rates, violent crime, food deserts, low property values, and are comprised of mostly renters, low performing schools, and neighborhood

schools with a Title I status, residents become vilified for their connection to their space and to their location (Wacquant, 1994). These and other neighborhood characteristics discussed in this chapter guided my choice of poverty rates, violent crime exposure, school performance, and Title I school status as the characteristics to broadly determine if the 2020 pool of Black NFL players came from humble beginnings.

Predominately African American neighborhoods. *Impoverished, blighted, crime-ridden, low performing schools, food desert, dangerous*—all of these terms and phrases are used to describe stigmatized communities (Ettema & Peer, 1996). Juxtaposed to these categorizations are racial identity terms such as *African Americans/Blacks* and *Hispanics/Latinos* (Anderson et al., 2003; Sampson & Raudenbush, 2004; Wacquant, 2010). When used in tandem, these descriptors portray a neighborhood as either lacking in resources, in need of repair, or a lost cause (Florida & Adler, 2018; Wacquant, 1994, 2010, 2016) and are potential targets for some of society's unwelcome elements including low-rent motels, rehabilitation clinics, and prisons (Sandercock & Taylor, 1999). Even more powerful is when these characteristics are connected to fear, because this creates momentum to solidify a neighborhood's negative reputation. Whether it is fear that a person will be harmed when visiting a stigmatized neighborhood, fear that crime will spill over to White communities, or fear that the same disinvestment that contributes to advanced marginality will occur in once affluent or post-gentrified communities—fear and stigmatization go hand in hand (Florida & Adler, 2018; Kern, 2010; Smith, 1996). The connection to fear emerges in marginalization literature which positions stigmatization as spatial relegation to the leftover, ex-urban concentrated places plagued by poverty, divestment, crime, violence, and the perception of violence that draws on social, cultural and even political dimensions (Hernandez, 2009; Wacquant, 1994). When fear

of crime spills over and outside of the danger-zones, it alters the reactions of outsiders and negatively impacts surrounding communities (Bonds, 2019; Goetz, 2011; Wacquant, 2010). This was demonstrated in the events described at the beginning of Chapter 1; the police came close to having to intervene after there were reports of the stereotypical depiction of a gun-toting Black star athlete from a poor community. The fear of Black neighborhoods and the people emerging from these impoverished communities is so ingrained, and the news of incidents are so often repeated that the stigma stay tethered to star athletes who emerge from such communities and are points of note whether they experience significant triumphs or failures (Berry & Smith, 2000; The Famous People, n.d; Lapchick, 2019). That fear and other imaginary beliefs often prompt outsiders to impose their negative stereotypes on athletes. In one particular case, Fox News reporter Laura Ingram criticized NBA star LeBron James for his "barely intelligible, not to mention ungrammatical take on President Trump" after Mr. Trump won the presidency (Raf Productions, 2018). During her television program, Ingram called James's comments ignorant and warned others not to leave high school early like James did. She ended her rant by telling James and the NBA's Kevin Durant to "shut up and dribble" (Raf Productions, 2018). Additionally, the fear of the unknown drives the "golden ghettos" phenomena used to describe Black athletes at predominately White colleges who find themselves isolated (Bourdieu, 1988, p. 153), "where conservatives were reluctant to talk with them because they were black, while liberals were hesitant to converse with them because they were athletes" (Hartmann, 2000, p. 229).

Baumer (1985) noted that the residents living within so-called crime-ridden areas can differentiate between the perception of crime and actual crime, but there is no awareness of the difference for outsiders. The ability to differentiate the real from the imaginary is especially

difficult when information outsiders receive is delivered by trusted sources like local news stations (Campbell, LeDuff, Jenkins, & Brown, 2011; Ettema & Peer, 1996). As a result, news outlets become key contributors to the making of Black Geographies. And when the majority of the crime stories show alleged Black perpetrators, they advance the perceived need for policing and a push for a carceral city with racialized surveillance practices existing beyond prison walls (Bonds, 2019; Gilmore, 1999; Thomas & Magilvy, 2011). The longer communities of color are believed to have negative reputations, the more those storylines become adopted by outsiders and, to some extent, insiders, and the harder it becomes to shed the stigma (August, 2014; Goetz, 2011; Sampson & Raudenbush, 2004). Conversely, stories that shape affluent areas as clean, prosperous, and desirable help increase property values, steer continued resources for desired characteristics and amenities like nearby shopping, breweries, and high performing schools with thriving extra-curricular activities and well-equipped athletic programs—all elements that positively affect perceptions of self (August, 2014).

Skogan (1986) introduced another perspective of insiders or people who live within neighborhoods and are routinely portrayed as dangerous—that fear can prompt them to withdraw from those neighborhoods. Such actions weaken the social structure and negatively affect quality of life factors. Furthermore, some people who are exposed long-term to impoverished communities and clusters of disorder adopt feelings of hopelessness and powerlessness, manifesting the perceived disorder into real signs of distress and physical decline (Sampson & Raudenbush, 2004). As it pertains to Black athletes, Powell (2008) noted a particular trend of some to disassociate themselves from stigmatized communities and backgrounds because they do not want the social responsibility of fixing all their community's problems, nor do they want to be spokespersons for the Black race. Some researchers claim Black athletes fear losing social

status and even endorsement dollars if they are associated with a stigmatized community or are considered a voice for racial justice (Brown et al., 2013; Martin, 2018; Reid, 2017). This was happening even though the Black Lives Matter movement underway at the writing of this paper has shown some athletes feel empowered to use their platform to stand for social justice (Blackwell, 2020; D. Davies, 2020).

Stigma and advanced marginality. The narrative of a poor, Black, blighted, and dangerous neighborhood is used to justify both the label and actions of advanced marginality—disinvestment and voids of investment and renovation dollars coming in (Brenner & Schmid, 2015). Disinvestment and neighborhood abandonment literature are often rooted in discussions of urban decline and the broken windows theory (Sampson & Raudenbush, 2004). Brenner and Schmid (2015) framed these perceptions as significant causes of territorial inequality, the recognition of contradictions of rapid urbanization growth in some neighborhoods, and the stagnation and shrinkage of other communities. These occurrences often happen simultaneously or in close proximity to one another. Social and economic exclusion can take on many forms including building abandonment, investors who fail to maintain their properties, a school district that does not repair damaged athletic fields for all its schools, or a county that fails to manage the upkeep or creation of parks and areas of recreation to match an area's young active demographic. All of these factors play a role in deepening financial and social disparities (Edwards, 2000; Sampson & Raudenbush, 2004; Sandercock & Taylor, 1999).

Such widening of financial and social disparities brought on by divestment or investment that often depreciates land can also intensify stigmatization of these urban clusters (Roy, 2011; Sampson & Raudenbush, 2004; Wacquant, 2016), creating what Wacquant (2016) refers to as *hyper-ghettos*. Examples are projects like Section 8 housing, toxic waste sites, power grids,

airports, and prisons; these developments easily spiral already troubled areas into advanced marginality and divestment (Rennie-Short, 2013; C. Thomas, 2018). Soja (2010) likened such examples of spatial injustice to an omnipresence of geographically uneven development. Again, although it is not explicitly stated, these neighborhoods are home to predominately Black and Brown residents. Therefore, when policies reduce government intervention and programs such as welfare that once safeguarded society's most vulnerable, even more African Americans are plunged into advanced marginality (Manalansan, 2005). Meanwhile, the residents from areas of advanced marginality and prolonged stigma experience more than exclusion and social, civil, and financial disparities. Internalizing the negative storylines are detrimental effects of neighborhood stigmatization (Ettema & Peer, 1996; Sampson & Raudenbush, 2004). This further explains why some athletes from severely marginalized places distance themselves from their home zip codes and the stigma attached to them (Powell, 2008). However, during this research project, there was also an exploration concerned with the extent to which advanced marginality prompts successful African American athletes to embrace their humble beginnings and return to their home communities and give back to where they lived as children. That exploration culminated into this research firmly establishing a Black spatiality or sense of place and space that also dictates how athletes interact with new environments throughout their career.

Media and stigmatized storylines. Government, academia, and the news media all play integral roles in dispersing stigmatized neighborhood and community narratives (Goetz, 2011). From national to local government, agendas often drive alienating actions by controlling capital from one region to another and are based on social, political and cultural criteria (Hernandez, 2009). Academia contributes to neighborhood stigmatization by using data to magnify the link between low socioeconomic areas including public housing and spaces and

places with a majority Black and Brown population (Allen et al., 2019; Derickson, 2017). Academic journals then assign these places and spaces labels such as *dysfunctional, uninhabitable* and *crime-ridden* (Goetz, 2011). Literature in Black Geographies states this traditional approach to geographical studies reinforces displacement narratives (Allen et al., 2019; Hawthorne, 2019; McKittrick, 2016). As for the media's role in sharing stigmatized storylines, it has a significantly large and universal effect on neighborhood stigma (Campbell et al., 2011; Stack & Kelly, 2006).

Whether the information comes from mainstream news, sports reporting or popular culture stories, the media produces knowledge, shapes opinion, and reflects society while typically being accepted as fact and truth (Brown et al., 2013; Campbell et al., 2011; Stack & Kelly, 2006). And these stories are often negative. Studies have shown that the facts and truths that newspapers and television news stations share routinely highlight the denigration and deterioration of place (August, 2014). Traditional news coverage, and in some cases sports coverage, are causal dynamics of fear, and mainstream media traditionally frames stories with a racialized and stigmatized viewpoint through which news consumers develop and relate to social constructs (Berry & Smith, 2000; Campbell et al., 2011; Deeb & Love, 2018; Muschert, 2009; Yanich, 1998). Television news, in particular, has been a trusted source since its inception in the 1940s, meeting the test of public service and wielding the power to shape perceptions and frame social issues (Leong, 2017; Ponce de Leon, 2016). It also plays a significant role in geographically shaping communities by unfolding the agendas of public and private developers to manipulate land use (August, 2014; Ley, 1996; Wacquant, 2016). Amid the decline of the newspaper industry and despite the introduction of social media and internet-based news sources, the global influence of television to create and change perceptions about any given topic, event,

neighborhood, or community remains strong today (Albarran, 2010; Muschert, 2009). As a result, when the storylines on news channels portray neighborhoods in a negative light, they negatively affect quality of life factors and can even change the landscape of once thriving neighborhoods (Skogan, 1986). When those storylines and accompanying images are repeated over a period of time, as happens in stories that are centered on poor African American communities, outsiders are more likely to adopt the community's news-driven negative reputation, and stigmatize the areas and residents as bad (Campbell et al., 2011; S. Cunningham, 2001). When the crime segments routinely highlight arrests and court appearances, and prison convictions disproportionately show Blacks as perpetrators, these portrayals cements the viewers' notion that African Americans are more involved in crime than their White counterparts (Berry & Smith, 2000; Campbell et al., 2011; Gilmore, 1999).

News coverage propelled and dominated by an emphasis on crime is not a cohesive look at any community; yet it is a common practice for a station to focus most of its reporting on crime, tragedy, and lack (Campbell et al., 2011). However, this creates an inflated undesirable image of any neighborhood with repeat criminal occurrences that devalues space and place. Such a skewed stance ultimately shapes urban geography by steering outsiders away from living, working, and investing in bad and fearful neighborhoods even though they can afford to live there (Hernandez, 2009).

There are stations, programs, and journalists in the mass media who practice holistic reporting, who call out racial disparities, and who report from a place of care, accuracy, and humanity. The tragedy of September 11, 2001, and the 2020 Covid19 pandemic have demonstrated the media's ability to unite communities and perspectives. Yet for the most part, network conglomerates have been historically driven by capitalism and thrive on mottos such as

"if it bleeds it leads" that push sensationalistic storylines (Campbell et al., 2011; Lapchick, 2019). The Hidden Valley community in Charlotte, North Carolina is a prime example.

I began working with the Hidden Valley community in 2018 as a University of North Carolina at Charlotte Ph.D. student and researcher with the Charlotte Action Research Project. My work involved creating a documentary based on original interviews with residents and employees. The purpose of the interviews was to counter the stigma the neighborhood received after a decade of gang activity (Pitkin, 2013). My work uncovered that Hidden Valley started as a fairytale-themed White community in 1959 and transitioned to an affluent Black neighborhood in the 1970s (Carter, 2012). It then transitioned to a low-income, nationally-known gang-infiltrated Black community in the 1990s, and changed once again to become a relatively quiet mixed community of homeowners and renters with a significant senior population of predominately African Americans and a growing Latino population by 2020 (Carter, 2012; Gangland, 2009; Wickersham, 2018). Personal interviews included in the documentary "Charlotte's Hidden Valley Neighborhood—The Lived Experience" (Lash, 2021) were based on the citizens' lived experiences, and the documentary corroborated the community's history. The decade-long reign of the Hidden Valley Kings gang attracted steady reporting on Charlotte television news stations, newspapers, and pop culture magazines, as well as national exposure on the History Channel in a television series called "Gangland Documentaries" (Gangland, 2009; Wootson, 2018). The episode was subsequently re-published online and has received hundreds of thousands of views via various links on YouTube and through subscriptions to the Gangland series (Gangland, 2009). As a result, the neighborhood was still fighting that stigma in 2019, even though the gang was eradicated 12 years before in 2007 (Wickersham, 2018; Wootson, 2018). According to personal interviews with residents conducted in 2019 for the documentary

on the lived experience (Lash, 2021), the media continued to depict a crime-ridden area, and Charlotte reporters claimed crimes were still happening in Hidden Valley, when in fact they were happening on the outskirts. Here are examples from residents Marjorie Parker and John Wall, respectively:

> It's always never in Hidden Valley. Meaning that, they will label everything Hidden Valley, and it could be Sugar Creek Road, it could be the apartments off of North Drive. I will immediately look for, where is this location? Because, I know that it's not Hidden Valley. Just recently, we did have an incident that happened on Spring Garden. It was actually in Hidden Valley. I was like, wow, that is Hidden Valley. I couldn't believe it. You know? (Lash, 2021)

> I can tell you that our lobbying, our advocacy has paid off. Because there have been some incidents recently in the area that was not attributed to being in Hidden Valley. And that is some progress that we've made in media relations. (Lash, 2021)

This is just the beginning of the discontent and struggle with some of the media coverage on this stigmatized community that continues to put residents in a position to counter the stigma, as noted by resident Saundra Jackson:

> They had a negative attitude about it, and I told them until you come into the neighborhood or visit someone in the neighborhood, then you shouldn't go by what you hear. I said, "We don't have any more crime in our neighborhood than they have in yours or in Southside, where they think there is no crime, you know?" Everything is quiet to me, but at the same time, I'm not out running around looking for anything, either [laughs]. (Lash, 2021)

Natasha Witherspoon grew up in Hidden Valley, and her parents still resided there at the writing of this dissertation. She described having to defend her community to her middle-aged counterparts who watched the prolonged stigmatized coverage of Hidden Valley during and since the repeated news stories on the Hidden Valley Kings gang:

> That's what the media doesn't show is the majority of, I would say my peer group and my brother's peer group as well, most of us are college-educated professionals, successful careers, law-abiding citizens, you know, raising good families. But you don't hear about that. (Lash, 2021)

Another Hidden Valley resident, Marjorie Parker, also reflected, "[The media] creates a negative perception in folks and it's hard to change those perceptions, unless they come and live in Hidden Valley. People will feel sorry for me" (Lash, 2021).

According to Ettema and Peer (1996), Parker's assertion could be a by-product of a neighborhood receiving ongoing negative attention—that the journalists themselves find it difficult to share positive stories or detach negative narratives about communities they have repeatedly been framing as dangerous, deficient, or economically depressed. Nonetheless, traditional news media is considered to be a primary and trusted vehicle people use to learn about themselves and communities around them; as a result, this media platform wields tremendous influence in shaping the perceptions of its readers and viewers (Stack & Kelly, 2006). Fear and the media's framing of marginalized communities play a crucial role in stigmatizing a neighborhood (Stack & Kelly, 2006), and lived experiences are often very different from the created imaginaries and the rhetoric of stigmatization (August, 2014; Baumer, 1985). The media's power to shape perceptions and reinforce stigma are even more powerful when the subjects receiving negative coverage are public figures such as professional athletes (Brown et al., 2013). When the athletes are Black, it appears to be automatic that their stigmatized home communities are pulled into the storyline, if applicable (Brown et al., 2013; Lapchick, 2019; Powell, 2008).

African American Athletes

During the literature review, research was found on stigmatized neighborhoods with predominately African American residents, including how the stigma are shaped and reinforced through neighborhood classifications, the perception of fear, governmental policies, investments, divestments, academia, and media framing. This section of the paper is centered on Blacks in

sports, how they have been historically stigmatized, and how the media has helped shaped that perception. Geography is connected to the topic by introducing the conditions that lead the media to mention an athlete's childhood neighborhood and to create a narrative shared in popular media that African American athletes come from stigmatized communities. This type of media presentation results in a fluid sense of Black space and place (Hawthorne, 2019).

Connecting athletes to place. Similar to race not being specifically stated in much of the stigmatized neighborhood literature studied for the literature review, the link to impoverished home zip codes is not always explicit in the shared narrative of Black athletes and is especially absent in the literature on the beginning of formal sports in the United States (Berry & Smith, 2000; Edwards, 2000). To fill this void, two key concepts were considered for this dissertation: (a) sport is subject to the same social and political factors at play in the country and (b) framing of geography can include a sense of place rather than a fixed location (Deeb & Love, 2018; Hawthorne, 2019; McKittrick, 2006; Ross, 2000). First, it is important to assert that professional athletics is a microcosm of American culture that has historically mirrored the country's segregated makeup (Brown et al., 2013; Christesen, 2007; Goff et al., 2002; Powell, 2008). This assertion is based on the reality that Blacks lived in poorer neighborhoods than did Whites from the abolishment of slavery, through the Jim Crow era, and through the Civil Rights era.

When the post-civil rights period is examined, examples of geographically-based disparities are to be found. P. Cunningham (2009) stated that Black NFL and NBA players come from Black stigmatized communities. Nonetheless, community-based storylines are more likely to surface only when a Black athlete accomplishes something extraordinary such as winning a championship, or when the athletes draw attention to embattled neighborhoods by

returning to build things including schools or when they host camps; athletes are also noticed when they are outspoken, controversial, or accused of a crime (Brown et al., 2013; Powell, 2008). Even when the reference to an athlete's stigmatized community is not explicitly stated, Powell (2008) pointed out that language like "street credibility" and being from the "hood" (pp. 197 & 200, respectively) connect Black athletes with Black places and spaces.

The position of place in evaluations of literature on Black professional athletes also relies on relational place-making, a key Black Geographies concept that is evaluated and discussed throughout this study. Descriptors for African American athletes are rooted in historical racialized ideologies and policies that have restricted the role of Blacks in professional athletics and are tied to the media's propensity to frame them as different and inferior to White athletes (Berry & Smith, 2000; Deeb & Love, 2018; Ross, 2000). Socially constructed beliefs such as the notion that Blacks are more animalistic and less intelligent were the initial storylines in professional sports that created an imagined idea for White athletes of what it would mean to play alongside Black teammates (McKittrick, 2014; Ramírez, 2015). Contemporary White-racial framing is more place-specific because it leans on the narrative that star Black athletes come from inferior, dangerous, and impoverished backgrounds to which they are always connected (Deeb & Love, 2018; Edwards, 2000). Therefore, it can be helpful to understand how these attitudes developed.

History of sport and Black athlete stigmatization. An exploration of the evolution of the reasons behind the stigmatization of African American athletes offers insight into the various perceptions of them. One of these perceptions is that they are athletically inclined individuals with savage-like tendencies. There is also the notion that when they become elite athletes, they

are just one decision or mistake away from their brutal stigmatized beginnings. Therefore, it is helpful to briefly trace the evolution of the Black athletes in the United States.

Ironically, sport was inclusive, and in some cases dominated by Blacks before the Jim Crow era (Ross, 2000). Horse racing is one of the earliest examples. In 1875, the Kentucky Derby's inaugural year, 13 of the 14 jockeys were Black, although they received less than 5% of the earnings the horse's owner received (Ross, 2000, p. 3). When the sport began formalizing, and jockeys were first licensed in 1894, Ross reported that Blacks were denied credentials altogether. That was also the trend for American baseball, football, and to some extent basketball, as state and local laws began to make legal public segregation in the late 1890s, reversing what had been a growing trend of Blacks playing alongside White players (Ross, 2000).

In baseball, for example, some teams employed a few Black players in the 1870s, while the rest played on all Black teams, some Latin squads, and in the Canadian league (The People History, 2020; Ross, 2000). The attempt of more Blacks to join the more prominent and lucrative White minor league teams was denied in 1867, and the attempt to join what is known today as Major League Baseball (MLB) in 1876 ended with a gentleman's agreement that kept Blacks out of the National League (History, 2017). Even though American football was first established 30 years after baseball, the few Black players who were playing alongside Whites faced the same segregation laws when NFL owners "informally agreed to ban black players" (NFL Pro Football Operations, 2020, para. 3). Both examples highlight White exclusionary decisions that did not hinge necessarily on the neighborhoods the athletes were from; rather, they were excluded because of the sense of place and space they represented, including their Black

style of play and all the imagined visions that Whites had about Black players as violent and out of control (Brown et al., 2013; Gilmore, 1999; McKittrick, 2014; Ramírez, 2015).

Because sport is considered a reflection of modern American culture, it simultaneously guides, mirrors, and reinforces how people view and interact with society (Brown et al., 2013; Christesen 2007; Goff et al., 2002; Giulianotti, 2016; Powell, 2008; Ritzer, 2008). In addition to the racialized narratives of White, Black, and Latino athletes, there was an increase in micro-aggressive language that reinforced the stigma athletes of color faced (Brown et al., 2013; Deeb & Love, 2018; History, 2017, 2020). The Negro League in baseball is a prime example. It was established in the 1920s and began to gain the attention of White fans after White major league stars were called to fight in World War II, causing their team membership to decline (Garbett, 2000). White fans seemed to like how the Black players stole bases, pitched, and hit home runs; they enjoyed what was described as "their showy and aggressive style" (Garbett, 2000, p. 56). Even when baseball was integrated in 1947 when Negro League player Jackie Robinson broke the MLB color barrier, his addition was framed with micro-aggressive language. When addressing his decision to the press, Dodgers general manager Branch Rickey referred to the struggles of Robinson's segregated past as strengths and a "fighting spirit" that would help him on the baseball field (Garbett, 2000, p. 59). Although that fighting spirit and the amazing athletic abilities of Robinson and other Black baseball and football players who later joined him in the professional ranks were celebrated, the players were still subjected to hostility and discrimination; they were stigmatized and subject to derogatory language including being called the N-word from fans in the stands (Garbett, 2000; Ross, 2000). Polarizing language, lower wages, and exclusionary practices like keeping Black players out of the team hotels are non-material spatial actions that created a Black sense of place within a White-dominated space

(Hawthorne, 2019). This idea of Black agency congruent with the social and political climate of segregated neighborhoods allowed for an early connection between Black athletes and stigmatized neighborhoods. With the growth of professional basketball and the growth of the media's power to describe athletes, more examples of this biased perception surfaced.

Media-Framing of Black athletes. Similar to the news media coverage of stigmatized communities, mass media portrayals of athletics and sports-related stories became the avenues through which Americans learned to further interpret and apply Eurocentric perceptions of race, place, and space (Brown et al., 2013; Ross, 2000). The more coverage there was of Black athletes, the wider the media's influence grew. And like sport itself, sport media's roots are grounded in a White standard and a Eurocentric modernity that established White men as America's first athletes and the American standard (McChesney,1989; McKittrick, 2011). By the late 1800s, White sports writers were so influential that they began taking on celebrity status. In the 1920s, America had entered into what McChesney (1989) dubbed the Golden Age of Sports Reporting and by the 1930s, 80% of male readers regularly read about sports. The popularity of newspaper coverage of sports created the demand for storylines outside the ring, court, and field, and according to McChesney (1989), the love affair between mass-media and athletics jumped to the television screen in the late 1950s and early 1960s. The annual network sports programming grew from 787 hours in 1974 to 1,700 hours in in 1984 (McChesney, 1989, p. 63). At every step of growth, the predominately White reporters and television anchors exercised celebrity-level influence. They framed White athletes as smart, talented, and heroic, and Black athletes were described as aggressive and lacking intelligence; such views were widely accepted as the norm (Brown et al., 2013; Garbett, 2000; McChesney, 1989; Ross, 2000).

Researchers on the stigmatization of Black athletes have demonstrated how racially derogatory language was in part a result of animosity on the part of White reporters and White athletes whenever they were defeated or over-shadowed by Black players (Brown et al., 2013; Powell, 2008). Before basketball's integration, dozens of all-Black professional teams were formed before 1950, and some Black teams played against White teams and competed in championship games over a 10-year span (Adler, 2014). According to Adler (2014), African Americans were dominant in the championship games over their White counterparts, yet they were consistently subject to Jim Crow sentiments; even the sports announcers used language likening the plays of the Harlem Globetrotters, a prominent Black team, to "monkey business" (para. 17). However, this did not hinder the integration of the National Basketball League (NBA), and the NBA experienced a quicker route to integration than did professional baseball and football (Daily History, 2017). The website attributed this to baseball's Jackie Robinson breaking the color barrier in Major League Baseball just 3 years prior.

The integration of professional basketball also appears to be the first time that race was downplayed in the media. During the 1950 NBA draft, Boston Celtics team owner Walter Brown picked a Black All-American college player named Chuck Cooper (Daily History, 2017; Spears & Khan, 2019). Brown's co-owner apparently questioned him about Cooper's race, and Brown replied he did not care that Cooper was Black (Daily History, 2017). Daily History (2017) noted, "Boston papers did not even see the need to include Cooper's race in its covering of the draft" (para 5). Nonetheless, derogatory language was consistently used by sports journalists when Black players were on the court, although there is little evidence that early journalists focused on the upbringings or home neighborhoods of Black athletes. Instead, they used the stigmatized depictions of the players and their experiences as they attempted to become

a part of mainstream athletics, as well as commenting on racial characteristics that delivered a sense of Black agency. The most common media descriptors that are still a part of modern sports reporting are that Black athletes have natural athletic abilities, are more aggressive, are stronger, faster, and bigger, but lack intelligence and intellect—just as Jackie Robinson and other trailblazers were initially depicted (Brown et al., 2013; Deeb & Love, 2018; Frisby, 2017; Garbett, 2000). In contrast, the first Black college football player, William Henry Lewis, was awarded the title of All-American player and team captain, was deemed to be a "superb athlete" as well as "an outstanding scholar, selected as orator for the (Amherst College) class of 1892" (Ross, 2000, p. 6). Lewis's depiction contradicted the common narrative. The NFL's trend of employing African American officials, coaches and quarterbacks (a common occurrence by the 1980s) also disrupted the narrative that Black athletes lack intellect (NFL Pro Football Operations, 2020; Powell, 2008).

Other stereotypes the media helped establish and reinforce are that Black athletes are inherently dangerous and sexually deviant (Berry & Smith, 2000; Brown et al., 2013; Lapchick, 2019). Conversely, White athletes are traditionally framed as smarter, more disciplined, are natural leaders, and are more grounded in the game (Brown et al., 2013). From the beginning, sports writers trended to glorify White male athletes and position them as what every athlete should strive to be, just as critical race theory points to the norm created by White framing (Crenshaw, Gotanda, Peller, & Thomas, 1995; Delgado & Stefancic, 2001; McChesney, 1989; Trujillo, 1991). From Babe Ruth of the New York Yankees in the 1920s and early 1930s, to MLB pitcher Nolan Ryan who played for various teams over a 27-year career from 1966-1993, the media glorified White players as heroes (Trujillo, 1991). Trujillo's (1991) elaboration on Ryan's media framing as an "ideal image of the capitalist worker, as a family patriarch, as a

white rural cowboy" (p. 290) highlighted a Marxist philosophy that firmly and completely established Ryan as a dominant figure and the poster child for the cultural norm. But White athletes are not the only ones who benefit from their cultural and media-driven personas. Black athletes have generated lucrative endorsement deals based on the media that frame them as outspoken and/or controversial as a result of highly publicized interactions with the media (Blog, 2015; Sitaras, 2014). This is a condition under which the media choose to link Black athletes to their home neighborhoods—controversy. The other three conditions are when athletes are extremely talented or achieve extraordinary success like winning championship games, when they use their platform to draw attention to stigmatized neighborhoods or to a sense of Black place and space, and when they are accused of an indiscretion or criminal activity.

Outspoken and controversial Black athletes. While stigmatized geographies are implied in early depictions of Black athletes, they are much more evident in contemporary media, especially when the players are outspoken and/or controversial, and in some cases, these actions are a deliberate part of the media's goal to increase viewership and readership (Shields, 1999). Other scenarios create a space for Black players and their White and non-White agents to monetize a connection to aggressive, outspoken, and even dangerous from-the-hood depictions of Black athletes (Powell, 2008; Shields, 1999). This was especially evident in the late 1990s and early 2000s in the NBA when the athletes themselves started speaking openly during interviews about their stigmatized communities to help authenticate a bad boy image and show what they referred to as their street cred (Shields, 1999). Powell (2008) noted that even players who were otherwise known as quiet accepted the façade of being a loudmouth who could provide sensationalized headlines because it brought with it "so much, in terms of attention, social status and of course money" (pp. 191-192). Former NFL player Terrell Owens is an

example. His passion and aggressive style of play and interactions with the media were so controversial that they prompted media-driven interest about his background that resulted in a number of interviews, a commercial, a documentary, and a docuseries on the Oprah Winfrey Network (OWN) that highlighted his poor, fatherless, painful upbringing (Brown et al., 2013). This is an example of controversy or an aggressive persona leading to the media digging deeper to connect the player to their humble start (Mchezo, 2018; Vanzant, 2013).

Other Black athletes have worked hard to distance themselves from such personas, as well as other racial and stigmatized community-based stereotypes because they do not want to jeopardize their success and status (Powell, 2008). Tiger Woods is often described as paving the way for the participation of Blacks in professional golf just as much as he has confirmed negative stereotypes faced by African Americans (Brown et al., 2013; Powell, 2008). In what some call a political as well as a capitalistic decision, Woods distanced himself from the Black race by accentuating his multi-racial background and describing himself as "Cablanasian" (Caucasian, Black, and Asian) during an interview (Brown et al., 2013, p. 68). The researchers argued that once news surfaced about his multiple extra-marital affairs, he was seen as another stigmatized Black athlete who was out of control and a sexual deviant in need of taming. Further, media reports could not link Woods to a humble beginnings narrative as a way to try and explain his indiscretions, because his child neighborhood was not poor or dangerous (Biography, 2021). Instead, journalists delivered messages of a savage, sexually addicted, "privately vulgar" man (Brown et al., 2013, p.79).

Extraordinary success. While being considered outspoken and/or controversial attracts place-based narratives, so do Black athletes who accomplish extraordinary success like making it to the NFL, winning a championship or breaking records. Athletes like Mike Tyson (who

became the youngest heavyweight boxing champion of the world at age 20) have generated stories from trusted sports media sources, the "Bleacher Report" among others, about a childhood spent in a "high crime neighborhood where bone-crushing fights were a common occurrence" (Head, 2010, para. 5). Details of Tyson's upbringing—turning to fighting to fend off bullies and racking up 38 arrests by the time he was 13, for example—are commonly framed to explain his extraordinary success as a boxer as well as his inability to stay out of trouble (Biography, 2020; Head, 2010). Boxing is not alone, for sports media utilizes extreme success in every sport as a springboard to share as much as possible about star athletes, no matter their race. The difference is the humble beginning depictions of star athletes are considered the norm for Black players, while they are considered the exception for White athletes (Carrington, 2010; Deeb & Love, 2018; Derickson, 2017; Frisby, 2017). Whether it is doing in-depth interviews about NBA All-Star Bam Adebayo growing up in a trailer park, or the rough New Orleans community NFL Super Bowl LIV winner Tyrann Mathieu grew up in, or reminding that Tyson's ability to fight started as a child from a dangerous neighborhood, the humble beginnings storyline gets cemented as a dominant narrative that is regularly reinforced by the media (Brown et al., 2013; Head, 2010; NFL Films, 2016).

Athletes using platforms. A third scenario in which Black athletes are linked to stigmatized neighborhoods is in evidence when the athlete intentionally calls attention to their upbringing. A common example is when they return to their childhood neighborhoods to use some of their earnings to add resources they did not have growing up. NBA elite athlete LeBron James has received repeated media coverage after returning to his hometown of Akron, Ohio and creating a public school to give African American youth equal access to quality education and a pathway to college that has resulted in a high-performing school (Green, 2019;

Nike, 2019; Reames, 2019; Reid, 2017). He is not alone, for star athletes commonly use their elevated platforms to advocate for stigmatized neighborhoods by speaking out, investing money and creating foundations that hold sports camps, deliver school supplies, or build community centers and programs to help get kids off the streets (Buhring, 2019; Oakley, 2013; Roling, 2016).

The NBA Champion James also highlighted the school and the narrative of humble beginnings when he teamed up with Nike in 2019 to do a commercial about African American athletes having to overcome tremendous obstacles and/or tragedies in their childhood communities to break the pattern of failure and poverty (Nike, 2019; Reames, 2019). As of May 2020, the YouTube posting had over 7.6-million views in addition to the views the commercial received when it aired on television (Nike, 2019). Within the 1-minute video, James and Nike traced the success of the African American star athlete to his humble beginnings and summarized the connection on which this research is based. Stigmatized communities are not only the backdrops of the humble beginnings narrative; they help shape the athletes, their experiences, and their ideas of what is needed to overcome the lack of resources in their home geographies (Edwards, 2000; Lapchick, 2019). Additionally, they shape how others see Black athletes, their rise to fame, and any fall from grace they may experience (Lapchick, 2019; Powell, 2008).

Another example of the athletes who highlight Black place and space is when an athlete embraces what some believe is a social responsibility to be a spokesperson for African Americans and voluntarily use their platform to speak against racialized injustices such as inequity of neighborhood resources and police brutality (Deeb & Love, 2018; Martin, 2018; Nike, 2019; Reid, 2017). While stands for social justice do not always highlight Black neighborhoods per se, they do magnify the Black experience and how Blacks relate to the social

and political factors they encounter, including stances on policing. In 2016, Black NFL quarterback Colin Kaepernick launched the practice of professional athletes kneeling during the playing of the National Anthem before games to silently, peacefully, and respectfully protest the overuse of police force against African Americans (Emery, Binkowski, & Garcia, 2017). During interviews with reporters, Kaepernick, who played for the San Francisco 49ers at the time, began to repeat the same message: "We have cops that are murdering people, we have cops in the SFPD that are blatantly racist, and those issues need to be addressed" (ABC News, 2016). Throughout the 2016 NFL season, Kaepernick highlighted a unique sense of Black place and space with his silent protest. While different from the humble beginnings narrative, Kaepernick's movement bridges an important connection between African Americans and the places and spaces that they consider are in need of protection. Kneeling for the anthem gained support among players from his team, other NFL teams and other sports; all who kneeled were calling out police brutality against Blacks, as well as achieving almost weekly media attention during the 2016 season. But racial bias and privilege also clouded the narrative because media outlets highlighted the criticism that kneeling athletes were unpatriotic and were being disrespectful of those who had fought for freedom (Reid, 2017).

Kaepernick's contract with the 49ers ended at the end of the 2016 season, and he has not played for an NFL team since. Fellow athletes and some sports analysts believe this is his penalty for starting a movement of Black athletes who use their platform to oppose spatial inequality and to effect change within Black places and spaces (Zeitchik, 2020). While the media were laser-focused on the kneeling storyline, outlets also used the connection to the Black experience as an opportunity to demonize Kaepernick. The practice became exponentially politicized and polarizing when President Donald Trump used profanity to describe athletes who

knelt for the anthem—a news soundbite that was quoted and repeated by news and sports media outlets (Edelman, 2018; Walsh, 2018). It would take nearly 4 years and the world-wide call for social justice after a police officer's use of excessive force led to the death of George Floyd, an unarmed Black man, for the sports world to apologize for taking Kaepernick's silent protest out of context (Linton, 2020; Zeitchik, 2020). On June 5, 2020, NFL Commissioner Roger Goodell, a White man with the most influence over the League, apologized for not understanding the importance of taking a knee (Linton, 2020). A month later on July 6, 2020, the Disney Company signed Kaepernick to a deal to create a docuseries on social justice because of "the distance his message has traveled" (Zeitchik, 2020, para. 13). Every step of the way, the media shared the ebb and flow of the debate on taking a knee with sports journalists, athletes, politicians, and activists weighing in, giving coverage to each perspective. Their stance may have been because Black journalists shared the media platforms since the campaign began, especially in sports (Hruby, 2019; Papper, 2018).

The 2019 NFL Super Bowl winner and Kansas City Chiefs Quarterback Patrick Mahomes is another-high profile Black athlete who used celebrity status to advocate for social justice for Black places and spaces. Mahomes and several other Black NFL players released a video entitled "Stronger Together" on June 4, 2020, calling on the NFL to publicly call out racism and condemn police brutality following the death of George Floyd. It shows them saying, "What if I was George Floyd." An image is created of each of them lying on the ground with a Minneapolis police officer kneeling on their neck, as happened to Floyd for almost 9 minutes (Karimi, 2020; Sweeney, 2020). The video was shared on the social media platforms Instagram, Twitter, and Facebook and is believed to be the video that prompted the NFL

Commissioner to post a video in support of the Black Lives Matter movement the next day (Karimi, 2020; Sweeney, 2020).

While African American athletes like Mahomes, Kaepernick, and James take up the mantel of neighborhood equity and the protection of black place and space willingly, other athletes are thrust into the position of having their humble beginnings used against them, especially when they are accused of indiscretions, breaking the rules, or committing a crime.

African American athletes and crime. Crime is an area where Black athletes are most often linked to their childhood geography, especially when those environments were challenging. Whether it is the NBA's Allen Iverson or Latrell Sprewell, or the NFL's Michael Vick or Aaron Hernandez—all are examples of athletes caught up in crime ranging from gun possession, to assault, to dog fighting, or to murder. In each case, stories framed their crimes as obvious outcomes based on the dangerous neighborhoods where they grew up (Bieler, 2020; P. Cunningham, 2009; ESPN, 2013; Lavoie, 2017). After serving prison time for illegal dog fighting, Vick responded to ESPN's questions of why by suggesting that "at least part of the answer may lie in the culture of Newport News, Va., where the future Atlanta Falcons superstar grew up in the projects as the son of a teenage mother" (Bieler, 2020, para. 9).

When Black male athletes are involved in crimes, studies have shown they receive more overall and prolonged coverage than do White male athletes accused of crimes (Berry & Smith, 2000; Deeb & Love, 2018; Lapchick, 2019). Scholars assert this creates a social expectancy that African American athletes will be involved in crime (Berry & Smith, 2000) and forces them to bear the stigma of "being blamed for the issues troubling the Black community" (Deeb & Love, 2018, p. 97). Berry and Smith (2000) described this as the sport-crime-race nexus: "African-American sports figures are represented as criminals and criminal athletes are

represented as African-Americans" (p. 21). One example involves the difference in media coverage of former NBA champion and captain of the Los Angeles Lakers Kobe Bryant and NFL champion and quarterback of the Pittsburgh Steelers Ben Rothlisburger. Each was accused of sexual assault in 2003 and 2009, respectively. While Bryant's case was covered immediately after the allegation by both news and sports departments, and the case made headlines for months, Rothlisburger's allegations were not addressed legally until the end of the NFL season, and they were only covered by sports journalists for a few weeks (Brown et al., 2013).

Even when their indiscretions are not criminal, but rather exhibit violence or a display of immorality, Black athletes are vilified in a way that promotes the idea that they need to be tamed and controlled (Brown et al., 2013; Gilmore, 1999). One of the most memorable violent outbreaks in modern NBA history involved the Detroit Pistons and Indianapolis Pacers basketball players who were involved in a fight during a 2004 game. NBA Commissioner David Stern levied a record setting 86-game suspension to the Pacers' Ron Artest, reportedly to pacify the White fan base and sponsors who believed the League "was becoming too thuggish and too heavily influenced by hip hop culture" (Brown et al., 2013). Star athletes and criminal activity also create a perfect storm of sensationalism when journalists revert to racial ideologies and over-representations of African Americans in trouble with the law (Berry & Smith, 2000; Edwards, 2000; Gilmore, 1999). Sociologists point to social forces and Black urban environments as the root causes of their criminal activity (Berry & Smith, 2000). Journalists repeat stories of an athlete's troubled past and impoverished beginnings, reinforcing Gilmore's (1999) assertation that criminalization has "particular urban and racial qualities" that are "most intensely applied to African Americans" (p. 175).

In summary, there are four general conditions that lead to modern media accounts of Black athletes in relation to poor, dangerous, under-resourced childhood geographies: (a) when the media wants to share extra information about extremely talented and accomplished athletes, (b) when athletes or sports topics are controversial and/or polarizing, (c) when athletes choose to use their platform to highlight disparities, and (d) when they are accused of a crime. The ways in which the humble beginnings narrative is included vary from fixed locations like impoverished hometowns to a sense of place and space produced by the Black experience. That sense of place is transient—traveling with Black athletes into White spaces and occupying spatial imaginaries that often lead to the exclusion of Blacks from White spaces (Hawthorne, 2019; McKittrick, 2006). This is the result of the stigma that accompany poor, Black neighborhoods and a way of understanding Black place and space that is informed by Black Geographies. Such knowledge can be used to connect the stigma of marginalized neighborhoods to race and Black agency created by the experiences of Black athletes who come from such neighborhoods. This information also offers new ways of understanding Black place and helps determine what to extract from traditional geographical scholarship.

Black Geographies

This research was used to articulate and establish a narrative of using sport to escape a stigmatized community and its prevalence for Black athletes. Perceptions of race as socially produced and reproduced ideologies were introduced that frame people of color and their communities as inferior. This section examines how deeply rooted those sentiments run to the point that even professional athletes who emerge from such communities and are universally celebrated cannot fully escape them (Brown et al., 2013; Deeb & Love, 2018). Instead, their stories of humble, geographic, economic, and social beginnings, their notions of physical

superiority in lieu of intellect, and the magnification of any social missteps compared to White athletes are systematically framed and disseminated through the media to reinforce race and perceived disorder within stigmatized communities and their residents (Brown et al., 2013; Sampson & Raudenbush, 2004).

To address the other research objectives and to discern what this narrative reveals about what is needed in marginalized communities, this section also evaluates the epistemology of Black Geographies to investigate the opportunities and approaches that may disrupt the cyclical and singular narrative that is often replayed about Black athletes. More specifically, this section acknowledges the relevance of the traditional geographic scholarship already used to evaluate the stigmatization of place, space and its Black residents, as well as to further evaluate the role of Black agency (Derickson, 2017) and relational place-making to evaluate "the exclusionary constructions of society" (Allen et al., 2019, p. 1012).

Geographic analysis. Traditional geography scholarship rarely references race in its evaluation of stigmatized communities, leaning more on class structure to explain marginality (Allen et al., 2019; Anderson et al., 2003; Delmelle, 2017; Dwyer, 1997; Florida, 2017; Hernandez, 2009; Hertz, 2015; Ley, 1996). While such neighborhood analyses based on observations and empirical methods reveal fact-based outcomes of blighted, poor, and stigmatized neighborhoods, they do not fully explain the *why* and are not able to fully analyze the "plural modes of spatial practices central to black geographical inquiry" (Allen et al., 2019, p. 1002). Instead, McKittrick & Woods (2007) argue that traditional geographical literature makes invisible community struggles that Blacks regularly face. It also under-theorizes landscape, relegating it to "specific, static, bounded and material locations in space," (Allen et al., 2019, p. 1008) rather than viewing place as a bundle of experiences, interests, values, and

objects that deliver a sense of place, identity, and the production of politics (Allen et al., 2019; Martin, 2003). Lastly, geography-based research and analysis are not explicitly informed by racialized dispossession, but rather are tied to the production of difference (Hawthorne, 2019). The researcher stated that as a result, they are implicated in the binding of groups in place and geographical locations, and the continuation of "racial theories that animate colonialism, fascism, and violent nationalisms" (Hawthorne, 2019, p. 3).

Carceral city. The influences of practices based on racial bias and prejudices are visible in the carceral city and in the broken windows policy-centric urban scholarships referenced in this literature review. Researchers have considered the foundational understandings of governmental practices and Keynesianism systems that made African Americans the face of the country's moral panic and created a perceived need to contain disorder (Bonds, 2019; Gilmore, 1999; Thompson & Murch, 2015). However, contemporary human geographers argue these ways of knowing that offer the dramatic over-representations of incarcerated Blacks and Latinos actually implicate the geography discipline in reinforcing stigmas (Derickson, 2017; Gilmore, 1999; Pierce et al., 2011). Conversely, the theory of Black Geographies draws attention to the ways in which Black communities "resist and creatively subvert surveillance, policing, and mass incarceration" (Hawthorne, 2019, p .40). Applying these perspectives and approaches to the storylines of Black athletes who get in trouble with the law, coupled with the extra attention their platforms provide, could help unveil how communities can mobilize against the stigma.

Anti-Racist scholarship and critical race theory. Derickson (2017) submitted that other theoretical approaches, including anti-racist scholarship, also implicate geography in sensationalizing "state violence against black bodies as both normal and unrelated to one another" (p. 236). In her evaluation of the brutalities of transatlantic slavery and the images that

are shared in history books, McKittrick (2014) posited the repeated framing of African Americans as being related to death and violence creates damaging "histories and narratives and stories and data that honor and repeat and cherish anti-black violence and black death" (pp. 17-18). One modern-day example is the Gangland documentary about the Hidden Valley Kings that included dozens of video clips of the gang members carrying automatic weapons and sitting on the Hidden Valley neighborhood monument in Charlotte as they threw their gang sign (Gangland, 2009). Additionally, the Charlotte media's repeated framing of the community as a gang-infested danger zone created and confirmed the perceptions that residents are still trying to counter (Carter, 2012; Gangland, 2009; Wickersham, 2018). Such anti-Black scholarship establishes White as normal, and White athletes as the standard by which Black athletes are compared and contrasted, often to the detriment of the Black athletes (Carrington, 2010; Deeb & Love, 2018; Frisby, 2017).

These cultural and media representations of Black communities and athletes are often explained in tandem with critical race theory (CRT) that highlight the highly-publicized, socially-constructed depiction of Black sports figures in frames ranging from revered physical specimens, to intellectually inferior, to emotionally-charged sexual deviants—especially as they join White athletes on the field and court (Bonilla-Silva, 2019; Brown et al., 2013; Deeb & Love, 2018; Shields, 1999). While several tenets of CRT are active in linking African Americans to traditional racialized stigmas, an application of the theory does not completely address the pluralities of processes always at play in Black communities (Allen et al., 2019). It does, however, create method by which researchers can evaluate Whiteness as a way of knowing, and to "think about subtle and everyday ways that racial difference is reproduced" (Derickson, 2017, p. 234).

While these evaluations of traditional scholarship point to shortcomings in the literature used for this analysis, it is not intended to criticize, but rather acknowledge that some theoretical traditions in geography literature deemphasize race, miss the complexities of Black neighborhoods, and tend to ignore hierarchies that legitimize neighborhood inequity (Derickson, 2017; Hawthorne, 2019; McKittrick, 2014).

Media-framing. While researchers offer ways to help understand how Black communities and their residents have been framed and evaluated, they are not alone in the employment of stereotypes as they study Black neighborhoods, people, culture and storylines. The media's power and practices have significantly contributed to supporting stigmatization and polarization by repeatedly reporting sensationalistic storylines and promoting readily available stories that highlight violence and inequity in marginalized communities through online avenues like YouTube (August, 2014; Berry & Smith, 2000; Campbell et al., 2011; Deeb & Love, 2018; Ettema & Peer, 1996; Gangland, 2009; Lapchick, 2019; Muschert, 2009; Wertz, 2019a, 2019b; Yanich, 1998). This is not to discount the value of the news media in providing a way to learn about our own communities and the world around us (Campbell et al., 2011; Ettema & Peer, 1996). Socially responsible media coverage was observed during CNN's coverage of the death of African American George Floyd, the arrest of the White police officer who was caught on camera using excessive force against Floyd, and the subsequent nationwide protesting and rioting—storylines that began on May 25, 2020. The news network appeared to be consistent in keeping the conversation focused on the history of racialized sentiments and practices in America. CNN's coverage allowed viewers access to the variety of emotions, decisions, actions, and perspectives of Blacks, Whites, and several other groups from law enforcement to

activists to athletes and did not let the rioting and looting storylines completely replace the attention to peaceful protests calling for change.

Criticism of the media in relation to this dissertation research is based on the over-representation of negative storylines about stigmatized struggling neighborhoods compared to affluent ones, and what is argued as a de facto process of linking a Black athlete's rise to fame or fall from grace back to their experiences growing up in a poor, dilapidated, dangerous neighborhood and community. Like the traditional geographical analyses of place and space, the media are also implicated in reinforcing the stereotypical narrative of African American athletes from marginalized neighborhoods, a practice that rarely allows for the diversity of experiences and the relational place-making that is constantly at work within Black communities (Allen et al., 2019; Deeb & Love, 2018).

Black Geographies epistemology. Tenets of geography's sub-discipline known as Black Geographies should be explained in order to understand the epistemological approach employed and its relevance to this dissertation research. Black Geographies encourage scholars to collectively consider the contributions of the range of scholarship and theoretical traditions to better understand the making of place rather than thinking singularly (Allen et al., 2019; Derickson, 2017). This is needed to understand the breadth of the lived experiences of the athletes I interviewed, including the "spatial imaginaries and practice of Black geographical expressions" that their journeys reveal (Bledsoe & Wright, 2019, p. 419). Next, Black Geographies acknowledge the impact of colonialism and the "plantation complex" (Ramírez, 2015, p. 750) on today's examples of Black dispossession and disempowerment (McKittrick, 2011, 2014, 2016), a perception I referred to as I evaluated the power dynamics at play since many of the athletes I interviewed discovered their talents at a young age. Black Geographies

also acknowledges the making of real and imaginary visions of place and space (McKittrick, 2012, 2014, 2016; Ramírez, 2015). Put another way, it is concerned with the spatiality of Black life with a Black sense of place and space representing the meanings people give to Black communities and Black people emerging from marginalized communities based on what they know and what they think is real (Hawthorne, 2019). By explicitly addressing the making of social geographies and political economy, studies of Black Geographies reveal an iterative process that is not embedded in a fixed set of political, social, and material experiences to define place (Derickson, 2017; Pierce et al., 2011). These ways of knowing were vital in evaluating the lived experiences of the athletes, especially as they interacted with their original and new environments.

As for more direct applications of Black Geographies epistemology, the discoveries made during this research established the prevalence, accuracy, and iterative nature of the narrative of Black star athletes who have emerged from embattled communities, while simultaneously disrupting the notion that all their experiences are the same. Second, understandings from studying how and why the humble beginnings narrative has been pushed forward can be positioned to reduce the impact of White racial framing of African American athletes in order to disrupt the automatic association and imagery of them choosing basketball or football over gangs. This approach is necessary to understand their experiences and non-material spatial practices (Allen et al., 2019). Further, by grounding this evaluative approach in Black Geographies, I could go beyond describing the "social ills" (Wright, 2017, p. 2) that are associated with stereotypes attributed to Black athletes, an approach that was needed to include alternate imaginaries of Black athletes and their embattled upbringings (Hawthorne, 2019; McKittrick, 2014; Ramírez, 2015). As a result, this research delivers a more pluralistic and

open-ended exploration of the narrative of African Americans who have become successful athletes by using sports to escape a life of poverty and crime. An approach to the subject by applying Black Geographies also helps inform other interests and imaginaries that can establish them as more than an athlete (Allen et al., 2019; Derickson, 2017). Just as Deeb and Love (2018) challenged the media industry to avoid binding multi-racial athletes by the same racial framing as Black athletes because their intricate experiences are different, this research considers the variations of the athletes' lived experiences. Even before conducting my research, an evaluation of the top NBA players of all-time (as categorized by the trusted sports media source ESPN) noted the variety of the athletes' home neighborhoods and backgrounds (Crawford, 2020), as presented in Table 1.

Table 1

NBA Player Profiles

Rank	Name	Race	Childhood Beginnings
1	Michael Jordan	Black	Brooklyn, NY, stable family, both parents, blue collar jobs
2	LeBron James	Black	Akron, OH, difficult childhood, ex-con father
3	Kareem Abdul-Jabbar	Black	New York, NY, stable family, both parents
4	Bill Russell	Black	Monroe, LA, both parents, difficult childhood, poverty
5	Magic Johnson	Black	Lansing, MI, stable family, both parents, blue collar jobs
6	Wilt Chamberlain	Black	Philadelphia, PA, both parents, dad blue collar, mom homemaker
7	Larry Bird	White	West Baden Springs, IN, parents divorced, poor upbringing
8	Tim Duncan	Black	Saint Croix, stable family, both parents, blue collar jobs
9	Kobe Bryant	Black	Philadelphia, PA, stable family, both parents, blue collar jobs
10	Shaquille O'Neal	Black	Newark, NJ, stable family, dad arrested, stepfather Army Sgt.

Note: Top NBA Players provided by ESPN; geographic and biographic information provided by The Famous People (n.d.)

The internet site The Famous People (n.d.) was chosen because it listed biographical profiles in the same format for each of the 10 players and used phrases and sentiments like *stable home, supportive parents, subjected to racism, segregated neighborhood, struggled to make ends meet,* and *criminal activity* when describing the parents and childhood environments for each of the athletes. Of the 10 professional players studied, nine are Black, and of these nine Black athletes, two were described as having difficult childhoods that they had to overcome—LeBron James and Bill Russell (TheFamousPeople.com, n.d.). Yet these storylines are more often shared via the media (Allen et al., 2019; Brown et al., 2013; Deeb & Love, 2018; Powell, 2008). The only White player listed is one three described as having a difficult childhood rooted in family unrest and poverty.

The Need for Context When Sharing an Athlete's Humble Beginnings

This initial exploration of the popular narrative that Black athletes emerge from stigmatized communities shows that there is much education needed for validity and variety. Explaining James and Russell in the context of having difficult childhoods does not mean that Shaq did not experience equally challenging circumstances having to adjust to an Army Sergeant stepfather instead of his biological father who was in prison (The Famous People, n.d.). Further, while Tim Duncan was described as having a stable family, it does not mean that he did not face nearly insurmountable challenges after losing his mother when he was a teenager (The Famous People, n.d.). Having both parents in the home does not mean athletes like Wilt Chamberlain did not come from blighted, stigmatized, divested communities, and it does not mean he did not suffer the lack of resources similar to those of the West Charlotte basketball players. The point is, understanding all variations of Black communities including the interconnectedness of thoughts, politics and social factors in the making of place is crucial to

unlock the propensity of today's racialized social and political structure that appear to believe in a singular narrative regarding elite Black athletes—that they came from nothing so they can be relegated to nothing at the first opportunity (Allen et al., 2019; Berry & Smith, 2000; Brown et al., 2013; Derickson, 2017; Edwards, 2000; Gilmore, 1999). Black Geographies accounts for the variety of experiences so none of them are discounted (Allen et al., 2019; Ramírez, 2015). Whether the humble beginnings storyline is true of 80% of African American athletes or 10%, it is still necessary to elevate the need for resources within poor Black neighborhoods. That is why relational place-making and the interdisciplinary approach inherent in Black Geographies were chosen to guide this research in order to consider the complexity of narratives and discover a variety of needs and solutions (Allen et al., 2019; Derickson, 2017; Pierce et al., 2011).

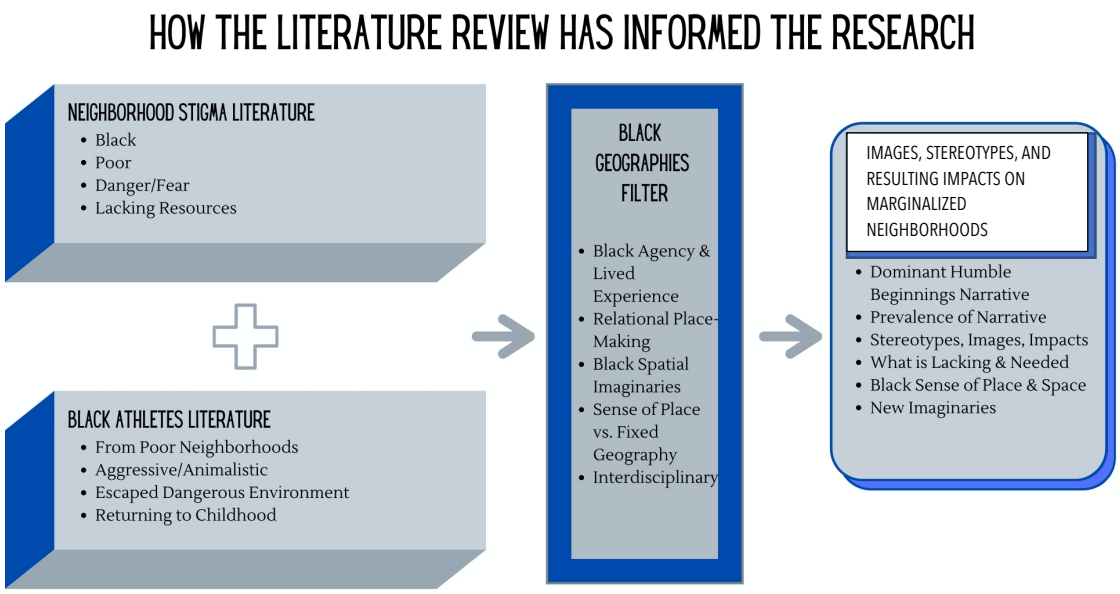


Figure 1. How the literature review has informed the research.

Research Gaps and Contributions

Sport has been extensively examined through perspectives in sociology, psychology, sports performance, racialized media framing, and Eurocentric and plantation complex place-making (Allen et al., 2019; Berry & Smith, 2000; Carrington, 2010; Deeb & Love, 2018; Edwards, 2000; Lapchick, 2019; McKittrick, 2011; Ramírez, 2015; Ross, 2000). However, a gap in geography research is the use of sport as a primary case study to evaluate the making of Black place and space. This dissertation contributes to the connection between Black athletes and their stigmatized (or not stigmatized) communities while drawing attention to what is often made invisible in the depiction of athletes that includes a variety of "black knowledges, black excellence and black lived experiences" (Allen et al., 2019, p. 1004) that are continually made and re-negotiated.

This research was conducted to reveal a series of voids—most importantly, the need to re-envision the perceptions of Black sports and community (Ramírez, 2015). As a result, this research contributes a foundational understanding that the needs of stigmatized communities as they pertain to youth aspiring to pursue athletics are not fixed, and they are not completely universal. Instead, they vary from community to community and can change at any time based on access to resources, changes in power structures, spatial and non-spatial politics, and more (Allen et al., 2019). Further, this research contributes to the understanding of the variety of blueprints of elite Black sports figures by not discounting the structural and non-spatial needs of stigmatized communities (Allen et al., 2019; Glassman, 2010; Hawthorne, 2019).

A purpose of this dissertation was to evaluate the perceived community needs and the practice of Black athletes who give back to their stigmatized communities from a Black Geographies perspective, including the sense of responsibility and/or desire some athletes feel to

fill the voids neglected by the state (Brown et al., 2013; Powell, 2008). A goal of my research was to not only highlight the impact on communities when athletes give back but to describe the impact on the athlete's psyche after his career positions him to give back, proving the power of political economy and Black agency in the making and re-negotiating of place.

Using Black Geographies as a foundation for this research may help to counter the distracting over-emphasis on the Black body (Hawthorne, 2019; McKittrick, 2016) and the stigma of a lack of intelligence in Black athletes. Instead, information from the dissertation may be used to reframe the Black athlete conversation from a poor Black man who uses athletics as a way out of his dangerous, blighted neighborhood to one more focused on intellectually-driven decisions and activism so that he can increase opportunity and impact within marginalized communities (Ramírez, 2015). After all, "how are discussions of race and space and knowledge tethered to an analytics of embodiment that can *only* posit black knowledge *as* biologic knowledge?" (McKittrick, 2016, p. 4). De-centering the Black body helps untether the foreclosure of alternate ways of knowing Black athletes by allowing for an open evaluation of the range of Black knowledge, experiences, and decisions ever-present in the making and re-negotiating of Black place and space (McKittrick, 2016).

Another goal of this research was to add to the growing field of inquiry in Black Geographies that (at the writing of this dissertation) had significant applications in feminist, political economy, policing, surveillance and incarceration, Latinx geographies, Black queer communities, and food production literature (Hawthorne, 2019; Ramírez, 2015). Contributing an approach to the framing of Black athletes in a way that no longer solely highlights their upbringings to fixed spaces of blight, decline, and lack can also be of benefit to the body of literature on sports (Berry & Smith, 2000; Brown et al., 2013; Edwards, 2000). Loosening the

guardrails used by geographers, sociologists, anti-racist scholars, the media, the general public, and athletes allows them to see and imagine their home geographies as the complex, culturally rich systems that they are (Brown et al., 2013). Information from this research project may be used to equip athletes, scholars, investors, and governments with the framework to evaluate what is needed from community to community, and to determine how best to mobilize and add resources. Ramírez (2015) addressed food justice by describing Black Geographies as a way to offer "knowledge and spatial politics that can revitalize community food movements" (p. 748). The same can also be said in relation the spatial imaginaries of an athlete's humble beginning, for the application of Black Geographies provides an iterative lens through which to re-envision those early years (Ramírez, 2015). This research allowed for an elaboration on the notion of a mobile sense of Black place and space that may provide the Black athlete journey as a case study to understand the burden and responsibility of continually contesting exclusionary practices and renegotiating one's political economy even as their geographies change.

CHAPTER 3

Research Design & Methods

This research used a mixed-methods approach to answer the following overarching research question: "What images, stereotypes, and resulting impacts on marginalized communities are created through the humble beginnings narrative of Black athletes?" It was important to understand the narrative, its prevalence and accuracy compared to the lived experiences of the athletes interviewed, and what it says about the needs of marginalized neighborhoods. Specifically, I combined quantitative data collection and analysis with qualitative discourse analysis and in-depth interviews. Chapter 3 includes an explanation of why a mixed-mixed methods approach was chosen. There is a brief overview of the methods used, followed by reflections of my roles as both the researcher and as a former broadcast journalist. A detailed account of the research design is also presented.

Mixed-Methods

Employment of quantitative analysis as well as discourse analysis and original interviews allowed me to discover useful modes of thinking about what the humble beginnings narrative says about what is needed in stigmatized communities. Information from the research may be used to help close the gaps that might otherwise arise by just focusing on one methodology (Rossman & Wilson, 1985). While the prevalence and accuracy of the narrative could be discovered through quantitative questions, and the impact on marginalized communities could be measured in a qualitative model, combining qualitative and quantitative tools helped produce accurate findings, limited bias, and gave a more holistic, comprehensive picture of the lived experiences of Black athletes rather than relying only on quantitative or qualitative approaches (Denzin, 2017; Johnson, Onwuegbuzie, & Turner, 2007). Researchers also rely on a mixed-methods approach to help achieve breadth, provide validity, and lead to "superior explanations of

the observed social phenomena" (Johnson et al., 2007, p. 115). Last, using a mixed-methods paradigm created a pathway to new avenues of inquiry for future study (Collins, Onwuegbuzie, Johnson, & Frels, 2013).

For a more specific breakdown, mathematical computations provided critical data that were central to grounding this research in facts rather than in instinct or opinion (G. Davies & Dwyer, 2007; Hay, 2010). These data established that most of the NFL is made up of Black players, and the majority of those players hale from marginalized backgrounds. The discourse analysis on stories on Black NFL players established the dominant rags to riches narrative and provided context on how other journalists interpret and disseminate information. The qualitative analysis of the research included 30 original interviews with current and former NFL players; these data added rich context by revealing that African American professional athletes are complex, and even though many did come from humble beginnings, their experiences vary. These were pivotal findings that helped answer the research questions about the needs of stigmatized neighborhoods and the resulting impacts of the dominant humble beginnings narrative.

While this research was designed to specifically evaluate the media-driven humble beginnings narrative compared to the lived experience of Black NFL players, I did not want to exclude storylines that veered from the dominant narrative. For this reason, instead of searching for only humble beginning storylines in the discourse analysis phase, I broadened my approach to search for stories on Black NFL players without mention of their backgrounds to establish personal experience and themes organically.

Reflections as a Researcher, Coach, and Former Journalist

As a Black woman with limited time in organized sports, as I conducted this research project, I constantly reflected on having very few things in common with my interviewees, and my positionality as a university researcher who needed to extract personal information. Aside from my passion for the impact athletes have on our communities and social constructs, my only link to their unique fraternity was my work as a media coach for some NFL teams and individual players. While I relied on those relationships during my recruitment process, I ended up only knowing a fourth of my interviewees before my research began; the rest were met through snowball recruitment methods. Understanding these dynamics made me simultaneously appreciative and passionate about the process; I wanted to ensure I represented their stories in a way that honored them and the scholarships to which I was contributing. I knew these were deeply personal accounts because several of them said things like, "Wow, I hadn't thought about that in years."

Another consideration that never left my mind was my positionality as a formerly trained broadcast journalist. I spent 20 years relying solely on interviews to interpret information and added value to the mixed-methods approach I employed. Not wanting to perpetuate the very stereotypical reporting trends I was researching, I acknowledged that research solely focused on the discourse analysis and interviews would have left out critical data that ultimately rounded out the humble beginnings phenomenon (G. Davies & Dwyer, 2007; Hay, 2010). If I had only conducted interviews with Black NFL players who came from marginalized communities without an understanding of how many African Americans are in the NFL and how many of them come from humble beginnings, the depth and breadth of the narrative would have been diminished.

Research Design

This specific research design began with a quantitative data collection that established the number of Black players in the NFL and how many of them were from stigmatized home neighborhoods. Early in this process, I revised my proposal to the Institutional Review Board (IRB) to include original interviews with sports journalists to uncover how they establish and/or choose to focus on an athlete's humble beginnings in their reporting. From there, I introduced more qualitative tools including a discourse analysis on pre-existing video stories done about Black NFL players, and conducted original interviews that highlighted the lived experiences of Black NFL players who came from humble beginnings.

The quantitative and qualitative tools initially followed a sequential design, and the data on the number of Black NFL players who come from humble beginnings partially informed the interview questions (Collins et al., 2013; Greene, Caracelli, & Graham, 1989; Rossman & Wilson, 1985). There was an emphasis on questions that explored how and why the humble beginnings narrative dominates popular media. An unexpected shift in the design model surfaced when I secured and conducted my first wave of interviews before completing the quantitative data collection, which at that point I had established that the majority of the players at the start of the 2020 NFL season were Black. The overlap prompted the addition of two key open-ended interview questions not originally included in the interview guide that helped answer two of the following research questions concerning (a) the prevalence and accuracy of the humble beginnings narrative compared to the lived experience and (b) what the narrative and lived experiences of the athletes revealed about the resources needed in marginalized communities. Specifically, I made these questions a staple in my interviews with athletes: "When you think of humble beginnings, what comes to mind for you?" and "How would you

like to see this research used?" The answers revealed feelings of discontent among the athletes regarding what they believed to be a disproportionate number of stereotypical stories about Black players in the NFL. Conducting athlete interviews early in the research process also helped inform my approach to focus on an athlete's hometown instead of their birth city and also to use high school demographics to determine if they grew up in humble surroundings.

This research followed a mixed methods paradigm that included (a) a data collection to establish how many Black NFL players made up the NFL's 2020 roster, and how many of them came from stigmatized neighborhoods, (b) original interviews with sports journalists to better understand how they determine a humble beginnings storyline, (c) a discourse analysis on existing media-driven stories of Black NFL players, and (d) original interviews with Black NFL players who came from humble beginnings.

Quantitative Data Collection and Analysis

To gain an understanding of how many of the NFL's players are African American and how many of them came from marginalized communities, I created profiles of every active Black player in the League in 2020. Understanding that each of the 32 NFL teams are limited to 53 active players during any one season, this research collected biographical data on 1,696 players who were on each team's active roster as of September 20, 2020. Using each NFL team's website, I screen-shot the rosters to collect an electronic copy that included each player's picture, name, college affiliation, and other football-focused information including height and playing position. I then printed a physical copy of the rosters and used those physical copies to "make a judgement" on race based on their picture, notating the Black players with an asterisk, then setting the hard copies aside (Johnson & Romney, 2018, p. 8). Next, I referred to the electronic copies, enlarged the screen-shots for a clearer view of the athletes' pictures, and

extracted the names and colleges of identifiable Black players. This information was put into a Microsoft Excel spreadsheet, and after inputting data from the electronic copy of the roster, I referred to the Excel spreadsheet and compared the athletes' pictures to the hard-copy version of the roster to check that I had properly identified the Black players. This two-step verification was critical, especially as a solo researcher, to correct race mis-identification and to establish reliability and validity in this process (Holton, 2010; Kearney, Perkins, & Kennedy-Clark, 2016). I completed all of these steps for one team before moving to the next. This established that the majority of the League's players in 2020 were African American, just as they had been in previous years (Lapchick, 2019, 2020).

It was next necessary to build out each player's profile to determine how many of them came from humble beginnings; this step addressed the prevalence portion of the research question. For the characteristics used to determine an athlete's humble beginnings, I pulled from the criteria used to describe neighborhood marginality and stigma found during the literature review. I decided on the following measures: poverty rates, violent crime risk, high school performance and Title I status.

With the Black players identified, the Pro Football Reference (2015) website was used to record the athlete's birth city and the high school where he graduated. I then used the 247 Sports website (247sports.com) to confirm the athlete's high school and to retrieve the city where the high school was located. I used the city where their high school was located as the childhood neighborhood or hometown and determined that significant time was spent there because of the athlete's commitment to school and athletics. I also came to understand from my interviews with journalists that high schools are often used to determine the athlete's locale. Because the high schools were typically listed on both websites, this also allowed for an

opportunity to double-check that the information on the athlete's high school was accurate. By following these steps, each Black NFL player's profile included their name, college affiliation, city where they were born, the area where they grew up or considered to be their hometown, and the name of the high school where they graduated. The next series of steps used the biographical data points to establish whether each player's upbringings were humble; these measures were accomplished by looking specifically at their hometowns and high schools.

Growing up in multiple communities. While an athlete may grow up and attend high school in the same city where he was born, this is not always the case. A common storyline that emerged from the investigation of Black professional athletes who come from humble beginnings is that they were shuffled from one family member to another or bounced between the homes of their friends or coaches in search of a stable environment (ABC News, 2010; CNN, 2011; NFL Films, 2016). While I initially believed it was important to account for their multiple geographies when applicable, and I collected both the athlete's birth city and hometown, I elected to focus on data about their hometown to establish whether their beginnings were humble. This was based in part on personal knowledge from working with professional athletes for a decade as a media coach and learning that it was common for them to settle in one geographical area in their youth once their football talents were realized. My decision was also based on the first wave of athlete interviews. I realized that even if they had moved from home to home, they were more likely to stay in the same neighborhood to progress their football career.

With the focus on hometowns, I used the United States Census Bureau's 2019 American Community Survey 5-Year Estimates to populate the median household income, female median

income (in case the majority of the athletes I polled were raised by a single mother), poverty rate and racial makeup (U.S. Census Bureau, 2019a).

For the violent crime measure, I used the Neighborhood Scout database (neighborhoodscout.com). Values were per 1,000 residents, with the database listing a rating of 4 as the national median. A neighborhood with a violent crime risk of 4 means the chances of a resident falling victim to a violent crime is 4 out of 1,000. Neighborhood Scout defines violent crime as rape, murder, armed robbery, or aggravated assault. The database software was created by Dr. Andrew Schiller, a geographer from Clark University and

> provides exclusive crime risk analytics for every neighborhood in America with up to 98% predictive accuracy . . . Raw crime incidents are sourced from all 18,000+ local law enforcement agencies—municipal, county, transit, park, port, university, tribal and more, assigned to localities. (Neighborhood Scout, 2021)

With the hometown profiles established, I moved to retrieving high school information for each of the 2020 active Black NFL players.

High schools as a measure of humble beginnings. Just as the interviews with athletes informed my focus on hometown demographics over birth cities, they also informed the inclusion of high school data to help understand whether an athlete's beginnings were, indeed, humble. Those conversations revealed the importance for an athlete to have a stable school foundation. Unlike the NBA, NFL-bound athletes must first attend college and need to be in a consistent high school environment, whether public or private schools, to help the college recruitment process. In other words, it behooves them to be at the same school all four years to build a reputation and provide a consistent location and football program for college coaches and scouts to evaluate. My interviews with athlete also confirmed that student athletes spend more waking hours at school and/or school events (e.g., practice, games) than they do at home. Therefore, if an athlete grew up in a working-class household with food security and both parents

in the home but attended a low-performing or Title I high school, he would still have some exposure to resource-void conditions every day of the school year.

Since I understood the important role schools play in an athlete's beginnings, high school names were searched using the Office for Civil Rights Data Collection to learn each school's Title I status and racial makeup (U.S. Department of Education, 2018.). Title I status refers to a school whose "children from low-income families make up at least 40% of the enrollment" and receives government funding to provide meals and other programs to improve academic performance (U.S. Department of Education, 2018). I also collected the high school summary ratings as defined by GreatSchools (GreatSchools, n.d.a.). According to its website, GreatSchools is a nonprofit that provides school information "to reflect how well a school is preparing students for postsecondary success" by using, for example, state educational data to record student growth data, standardized testing scores, SAT and ACT scores, high school graduation rates, and the availability of advanced courses (GreatSchools, n.d.b., para. 1). The ratings were on a 1-10 scale ranking, with 10 being the highest combined measure of "the Student Progress Rating or Academic Progress Rating, College Readiness Rating, Equity Rating, and Test Score Rating" (GreatSchools, n.d.a, para. 7). Also according to its website, rating between 1 and 4 signals a "below average" school, and a rating between 5 and 6 is considered average, and 7-10 "above average" (GreatSchools, n.d.a, para. 6).

Sample size. After compiling the initial biographical data on all the 2020 NFL Season players, only African American athletes were evaluated to understand whether their beginnings were humble. The Institute for Diversity and Ethics in Sport's 2019 Racial and Gender Report Card for the NFL recorded that at the start of the 2019 season, 58.9% of the players were Black (Lapchick, 2019). A 2016 report delivered by the same Institute listed the participation at 70%

(Lapchick, 2019; Sonnad, 2018). As a result, I expected to find between 1,000 and 1,500 Black NFL players, and once tallied, I identified 1,171 Black NFL players on the active 2020 rosters.

Analysis and limitations. To analyze the data from the 1,171 profiles, I tallied every occurrence of a poverty rate measure that was at or above the U.S. Census 2019 Overall Supplemental Poverty rate of 11.7 (U.S. Census Bureau, 2019b). Similarly, I counted every violent crime risk measure that was at or above the national median of 4.0. For school ratings, I used the schools whose GreatSchools Summary Rating was at or below 4 (GreatSchools, n.d.a). Finally, I tallied all Title I schools (U.S. Department of Education, n.d.).

Limitations to this approach include mis-categorizing the League's Latinos, Asians, Native Hawaiians/other Pacific Islanders and/or American Indians/Native Alaskans as African American. However, because these groups represent approximately 5% of NFL players (Lapchick, 2019), any mis-categorizations were nominal. Another obstacle was establishing rigor using second-hand data because the website compilations were not created or collected with my specific questions about race and hometown geographies in mind. Reverse engineering the study to establish hometown zip codes and maintaining transparency in how the study is carried out can help overcome questions of rigor (Köhler, Landis, & Cortina, 2017). Questions of validity were addressed by cross-referencing the League's dataset with the individual team datasets as well as the third source, which was Pro Football Reference (2015). A final anticipated challenge was unknowingly categorizing athletes whose birth cities differed from the cities housing their schools, especially when one of the locations pointed to a humble beginning while the other pointed to a more affluent neighborhood and experience. LeBron James is an example of this; he grew up in a poor neighborhood in Akron, Ohio, but earned a scholarship to attend an "affluent Roman Catholic college preparatory" high school (Murphy, 2013, para, 33).

In these cases, I used the city housing the school from which they graduated to determine any marginalized markers since it was established they spent significant time at their high schools once their talents were identified.

Qualitative Paradigm—Discourse Analysis

As well as collecting data about individual players, I included qualitative discourse analysis. The strength of qualitative research is its ability to help explain human environments, social structures, and human experiences (Hay, 2010). Discourse analysis is a framework that allows "insights into how particular knowledge becomes common sense and dominant" (Waitt, 2010, p. 271). During this part of the research, media video stories of Black NFL players were evaluated, and I paid particular attention to the language and images used to describe their childhoods, as well as the media outlets that produced the content and the intended audience (Acosta, 2018; Waitt, 2010). Drawing from French philosopher Michel Foucault's Discourse Analysis, evaluating groups of statements from and about interview participants, and their relationships "generate the meaning of a specific item that is understood to construct 'truths' about the social and material worlds" (Waitt, 2010, p 170). In this research, the discourse analysis firmly determined a narrative that Black professional football players had overcome some kind of spatial and/or societal adversity as a child.

Specific parameters. The discourse analysis focused on 72 video stories of NFL players. I initially relied on long-format stories, ranging from 40 to 70 minutes, and produced by the NFL and ESPN. That provided a pool of 253 stories. I chose the NFL and ESPN because of their dedication to and impact on professional sports (Schwabel, 2012). While the pool of information was broader when including print stories, the pictures and images used in videos added significant texture and context that helped me understand the social settings that

reinforced a humble beginnings theme (Blikstad-Balas, 2017; Jewitt, 2012). This was particularly true in this research because when referencing a Black athlete's childhood, there was a tendency for media outlets to use either a picture or video clip of a very small home along with a descriptor of it housing multiple family members. This served as a primary image that substantiated one of the stereotypes established in the literature review—that Black professional athletes grow up poor (Allen et al., 2019; Barron & Engle, 2007).

I used the NFL, ESPN, Google and YouTube search engines to identify video stories from 2000 to 2020. I initially chose a 2010 start date because of the Hollywood movie, *The Blind Side,* about the humble beginnings of professional football player Michael Oher. Although it debuted in November, 2009, it was 2010 when *The Blind Side* won an Academy Award, bringing with it tremendous attention to Oher's childhood that included homelessness, a mother who was addicted to drugs, and an imprisoned father (ABC News, 2010). The media have tremendous power to shape how Blacks are framed; Oher's story gained an even bigger audience when he confirmed in media interviews that *The Blind Side* was based on true events from his life during his high school years (ABC News, 2010; CNN, 2011). The movie's award-winning status intensified the process by leading to even more media stories and interviews with Oher and the White family who took him in. Such publicity prompted even more attention to the stigmatization of place and made displacement images common in the minds of viewers (ABC News, 2010; CNN, 2011; McKittrick, 2016). I adjusted my IRB proposal to include videos produced as early as 2000 to increase the pool of videos to choose from.

From the NFL network, I evaluated 27 episodes of their docuseries "A Football Life" featuring Black players. These were long-format video stories averaging 43 minutes. While 116 episodes of "A Football Life" had been produced since the series began in 2011, not all of

them featured African American players. I stopped after 27 episodes of "A Football Life" featuring Black players because I reached saturation in observing their formula of mentioning characteristics indicative of neighborhood stigma, including being raised in single-parent households and modest home accommodations. I also evaluated four ESPN stories featuring Black NFL players as part of their "30 for 30" documentary series. I stopped after four episodes because the pool of stories featuring Black NFL players was significantly smaller than the NFL's docuseries. The four I randomly selected were out of the five available documentaries on Black NFL players that were rated among the best 30 episodes (Strait, 2020). While 137 episodes of ESPN's hour-long "30 for 30" documentary had been produced, the network does not solely focus on professional football. Instead, it covers a much wider array of both men's and women's sports, featuring players from various races. Reviewing the ESPN and NFL stories was significant because I did not use the humble beginnings search criteria, but rather randomly selected from the pool of stories produced on Black players. This allowed me to evaluate themes and determine whether or not they fit the humble beginnings profile.

The rest of the videos stories I evaluated came from a Google search of shorter stories from a variety of national outlets and smaller sports stations. For some of these, I chose videos that were automatically suggested by YouTube after watching "A Football Life" stories. For others, I used the following terms for the YouTube and Google search engines to locate video stories: "NFL players from humble beginnings" and "NFL players from rags to riches." This was significant to evaluate how athletes were being framed within stories whose titles were stereotypical. A preliminary search revealed videos as well as online print articles that typically offered a list such as Sturm's (2014) "20 NFL Players Who Went From Rags To Riches." In the cases where print articles outlined Black NFL players from a stigmatized community, I used

those names to specifically search for video stories about their humble beginnings. Last, I randomly selected names from the list of African American athletes who were active for the 2020 season and specific names triggered by athletes featured in episodes the "30 for 30" or "A Football Life" series, to search for their specific stories. I only evaluated videos from established news outlets such as local news stations and network brands including Bleacher Report, The Player's Tribune, ESPN, the NFL network, Sports Illustrated, OWN, CBS Sports, Touchdown, I AM ATHLETE and Yahoo Sports, as well as videos produced by individual NFL teams (Sports Management Degrees, 2020).

As I collected the data pool of videos, I copied the auto-generated transcriptions from YouTube and edited them as I watched the videos. I coded the recorded stories to organize passages into common patterns and based on the literature review, I assumed I might find the following themes: (a) athletes who came from single parent households; (b) athletes whose fathers were voluntarily absent or in prison; (c) athletes who lived at more than one address during their childhood, often because of unstable home environments; (d) athletes who were surrounded by negative influences like drugs and crime; and (e) athletes who used football as a way to escape their childhood community.

In addition to coding the transcribed text from the videos, I evaluated the video imagery used while the humble beginnings narratives were shared. Corroborating truths were assured by employing a multimodal discourse analysis that builds on evaluating the text and the contexts in which they were created by understanding the images. (Acosta, 2018; O'Halloran, 2011). In other words, coding and interpreting the video images and settings the story creators used during their interviews of athletes who came from stigmatized communities was useful in interpreting the media's framing and normalizing of the athlete's identity as a product of a stigmatized place

(Acosta, 2018; Machin, 2010). It also informed the interview questions for the journalists I interviewed. Table 2 presents the initial codes that were predicted a priori from the literature review. However, other codes developed inductively as I observed the same patterns begin to appear. They are listed in the following Analysis and Limitations section.

Table 2

Coding Guide

Text Patterns	Visual Patterns
football saved my life	playing football as a kid
childhood struggles were motivation	childhood home small
perseverance, tough	childhood home broken down
grind	pictures of poor neighborhood
gangs	police lights
didn't know father	closeup of athlete
father in prison	closeup of athlete looking down/away
didn't have a lot	driving through poor neighborhood
hard life	pictures neighborhood at night
mother did the best she could	picture of mother/childhood home
single parent	picture of parent
moved a lot	different housing developments/motels
homeless	car (lived out of)
natural ability	playing football or working out
proud of where I'm from	touring old neighborhood
made him, didn't break him	college highlights/draft day
giving back	visiting or meeting with kids
return home	visiting childhood neighborhood,
kids off the streets/	new/revamped community center or school in
give them something to do	childhood neighborhood
football camp	interacting with kids on football field
donating school supplies, essentials	backpack/clothes giveaway

Analysis and Limitations

While I did find the presence of anticipated themes based on the literature review, including athletes raised by a single mother, the presence of drugs, instances of neighborhood violence, and athletes who used sports as a way out of their neighborhood, I also found themes that emerged organically. They included athletes with fathers who were extremely active in

their lives, athletes and their fathers who did not have a relationship when the athlete was a child but developed a close relationship when the athlete became an adult, and a variation in the amount of video views. While evaluating the "A Football Life" series, I discovered dominant storylines emerging that emphasized the athlete's body and physicality, and another storyline on athletes who were not raised by their parent, but by other family members. As a result of newly emerging themes, I re-evaluated 22 previously watched videos to code for the new themes. This happened in two waves. The first re-evaluation occurred after the fifth video, then again after the 22nd video. After combining the codes influenced by the literature review with the codes that emerged organically, I prioritized the most common patterns: (a) an emphasis on the athlete's body and physicality, (b) growing up without much, (c) being raised by a single mother, (d) an absentee father versus when the dad was present, (e) unique parenting situations, (f) emphasizing when a Black athlete is considered intelligent, (g) using football as a way out of their childhood neighborhoods, (h) the presence of crime and violence, and (j) giving back to their communities with things like camps.

Limitations were found in the coding and interpretation processes because I recognized that the news reports, sports and human-interest stories I viewed were created without my input; therefore, I had to keep an open mind to the findings. Further, I addressed Foucault's requirement for a familiarity of the social dimensions by relying on the extensive background research done for the literature review and by continuing to immerse myself in the social context of the humble beginnings narrative in order to best understand the context in which the materials were created (Foucault, 1972; Waitt, 2010). This discourse analysis ran concurrently with the quantitative data analysis.

Qualitative Paradigm—Original Interviews

The role that original interviews play in research is profound because of their ability to capture context through personalized accounts, individual and community history, experiences, and responses to any given topic, problem, or issue (Hay, 2010; Mandel, 1974). This method was particularly interesting to me because of my journalism background; I had built a 20-year career interviewing people as a news anchor and reporter, analyzing their stories, and interpreting them for larger audiences. In addition to my practical experience co-creating stories for public consumption, research shows interviews are best suited to help fill "a gap of knowledge" (Hay, 2010, p. 102), evaluate opinions, and unveil individual or shared experiences. To recruit sports journalists, I relied on my personal network from my background as a broadcast professional and as a media coach for athletes. I identified five journalists and spoke with each of them on the phone. This was a purposeful sample taken directly from my network in hopes of getting a variety viewpoints. Following the IRB-approved recruitment script (Appendix F), I explained that I was conducting research for my PhD dissertation about the humble beginnings narrative of Black athletes and their approach to covering them. I shared the time commitment and that the request was for an audio and video-recorded Zoom interview. I also explained that the interviews were confidential and that I would not share any of their identifying information when writing up my findings. After reading the recruitment script, I answered any questions they had. Each of the five journalists I spoke with agreed to be interviewed via Zoom with their audio and video being recorded. I initially followed the same pattern when recruiting athletes to be interviewed, relying on my personal network. But instead of a purposeful sample, I exhausted my network to populate as many interviews as possible before relying on the snowball recruitment technique. After identifying Black NFL players I know personally, I spoke with

them on the phone, and following the IRB-approved script (Appendix D), explained my research on the humble beginnings narrative of Black athletes, and that I was interested in their journey. I also explained that the interviews were confidential and that I would not share any of their identifying information when writing up my findings. Then I answered any questions they had. If they agreed to the interview, we set a day and time. For the journalists and athletes, I scheduled Zoom meetings, then emailed them the meeting link and a copy of the verbal consent form. In the emails, I thanked them for agreeing to be interviewed, requested they read the attached consent form ahead of the interview, and explained that if they were in agreement, we would conduct a verbal consent the day of the Zoom meeting. At the start of each Zoom meeting, I read the consent form and recorded their verbal consent. After the interviews, I extracted their verbal consent from the beginning of the recording and emailed the short video clip to them for their records. Following the interviews with athletes, I also used the snowball recruitment technique and asked if they knew of any other Black NFL players they thought might be interested in being interviewed for the research. If they said yes, I asked them to do an introductory text or email. Once connected with the new athlete, I requested a phone call, during which I explained the study and interview request per the IRB script. Additionally, I sent a direct message to one of the athletes I know personally, but for whom I did not have a phone number. I used the IRB-approved script for direct messages (Appendix E). When he replied, he offered his phone number. When we connected via phone, I followed the same steps I used with the other athletes.

Of the 30 players interviewed, I knew 12 of them. The remaining interviews were a result of referrals. I also spoke with four NFL players, two I know personally and two who I met through snowballing, who did not want to be interviewed. The sports journalists I

interviewed for this research shared their authentic experiences covering athletics during their career, and the athletes described their personal accounts of growing up in their communities. The athletes also disclosed the role of athletics in their lives, the politics and social collateral they had to negotiate within their childhood communities, and the types of resources they feel are still needed in marginalized communities. Semi-structured interviews with both the journalists and athletes allowed them to express their opinions and share their lived experiences and responses freely (Jacob & Furgerson, 2012; Mandel, 1974).

Limitations. Interviews for qualitative research face a unique set of limitations and historical challenges, including questions of reliability and credibility, especially when this method is used as the only method of a study (Lincoln & Guba, 1985; E. Thomas & Magilvy, 2011). Along with balancing the research with quantitative methods, I established rigor by conducting "adequate preparation, diverse input, and verification of interpretation" (Hay, 2010, p. 135). This included a well-thought-out interview guide, interviewing until I obtained enough interviews to account for most perspectives, and finding corroborating patterns from within the re-circulated texts found in the discourse analysis (Howe & Eisenhart, 1990; Mason, 2010; Waitt, 2010). With the athletes, interview saturation established credibility and breadth when I began to hear some of the same patterns and articulations of place and space repeatedly. With saturation, the collective voice of the athlete interviews became immediately recognizable from interview to interview (Krefting, 1991, p. 218). Because I only interviewed Black NFL players who, by their own standards came from humble beginnings, I reached saturation at 25 interviews, but continued to complete a total of 30 interviews.

As for the journalists I interviewed, saturation was less of a concern. Instead, I used their perspectives to gain a general idea of when and how backgrounds and childhood

environments enter the story-making process. Some of them admitted that they had pushed the humble beginnings narrative to achieve dramatic effect in their storytelling. They also collectively shared that there is an over-representation of the narrative among Black athletes, and voiced frustration that, from their perspective, the narrative is most often pushed forward by non-Black journalists.

My strategy for attaining journalists and athlete interviews began with on my own network. After spending time in television and several years as a media coach for athletes, I developed a significant network of journalists and athletes I know personally, as well as Player Engagement employees at roughly a dozen NFL teams, NBA teams and colleges. With the five journalist interviews, I was able to rely solely on my network. But that was not the case with the athletes. After exhausting my personal relationships, I used a snowball approach to find more potential interviewees and asked athletes and my contacts within the teams and within the League to let others know about the research project. I also used the social media platform LinkedIn to build relationships with athletes who might be interested in participating. I included both active and retired players who played in the NFL within the last 20 years. This allowed me to go back as far as the 2000 season. Many of my contacts were in the demographic of retired players who were still attached to the game by working for the NFL as well as for individual teams. Recruiting retired athletes increased the probability of attaining interviews since retired players were not focused on training, traveling, and playing while simultaneously being preoccupied with the Covid 19 pandemic.

All of the interviews were conducted virtually using Zoom video conferencing software. Virtual interviews accommodated Covid 19 social-distancing restrictions and allowed for a wider pool of interview candidates. The NFL has teams in 32 states, and the journalists I spoke with

lived all over the country. All of the virtual interviews included audio and video recording, and in the consent for the participants signed, they agreed to be recorded. A more natural exchange of information was possible since the interviews were recorded because I did not have to be preoccupied with taking notes during the interviews. According to Hay (2010), rapport between the researcher and participant can be easily, especially when separated by the virtual environment, and this may cause the researcher to miss cues from the interviewee. Understanding the importance of rapport, I opted to write memos of reflection after the virtual interviews were completed.

I also used an inverted pyramid style of interviewing, first asking "simple-to-answer, non-threatening questions, then moving to more abstract and reflective aspects" (Hay, 2010, p. 109). I also included free association questions that allowed for "maximum response on the part of the interviewee" with some athlete answers leading to in-depth self-reflections (Mandel, 1974, p. 19).

Interview guides. The questions from the interview guides I created acted as a general guideline for my virtual interviews with the athletes. Each interview session ended with, "Is there anything else you would like to add?" The interview guide questions for Black NFL athletes active during the 2020 season were the following:

1. How long have you been/did you play in the NFL?
2. What do you enjoy most about playing your sport on the highest level?
3. What do you enjoy least?
4. When you think of humble beginnings, what comes to mind for you?
5. Tell me about your journey to the NFL including what college you attended.
6. What was it like the moment you heard your name called in the draft/got the call to join your team?

7. At what age did you start playing football?
8. What led you to start?
9. Tell me about your first few years playing. Was it Pop Warner or at school?
10. What did you enjoy most and least about playing in middle and/or high school?
11. Describe your training facilities at school.
12. What was your community like?
13. What did you like most about your community?
14. What was your biggest challenge about your community?
15. If you could have added resources to your community or school when you were a youth, what would they have been?
16. Were your parents active in your life?
17. What, if any, outside influences were you tempted by or were trying to avoid?
18. Were there other professional athletes before you who came from your community?
19. How would you describe the media coverage of you and your story?
20. How did becoming a professional athlete change your life?
21. How has your childhood impacted your life as a professional athlete?
22. Have you given back to your community? If so, how and why?
23. What would you like people to know about your community?
24. What would you like people to know about your journey?
25. How would you like to see this research used?

The interview guide questions for career sports journalists and former athletes-turned journalists were the following:

1. Walk me through your broadcasting career, including what attracted you to this field. (OR)
   What made you make the transition from athletics to broadcasting?

2. What markets and/or stations have you worked in?

3. How long have you been in this space?

4. What sports do you typically report on?

5. As you think about the stories and athletes you cover, under what circumstances do you include their backgrounds?
   (OR)
   At what point during commentating conversations does someone's journey include their childhood community or experience?

6. When you hear the term *humble beginnings* in sports, what comes to mind for you?

7. In your space, is the humble beginnings narrative shared more with any one group of athletes?

8. How is the storyline typically shared?

9. What is your assessment of how the stories of an athlete's background are shared when the athlete is White? What about when the athlete is Black?

10. Is there anything else you'd like to share?

Analysis. After completing the interviews, they were transcribed using the transcription service Trint (trint.com). Following each transcription, I listed to the audio as I read the transcripts to check for accuracy. I then edited the text as needed and uploaded the transcripts into the ATLAS.ti software. The recorded interviews were coded inductively based on patterns surfacing within the qualitative data. This approach helped to organize passages into common themes regarding how the athletes interpreted humble beginnings, the power dynamics of their childhood neighborhoods, and the politics of the new communities they navigated once they joined the NFL (Waitt, 2010). From interviews with the journalists, I found patterns on how and when the humble beginnings narrative is included and shared, and if there is a difference in coverage between athletes of different races. In the analysis of both sets of interviews, I used a grounded theory approach to analyze the data and to identify themes from the patterns found not only during the coding process, but also during interviews. While re-visiting the interviews to

fine-tune the transcriptions, other patterns became apparent (Glaser & Strauss, 1967; Goulding, 2002). This iterative process allowed for a balanced look at the patterns and themes that were emerging from the data. This step ensured that I avoided implementing commercial news gathering techniques that I learned over my 20-year broadcasting career. Otherwise, I might decide on a theme and look only for the evidence to support that theme. By writing memos between interviews and continually searching for organic themes and concepts, I avoided pre-judgment and adjusted how I asked the athletes about humble beginnings with open-ended questions that allowed them to insert themselves in their description or differentiate their experiences from those of their teammates. Figure 2 shows how each of the methods used contributed to the collection of research data.

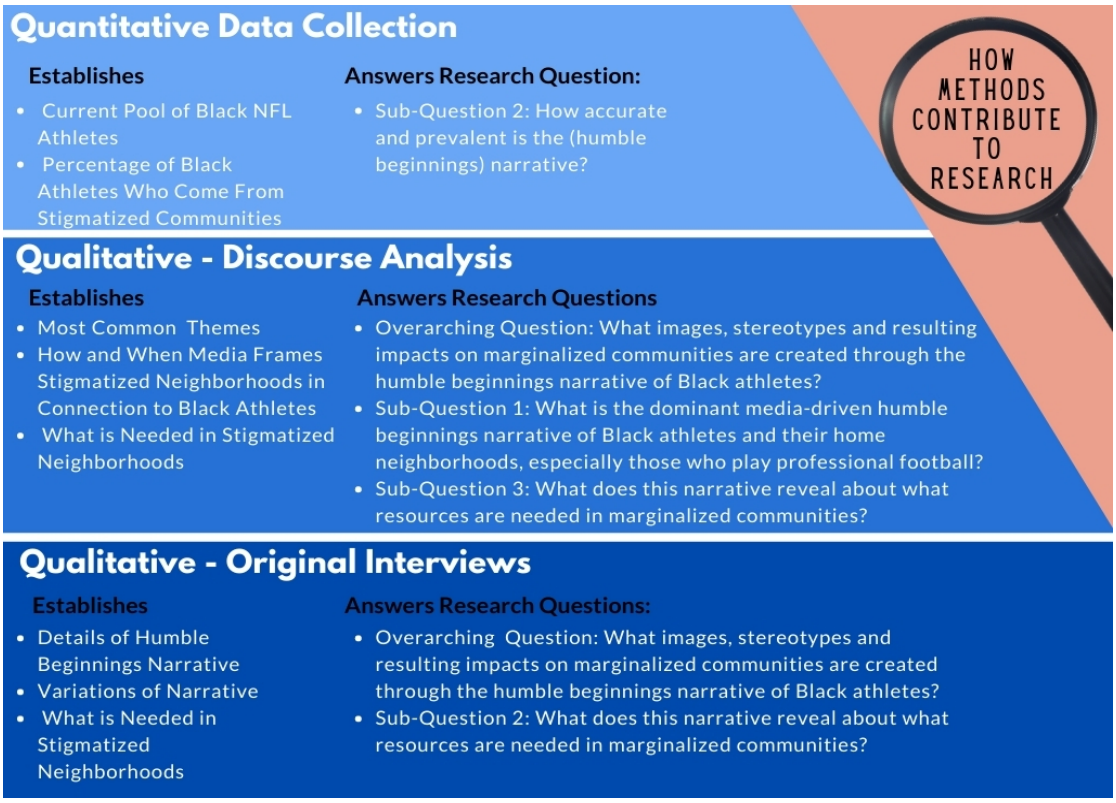


Figure 2. How the methods contributed to the collection of research data.

Methods Summary

Professional athletes are generally seen as celebrities and often become spokespersons, role models, and ambassadors for their groups, their communities, and their interests (Brown et al., 2013; Carrington, 2010; Deeb & Love, 2018). The more talented, accomplished, controversial and polarizing they are, the more the media highlights them, and when their backgrounds are rooted in poor, dangerous, and otherwise lacking home neighborhoods, the humble beginnings storyline is elevated even more. The more people see the humble beginnings storyline, the more it validates the Black athlete experience as much as it reinforces White-framed stereotypes of Black athletes (Deeb & Love, 2018; McKittrick, 2016). This research brought awareness of the cyclical process used to answer what images, stereotypes, and resulting impacts on marginalized communities are created through the humble beginnings narrative of Black athletes.

1. What is the dominant media-driven humble beginnings narrative of Black athletes and their home neighborhoods, especially those who play professional football?
2. How prevalent and accurate is this narrative compared to the lived experiences of the athletes?
3. What do this narrative and the lived experiences of the athletes reveal about what resources are needed in marginalized communities?

The qualitative discourse analysis of video stories of Black NFL athletes answered the first supporting question by establishing the dominant media-driven narrative that Black professional athletes come from humble beginnings. The quantitative data collection and analysis helped answer the second supporting question by confirming the prevalence and accuracy of the narrative compared to the lived experience. It also confirmed the NFL is made consists of more Black players (60%) than White player, as past studies concluded (Lapchick, 2019, 2020). Quantitative methods further established that the majority of the Black players,

who were active at the start of the 2020 football season (70%) experienced at least two characteristics that geographical scholarship considers to be predictors of neighborhood marginalization.

The original interviews helped answer the third supporting research question by establishing that the resources needed in marginalized communities are as unique and varied as the communities themselves. All of these methods and analyses helped establish that damaging images, dangerous stereotypes, and long-lasting negative impacts on marginalized neighborhoods are repeated and reinforced by the media. But perhaps most importantly, data from this dissertation may create an opportunity to pivot the conversation to "one of power and transformation" (Ramírez, 2015, p. 748) that could mobilize a variety of resources to help in the complex process of producing and reproducing Black place and space and to create opportunities to decrease neighborhood stigma.

In Chapter 4, the dominant narrative, perspective, and prevalence of the patterns and themes noted during the data analysis are discussed. Chapter 5 is centered on the lived experiences of Black NFL players. I elaborate on these new imageries in Chapter 6 and offer a detailed discussion on the contributions of this dissertation to Black Geographies scholarship and suggest expanding the area of application and further cementing its impact of relational place-making in marginalized communities.

CHAPTER 4

The Dominant Narrative, Perspective, and Prevalence

Much emphasis has been placed on Black professional athletes as being aggressive, animalistic, and a byproduct of poor, dangerous, marginalized communities (P. Cunningham, 2009; Harrison, Harrison & Moore, 2002). While geographic scholarship rarely studies athletes' lives to better understand the needs of stigmatized communities and in some cases dismisses the relevance of sport geography (Koch, 2017; Montez de oca, 2018), connections and evaluations are ever present in the media-framing of Black athletes from humble beginnings. Similar to the arguments of Koch (2017) and Montez de Oca (2018) that sports play a substantial role in the development of social and political economy and geographical identity, I argue that a focus on Black professional athletes and their home geographies provides a unique and significant role in the making and understanding of marginalized and stigmatized communities. Continuous exposure to stories and narratives about their personality traits based on stereotypes of their neighborhoods creates stigma for the athletes and their communities. These stories are blended with traditional markers of marginalization, including low socio-economic status, low housing values, governmental programs such as free and reduced lunch, low performing schools, and crime rates. This research delivers a new, concentrated approach to understanding and studying neighborhood stigma and marginalization by studying the plight of Black athletes. The data from the research analysis also expands the application of the Black Geographies sub-field by delivering a detailed evaluation of how marginalized neighborhoods shape athletes and how the athletes shape their neighborhoods. This work considers the tenets of Black Geographies by outlining how insiders and outsiders decipher and interact with their communities based on what they know and what they imagine about places from which Black athletes emerge. These tenets

create a Black sense of place and space that transcends an athlete's home geography. This chapter sets the foundation for these connections to and applications of Black Geographies in the making and re-negotiating of place and space. Chapter 4 also includes the establishment of the dominant patterns, themes, and standards that were used to evaluate the lived experiences that emerged from the interviews with athletes. Specifically, this chapter establishes three considerations that guided how I determined the patterns and four themes found in the data. These considerations were: (a) the dominant media-driven humble beginnings narrative of Black NFL Players, (b) an overview of why it is highlighted in the media, and (c) a snapshot of how many NFL players come from marginalized communities. The dominant narrative was established through a quantitative data analysis of 72 video stories on Black NFL players. The overview of what leads to the narrative that dominates media coverage is evaluated through five interviews with sports reporters. Finally, establishing the number of Black NFL players who experienced neighborhood marginality growing up is delivered via a quantitative content analysis. These deliverables, individually and collectively, provide a baseline to evaluate the overarching research question regarding the images, stereotypes, and resulting impacts of the humble beginnings narrative on marginalized communities, especially compared to the lived experiences of the athletes. Black Geographies will be applied briefly in this chapter, and extensively in Chapters 5 and 6.

Stories of Black NFL Players

The dominant media-driven humble beginnings narrative of Black NFL Players, as established by the literature review, is that they come from poor, crime-ridden, single parent households, and that they relied on athletics as their way to escape their environments. During this research project, 72 video media stories on Black NFL athletes were evaluated to get a better

understanding of the narrative and to set the baseline that will be compared to the interviews of the athletes as they shared their lived experiences. To retrieve the stories used in this section, I randomly picked stories of Black athletes from the NFL's list of "A Football Life" series and from the ESPN "30-for-30" series. Because the titles of these videos do not explain anything about the athlete's journey, the storylines, patterns, and themes emerged organically. While the literature review set expectations for storylines including blight, poverty and crime connections, I left open the doorway for alternate storylines. For the balance of the videos, I searched specifically for athletes from humble beginnings and for athletes who gave back to their communities. I also randomly selected names to search from the 2020 NFL active rosters, names of athletes mentioned in the ESPN and NFL docuseries and relied on stories automatically generated based on my YouTube search history. Patterns emerged that eventually led to four dominant themes: (a) tremendous emphasis placed on the athlete's body, physicality and style of play; (b) growing up with few financial resources, especially if athletes were raised by a single mother; (c) challenging family dynamics; and (d) using football to escape their neighborhood.

Athletic and aggressive super freak. Depicting Black athletes as physical beings with extraordinary strength, speed, and other physical attributes, and with matching aggressive temperaments was the most dominant pattern to arise from this discourse analysis with 33 athletes (45%) being described in relation to their body. This was expected to some degree because the subjects are elite athletes who rely on their physical abilities to be successful in the NFL. Many of the depictions described the players as beyond human, and in some cases, they were compared to animals. Comments described athletes like "a stallion" (NFL Productions, 2018), "establishing physical superiority" (NFL Productions, 2019) and an unnamed announcer called "DK Metcalf, an athletic super freak," (NFL Productions, 2018). When former USC

Head Coach John Robinson talked about who he wanted to recruit for the team, he stated, "We tried to recruit him to USC. There was something about Eric [Dickerson] that was different, you know what I mean? He was tall. He looked like a racehorse out there" (NFL Productions, 2018).

In the case of the "super freak" comment, it was the very first thing the story narrator said in the 21-minute long video (Original Bored Film, 2020). This is significant because before any of the 940,000 viewers had a chance to evaluate Metcalf's abilities for themselves, the Original Board Film Documentary influenced the audience to focus on his body. Other depictions of his body included "this monster", "his freakish size with elite 4-3 speed", and "you've got yourself a beast" (Original Bored Film, 2020). Body-centric rhetoric is a significant area of discussion within Black Geographies since McKittrick (2016) proclaimed it prevents outsiders from imagining Blacks any other way than physical specimens. This substantiates what was found in the literature review (Chapter 2) that Black athletes are highlighted for their physicality and aggressiveness, while White athletes are more often described as being intelligent and students of the game (Brown et al., 2013; McChesney, 1989). This pattern also highlights a temperament that mimics the physical animalistic attributes. For example, the comment about Eric Dickerson appearing like a racehorse continued with the idea that he invoked fear in his opponents. "Half the defense was afraid to tackle him, and the other half was too slow" (NFL Productions, 2018).

The idea of fear was exceptionally dominant in the story on Joe Greene, whose nickname was "Mean Joe Greene." While it was expected that his nickname would be used throughout the 44-minute video on his life, it was unexpected to hear "mean" 26 times (NFL Productions, 2020). The story did add some balance by shaping Greene as a family man later in life. Nonetheless, the video consistently used language including "not the friendliest type of guy on

first impression," "fighting Greene," and "vigilante" to describe him (NFL Productions, 2020). Fear or the perception of fear, as established in the literature review, plays a significant role in creating neighborhood stigma (Stack & Kelly, 2006). In the case of this research, it stigmatized the Black athlete as dangerous and scary.

Concentrating on the athlete's physicality was often tied an aggressive style of play that was a result of the athlete's dangerous hometown. These excerpts described NFL retired player Marshall Faulk's experience growing up in New Orleans (NFL Productions, 2017b). In between Faulk talking about his early years, the video included a news clip from an unknown station describing the area where Faulk grew up.

> Faulk: If you know anything about New Orleans, they tell you stay out of the Ninth Ward. That's where I'm from. Like there's no reason for you to be in the Ninth Ward. You just don't go from the hood to the Hall of Fame.
>
> News clip: The average income per family in this neighborhood is around $7,000 a year. It's one of the worst ghettos in America and certainly the toughest in New Orleans.
>
> Faulk: The Desire Housing Project was tough, challenging. As friends you will fight just to make sure that you're ok with fighting in case as a group we got into a fight with some other people.

Describing neighborhood fighting as a necessary exercise to prepare for potential danger, plus language from a news report that leads to imagining a family having to survive off $7,000 for the year and pictures (Figure 3) of the projects Faulk grew up in firmly cement a humble beginnings narrative.

Note: Picture is a screenshot from the publicly available A Football Life video ((NFL Productions, 2017b).

Figure 3. Desire housing project.

The language and imagery also create a Black sense of place and space, or a spatial identity that sports fans can adhere to other Black professional athletes.

From the hood. Descriptors used in Faulk's story lead to another pattern that emerged in the discourse analysis—Black athletes come from poor, blighted communities, a sentiment highlighted in 29 (40%) of the stories, and neighborhoods where negative elements like drugs, crime and/or danger are present, which was highlighted in 25 (34%) of the stories. Most of the "A Football Life" stories used pictures and videos of the athlete's childhood home to accompany language like "small home" (NFL Productions, 2017a), "everyday life was the hard part," "his birth father would pay his mother $98 a month for child support" (Touchdown, 2020b), "a neighborhood so riddled with crime [that] it came with its own jail" (NFL Productions, 2017b), or describing their neighborhood like a "war zone" (NFL Productions, 2017b). These verbal descriptors were also shared with pictures or videos of blighted conditions. The story on Barry Sanders (NFL Productions, 2017a) that had 3.6 million views used a picture of his childhood home (Figure 4), along with the descriptors that highlight the homes size and number of occupants.

Note: Picture is a screenshot from the publicly available A Football Life video (NFL Productions, 2017a)

Figure 4. Barry Sanders's childhood home.

The unnamed narrator started the description of the Sanders childhood home, followed by Sanders' interpretation of it:

> Narrator: Life for the Sanders family was in Wichita, Kansas, in a small home that Barry shared with his 10 brothers and sisters.
>
> Barry Sanders: "I never felt that it was that cramped, you know? Either I was in my room, or I was outside playing."

Even though Sanders did not feel cramped, the idea that 11 children, along with Sanders' mother and father, fit into such a small house created an image of financial struggle.

This portrayal of an athlete's family financial struggles was a common occurrence throughout the stories in which a humble beginnings was established, either with pictures of the athlete's home or, in the case of Tyrann Mathieu, a video of his childhood neighborhood. Two of his stories were evaluated for this research, both highlighting negative neighborhood influences. The first was "The Tyrann Mathieu Story: Born & Bred in New Orleans" produced by NFL Films (2016b). In this 11-mintute video that received 3.6 million views, Mathieu shared his childhood experience around gang members:

> So right now we're at Kerry Curley Park in New Orleans East, one of those special places. And it'll be times we would come to the park and, it'll just be big gangbangers at the park. . . . [We'd be] playing against murderers, robbers, and you know, it just teaches you a different side of being tough.

ESPN also did a cover story on Mathieu about his initiative to teach people about the importance of voting (ESPN, 2020). When it was shared that he originated from New Orleans, this story used a split-screen with a picture of the city's skyline in one frame, and video of Mathieu in the other. Matthieu described his hometown for the ESPN story in this way: "Being from New Orleans gives you a sense of, you know, pride about who you are and it also gives you the spirit of 'no matter what, I'm gonna be alright because I'm gonna get through it'" (ESPN, 2020).

While Mathieu's description painted New Orleans as a place where a person struggles to survive, it was also the journalist's choice to include this descriptor. It painted a far less negative depiction than the NFL Films story did, but it also received far fewer views with just 58,000, compared to the 3.6 million views of the more negative-framed NFL story. And between both stories, there are potentially more than four million people who now have the impression that Super Bowl winner Tyrann Mathieu came from the hood.

Another example of an NFL player who was linked to a rough neighborhood growing up was found in the "A Football Life" story on Sean Taylor (NFL Productions, 2017f). Taylor was fatally wounded when someone broke into his Miami home. But before this part of the story was divulged in the video, the 44-minute production set the scene of a man who had been in trouble with the law before, and someone who did not like to conform to team rules and standards. When the video advanced to his tragic death, it was framed as something some expected based on his past. The unnamed narrator stated the following:

> Some did not wait for details to emerge about Taylor's murder. He experienced legal trouble early in his career and played violently on the field. They saw his death as an extension of the lifestyle they thought he had lived.

Taylor's cousin, David Walsh, then appeared in the video to explain his discontent with a comment made by an ESPN reporter.

> When Shawn passed away, Michael Wilbon really upset me from ESPN, because he kind of made it seem like if there was one player in the league that you would expect this to happen to, it would be Sean. (NFL Productions, 2017f)

The producers of the Sean Taylor story then shared a picture the Wilbon quote that Walsh referenced. It read, "I wasn't surprised in the least when I heard the news Monday morning that Sean Taylor had been shot in his home by an intruder. Angry? Yes. Surprised? Not even a little" (NFL Productions, 2017f). This is significant because it not only positioned Taylor as being overtaken by his aggression, but the story (that had been viewed over two million times) created the perception that athletes who come from marginalized communities are forever tethered to and deserving of the danger of their humble beginnings.

Michael Vick is another example of this and is another version of the Black athlete from the hood narrative. After being arrested in a dog fighting scandal, he was sent to prison. There was "A Football Life" video of his life (NFL Enterprises, 2017e) with nearly 2.7 million views that shared these descriptors: "The Michael Vick experience was a dance between trouble and triumph, on and off the field" and "He was the most thrilling player of a generation who became the most reviled." These comments about Vick were delivered by the story narrator. An established sports reporter, Peter King, stated in the video, "This guy had everything, and he risked it all and ended up losing it all because he wanted to have dogs fight against each other. What planet are we on?" (NFL Enterprises, 2017e). These comments, especially the one from King, not only vilify Vick, but they also set a standard that it is

acceptable to challenge his character publicly; in this case, the sports reporter was a White man. I argue that the tone he used in sharing his opinion represented disgust with Vick and created separation between Vick and the rest of society, establishing an excluded Black sense of place and space. That Black sense of place and space created spatial imaginaries that allowed viewers to attach negative meanings to Michael Vick and what he represented.

Challenging family dynamics. The dominant humble beginnings narrative shapes Black athletes as growing up with a single mother and often without a significant relationship with their father. The stories I evaluated substantiated this storyline with athletes praising their mothers for taking on the job of raising them alone. Common sentiments included "grew up with his mother and sister in a public housing project," "she served as everything" and mothers with two and three jobs to "hold the family together".

The dominant narrative also describes Black athletes as having little to no relationship with their fathers. The results of this discourse analysis found 34.7% of the videos mimicked this narrative of an absentee father (Figure 5).

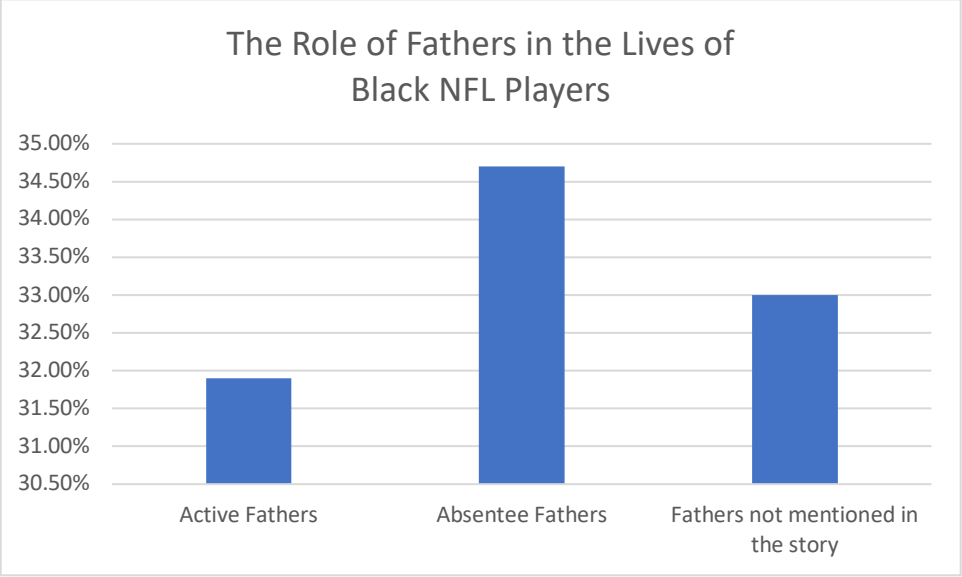


Figure 5. The role of fathers in the lives of Black NFL Players.

Some of the descriptors included the following: “My biological father is in prison for murder”(NFL Productions, 2016b), “My dad liked to run the streets” (NFL Productions, 2017e) “Growing up with a dad that was on drugs [and] that was abusive to his mother” (NFL Productions, 2017e), and “His father . . . who left the family when Deion was a child, was frequently unemployed and addicted to drugs” (Asylum Entertainment, 2002).

A story featuring Jimmy Graham shared that he had “a very troubling upbringing having never known his father” (Touchdown, 2020b). In the video, it was explained that he was failing school, but “once he met Rebecca Benson at church his whole life began to change.” The video shows a White woman on the screen and the narrator explains that she and her daughter took Graham in as a high schooler. While the story does not establish any further detail and does not allow the viewers to hear directly from Benson or Graham, it created the question of why a woman, presumably unrelated to Graham, would take him in (Touchdown, 2020b). By not delivering context, the video reinforces the narrative of a poor, unfortunate Black man from the hood who needs a way out.

Other unique family dynamics included athletes who were raised by their grandmother, and/or being adopted by other family members. This was the case with Tyrann Mathieu and Eric Dickerson. Mathieu described his family this way: “My family felt like I needed a father figure so they thought it was best if I moved with my uncle who [became] my adopted father” (NFL Films, 2016b). While Mathieu knew uncle and aunt were his adopted parents, Eric Dicerkson did not find out who his real mother was until he was a teenager. He explained: “My situation is that I was legally adopted from the inside of my family . . . My mother Viola, she was really my great-great-aunt. Everybody knew her as Aunt Red and her husband was my dad, Carey Dickerson” (NFL Productions, 2018). Dickerson also talked

about his parents after he learned the truth: “My real mother lived right next door, Helen. They told me that was my sister, so I always thought she’s my sister. But my parents had a big impact. My dad was a good man” (NFL Productions, 2018). Other athletes shared similar stories of living with family members other than their mother and father, locking in the narrative of instability within Black neighborhoods.

Using football as a way out. The last of the dominant narratives that emerged was the idea of using football as a way to cope with life in a marginalized neighborhood and the ticket to escape it. Of the 72 stories, 29 (40%) of them included language from either the story narrator or reporter, the athlete, or an athlete’s friend or former coach—all proclaiming football as a way out. Darnell Dockett’s description is an example of this storyline:

> Darnell was in and out of juvenile detention centers throughout the better part of his very young life and felt that he was a product of his environment. He moved in with his uncle and . . . his life changed for the better as he got into sports. And as a result of that, he found himself clinging to football as a way of escape. (Touchdown, 2020a)

The Deion Sanders story is another example of reliance on sports. It unwrapped a troubled journey that started with growing up being raised by a single mother in a crime-riddled neighborhood and dealing with an imprisoned father. The 42-minute story that received 590-thousand views described the role football played in Sanders’ life. “Football wasn’t just a game. It was a chance to escape the projects” (Asylum Entertainment, 2002). Jerome Bettis articulated it this way: “I came from the streets of Detroit and I'm not going back, so I'm gonna do whatever it takes for me to be successful” (NFL Productions, 2017c). Charlie Batch explained using football as a ticket to college and being reminded of how fortunate he was during his trips home: “When I was able to earn that scholarship to Eastern Michigan at 17, I said I’m not coming back. And every time that I would come home from college to visit, you know, you look forward to coming home. But then you look forward to leaving again” (NFL Films, 2016a). These

perceptions are significant because the videos highlighted neighborhood marginality. Seeing repeated stories of Black athletes who perceived the need to escape dire neighborhood circumstances including poverty, crime, drug addiction and gang-bangers creates a dominant narrative that leads people to think of all athletes as coming from a background in which they lacked the necessities of life. When this happens, it impacts how the athletes are treated, and how marginalized communities are viewed. However, not all Black athlete experiences are the same, and every marginalized neighborhood is not the same. It is important to note some of the variations that surfaced in the discourse analysis.

Narrative exceptions. There were two exceptions that were significant in providing stories that were outside the typical storylines. For the athletes who did have their fathers in their lives, the videos spent more time spelling out the relationship compared to the stories in which the fathers were absent (Figure 5). In the case of absentee fathers, the information became a reference data point. But in the example of Barry Sanders, the relationship he shared with his father who was in the home, was woven throughout the 44-minute "A Football Life" video (NFL Productions, 2017a). While the video shared how Sanders' father publicly named another Black athlete as the best Running Back to ever play in the NFL (a statement the story producer positioned as a slight to Sanders), the rest of the story described Sanders' father as a hard worker and extremely supportive of his son. Barry Sanders explained about his father's statement, "What he said about Jim Brown, I was never offended. My dad was always the biggest supporter. I don't believe I'd be here without him" (NFL Productions, 2017a). The Barry Sanders video showed several pictures and video clips of Sanders and his father throughout his career. It also included the perspective of one of Sanders's childhood friends, Mark McCormick.

> He's done a nice job of kind of blending his parents and the way that he raises his kids. A lot of us didn't have our dad in a home. Mr. Sanders was in the home and that was, that was a big deal. [He] stayed there and worked hard and was a dutiful father and if Barry was at a game or whatever, he was there, and I see that in Barry.

In a more recent clip in the video, Sanders is shown with his own four sons and portrayed as playing a supportive role in the lives of his children, like his father taught him. The last five minutes of the video are dedicated to positioning both Sanders men as active fathers. This story is significant in demonstrating an atypical story, and the length that it went to in order to describe the active role of Barry Sanders's father. The video received over 3.6 million views, and while other stories of Black NFL players who had active fathers did not spend as many minutes highlighting the father's role, they did place significant emphasis on father figures.

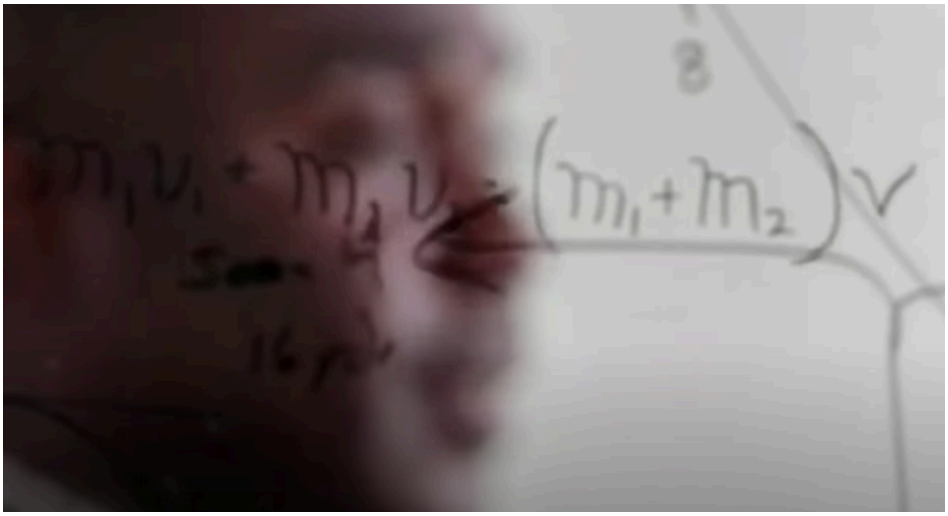
Ronnie Lott is another example. The NFL's (NFL Productions, 2019) story established his relationship with both his parents within the first three minutes. The narrator of the video was his daughter. This could be an area for further evaluation—to understand if the storylines that include a father's active role are routinely given more coverage, and if it is a result of the athletes and/or their families stressing the point during their interviews.

The second exception that emerged countered the dominant narrative found in the literature review that Black athletes are not intelligent (Brown et al., 2013; McChesney, 1989). While there was no research found during the literature that was centered on specific language to support this notion, the studies of the videos revealed that when Black athletes were considered smart, the story producers magnified it. The most striking example was the NFL's 44-minute story on Marshall Faulk (NFL Productions, 2017d). One of his former head coaches praised Marshall and called him, "One of the smartest

football players at a what I call perimeter position I've ever been around. I mean it's not even close." Marshall's former quarterback, Peyton Manning stated the following:

> My head was spinning. I had a lot on my plate, and you know, trying to learn this NFL style of football, and Marshall will be right next to me, and he'd be reading the defense like a quarterback would. And he would be helping me out [with comments like] "Hey Peyton, this linebacker's blitzing" [and] "Hey it's gonna be zone." He could see things. Marshall was a real source of comfort for me. I was looking for him a lot. (NFL Productions, 2017d)

These statements are significant because it is the quarterbacks who are considered the ones with the highest intellect and football IQ (Dawidoff, 2014; Kisssel, 2013). For Peyton Manning, a quarterback, to share that he relied on Faulk's direction after he joined the League speaks volumes about Faulk's intellect. Additionally, the video shared images (Figure 6) of Faulk with a scientific filter over the image, to illustrate how his mind was in calculation mode. This is another area for future research—to determine if other athletes who are considered extremely astute were afforded the same type of imagery in their videos.



Note: Picture is a screenshot from the publicly available A Football Life video (NFL Productions, 2017d)

Figure 6. Marshall Faulk calculating plays

Evaluating the 72 videos provided a clear picture of a dominant media-driven narrative of Black athletes – they are physical super-humans with animalistic qualities and an aggressive style of play that creates fear in their opponents; they come from marginality, often being raised by a single mother who struggles to provide for her family and with negative neighborhood influences present; they experience challenging family dynamics, even beyond growing up with a single parent; and they rely heavily on football as a way to escape their neighborhood. When the storylines of having an active father and being intelligent emerged, the story producers did emphasize these qualities, including sharing more than one person to reiterate the athlete was intelligent, or sharing detailed stories of a strong relationship between the athlete and his active father. But there were also 24 videos (33%) that did not mention the athlete's father at all. Because the media-driven narrative defaults to negative depictions Black athletes, it is argued that when an athlete's father is never mentioned in a story, then the viewers will assume the athlete's father was not a part of his life. This is why more stories that share atypical storylines are needed.

Journalist Context

As this chapter spells out, some journalists refer to the backgrounds of Black professional athletes as 'rags to riches' or 'feel good' stories they believe will endear sports fans to their favorite athlete or team, while the literature review outlines other examples of agendas to commodify 'from the hood' narratives and 'bad boy' images (Powell, 2008; Shields, 1999). This section explores the conditions that lead journalists to narrowly focus on the humble beginnings storyline.

Including an Athlete's Humble Beginnings

To further establish the dominant humble beginnings narrative and help answer the research questions about what images, stereotypes and resulting impacts on marginalized communities the narrative creates, as well as what the narrative reveals about what is needed in marginalized neighborhoods, I interviewed a small but diverse group of sports journalists to gain a basic understanding of what prompts them to include an athlete's childhood geography in the story-telling process (see Table 3).

Table 3

Journalist Pseudonyms and Profiles

Pseudonym	Gender	Background	Media Level	Years of Journalistic Experience
Charlotte	Woman	Career Journalist	Local & National	9
Chuck	Man	NFL Player	National	20
Jeff	Man	Career Journalist	Local Stations	10
Kyle	Man	Career Journalist	Local & National	20
Sterling	Man	NFL Player	Local & National	10

Of the five journalists, one was a woman, and the rest men. Three of them were career sports journalists and the remaining two were former athletes-turned sports commentators. The first part of this interview process included confirming that their process of researching athletes involved them going through several steps to wholistically understand their interview subjects. This helped guide and confirm my approach of searching several sites to build out the profiles of the rostered players (discussed more below). Additionally, the interviews revealed three key themes: 1) journalists working within/around inherent Black athlete stereotypes, 2) the desire to show the most unique and/or extreme examples of fame, 3) stories driven by athletes giving back to their home communities. Two of the journalists (a former NFL athlete who moved into the journalism space and one of the career sports journalists who has been reporting for over a

decade) talked through many of the pre-conceived notions that are constantly at play in the sports reporting world. Many of these stereotypes are spelled out in the literature review (Chapter 2) and supported here.

> We see the narrative out there that most Black athletes come from the inner city or come from, you know, beginnings where they don't have a lot. A lot of people assume that their parents, i.e., their father, isn't in the picture and that this was their way out to become good at insert sport - whether it's football, basketball, baseball or whatever. It's assumed that most will fall into this similar category where they are into hip hop, they dress a certain way. They may not be as intellectual as others. So those are just some of the few stereotypes, if you will, that are kind of out there about athletes before you actually meet and talk and cover them (Jeff, 10-year local market sports journalist).

> A lot of times I think the story does kind of fall back on, you know, all the difficulties that people have to overcome, which I think is okay. But sometimes that starts to become a narrative and an almost a stereotype for the Black athlete when not all of us have had to go through those super hardship (Chuck, former NFL player & 20 plus year sports journalist).

All five journalists expressed this sentiment. Both Chuck and Jeff added that they feel a responsibility to challenge the overemphasis on the humble beginnings narrative and add other storylines, respectively, so viewers can see Black athletes differently. Even when he covers an athlete with a rags to riches story, Jeff still tries to find what is unique about the athlete so they are not solely put in the stereotypical box that racially frames them as a product of a dangerous Black community. With his platform and deliberate reporting style, Jeff takes an active role in re-creating imaginaries rather than a passive role of reinforcing stereotypes. He also illuded that his role as a Black journalist uniquely positions him to re-write narratives, making him an agent and contributor to the political and social economy present in Black Geographies.

Sterling shared a similar sense of responsibility to expand the narrative of Black athletes. He played in the NFL for 10 years. He started dabbling in media before his NFL journey, and jumped into it more after he retired. At the writing of this paper, he had already spent nearly 10 years as a television sports commentator for a national network and a few local market stations.

He recalls a story he and another sports announcer were covering on ESPNU about a college standout whose father was in prison. Sterling was surprised when his producer, who knew Sterling came from a family with two supportive parents in the home, suggested that he share his experience on Live TV.

> We talked about it and our producer knew, he knew my story. He said, 'Hey, you should mention that. You're real passionate about that. You should mention it.' And so I did… They asked me… 'You had a 10-year NFL career and you played college ball, but your family situation was different?' And then I had the opportunity to tell them… I grew up in what you would call a strong family base, if you will.

Sterling says this was the only time in his NFL and sports broadcasting career that he was asked or had a chance to share his background. His time in both industries impressed upon him that his story was too bland to share because he didn't overcome major obstacles and familial/community hardships to realize his NFL dream. That is the second and most dominant theme that surfaced - that the sports broadcast industry and its fans prefer sports stories with the greatest extremes. Kyle, a former ESPN reporter with 20 years broadcasting experience, explained these 'feel-good' stories often show the biggest examples of perseverance, and depict a local inner-city kid 'making good'. Each of the five journalists shared this sentiment as a universal goal at all the stations at which they have worked.

> I could be wrong, but it's elevated because that's the country we live in. I think they feel as though that type of story garners, gains and is positioned to draw more viewers in. It's almost like nobody wants to hear the golden situation, like that's not interesting. It's more interesting (to hear) – 'Ah, he's like the best player on team. And look what he had to deal with growing up' (Sterling, former NFL player turned sports commentator with 10 years broadcasting experience).

Bland everyday stories of athletes who did not struggle through humble backgrounds are not interesting enough to report. Chuck, who also played in the NFL and migrated to sports journalism during and especially after his playing days, doesn't mind the dramatic *from nothing to greatness* stories because those stories are real for the athletes who experience them, and they

honor the hard work, grit and determination it takes to make it to the NFL. Yet he does see a need for more diversity within sports broadcasting companies to add more context and content to the stories.

> It depends on who's producing and who's… telling the story. You know, I think that plays a big role in my mind. And I've seen that progress over the years when I've had more producers of color or women that understand a little bit different the story, as opposed to the White male that kind of thinks, 'hey, this is great to just talk about how difficult it was sometimes for Black athletes and where they come from' (Chuck, former NFL player & 20 plus year sports journalist).

Chuck is also an advocate for a broader depiction of the lived experience of athletes from all backgrounds, including Black players who do not come from lack. Charlotte, another career journalist I interviewed, used to seek out atypical stories. She spent nine years as a sports reporter and says she found stories about Black players who grew up with both their parents, and from middle class and affluent areas just as interesting and endearing as the humble beginnings stories, especially because they are rarely shared.

> For me, I think those are interesting stories, too. I think for the typical sports journalists, they don't find those stories interesting. You know, they don't think the viewer will find that interesting. They like (the)... poor upbringing, poor background (stories)... especially when it comes to Black athletes, for some reason, those are the stories that are pushed a lot.

If Charlotte's perspective were adopted by more sports journalists, the humble beginnings narrative would start to change. But the reluctance to offer a variety of storylines of Black athletes from affluent backgrounds or a less extreme version of the dominant humble beginning narrative prevents outsiders from fully understanding the Black experience and Black agency. It locks in stereotypes and the stigma associated with Black athletes and their communities, and makes a Black sense of place and space applicable even when the athletes leave their childhood neighborhoods. Even local media market stories travel far and wide because of the Internet and

social media. As a result, the narrowly focused humble beginnings story continually instructs and exemplifies how residents of marginalized communities and outsiders should interact with Black athletes and neighborhoods, and what people believe they represent based on media stories.

One common story that piggy-backs off the humble beginnings narrative is the occurrence of professional athletes investing resources into their hometowns.

> I guess you could say a story is a little more attractive if the athlete is coming back to an inner-city school because, hey, you know, the kids really need it more than they would in the middle, you know, middle class school (Kyle, former ESPN reporter with 2 -years broadcasting experience).

This quote is illustrative of the third theme that surfaced in the journalist interviews - the practice of athletes giving back to address the needs of their childhood neighborhoods. This speaks directly to the supporting research question about what the humble beginnings narrative and the lived experience reveal about the lack of resources and opportunities within marginalized communities. Kyle, who had nearly 20 years reporting in local markets, nationally for ESPN and even reporting internationally, says he would often see press releases of athletes hosting camps, backpack giveaways and other events in their hometowns, which inherently brings geography into the narrative.

> These guys, a lot of a lot of them don't do it for them. I mean, I just for the kids and the community, because they realize how fortunate they are to make it out of those communities and the life that, you know, most only dream of (Kyle, former ESPN reporter with 20 years broadcasting experience).

I also asked journalists about the approach to reporting on White athletes giving back to communities. Kyle began explaining trends within his reporting of players from both backgrounds pouring into kids from marginalized communities, then re-adjusted his response mid-sentence, realizing a distinct difference. Here was our exchange:

> **Kyle:** You'd have a lot of athletes come back and host tournaments and host the kids and teach the kids. So a lot of marginalized communities, a lot of inner-city communities. But then I also covered those big programs that maybe would take kids from inner cities and give them maybe a better high school education and a private school. And those were, you know what? Those were mostly professional athletes who worked with their (own) kids, who were at those schools so that they would go to the posh schools and give back to the schools because their kids were at the schools. So, that doesn't apply.
>
> **Barbara:** (That's) an interesting distinction to hear (you describe): Latino players and community. Black players and community. White players and a hospital, or the affluent schools that their kids may attend.
>
> **Kyle:** Because they're giving back to where - they're a product of these communities.

This is significant because it establishes an instance when geography is intentionally highlighted to showcase the athlete's generosity in giving back to his community. Charlotte and Jeff also shared this as a common story topic they have covered, especially during the summer which is the NFL's off-season. This insight informed the search criteria for the discourse analysis on pre-existing stories. In addition to searching for general stories on Black NFL players and specifically for the humble beginnings experience, I also searched for stories of Black NFL players giving back to their communities to evaluate how the stories of community "need" are depicted.

Analyzing how journalists may include geography and specifically the humble beginnings narrative, as well as understanding how and why some journalists work intentionally to provide alternate story-lines, provides context to what the humble beginnings narrative says about what is needed in marginalized neighborhoods – journalists who are cognizant of their role in shaping space and place, and normalizing inequalities in Black or urban geographies.

These interviews also helped answer the overarching research question about the images, stereotypes and resulting impacts on marginalized communities that the dominant narrative creates. First, these journalist interviews helped explain that the narrative creates a narrow lens

to understand Black professional athletes as products of poor, rough neighborhoods, whose grit, hard work and determination must be a result of having to overcome the ghetto. The resulting stories shape how viewers and listeners come to understand a Black sense of place and space, or what they think Black athletes experience in their hometowns. They also shape how athletes who are not from humble beginnings process the exclusion of their own stories.

As for the other research question about what the narrative reveals about what is needed in marginalized communities – by the media reinforcing a single narrative, viewers, listeners and readers are continually being fed socially-constructed divisions between Black and White players and images of racially divided geographies. Narrative that links Black players to humble beginnings while presenting a different story entirely for White players inextricably connects race and space, and sustains invisible fences that represent spatial inequity. Furthermore, it highlights various needs of marginalized communities based on the areas in which Black athletes choose to give back, while simultaneously sensationalizing urban landscapes. Lastly, pushing forward a single narrative of the Black athlete from humble beginnings puts journalists of color in a unique position to adopt this practice or to find opportunities to try and introduce new reporting styles. To round out the humble beginnings narrative compared to the lived experience, the next section establishes how many Black NFL players come from humble beginnings.

Black NFL Players on the 2020 Active Roster

This section evaluates the prevalence of the humble beginnings experience of Black NFL players through a quantitative data analysis and discussion. The first part of the section outlines how many of the NFL players on the 2020 active rosters were Black, while the second part of this section establishes how many of them come from marginalized communities. The third part of the section discusses the limitations and intent of quantitative data analysis.

Demographic data collection on each of the NFL's 32 teams during the 2020 season found 1171 of the 1696 total rostered athletes were Black players as of September 20, 2020. This determination was made after collecting electronic copies of the active rosters from each team website (see Chapter 3 for details). While this assessment is similar to the Institute for Diversity and Ethics in Sport's 2016 and 2019 Racial and Gender Report Cards in establishing that the majority of NFL players are Black, my findings differed from the Institute's most recent report. Their 2020 report showed Black players made up 57.5 percent of active players (Lapchick, 2020) versus my findings that they made up 69%. In addition to the limitations I outlined in Chapter 3 of potentially mis-categorizing Latino, Asian, Native Hawaiian/other Pacific Islander and/or American Indian/Native Alaskan players as African-American, the discrepancy between the Institute's and my findings can be further explained by the Institute's acknowledgement that 5.7 percent of the athletes chose to not specify race in its study (Lapchick, 2020). While athletes self-identifying their race is a more accurate depiction of the racial makeup of the League, my study evaluated race from the outside which is an automatic response that we learn as children, and often the approach that many take throughout life. Further, deciding one's race based on skin tone mimics how journalists and sports fans evaluate professional athletes. With those automatic assessments on race comes assumptions about what the athletes represent, hence the stereotypes discussed in the literature review. To create separation between the imaginaries and reality, the second part of this section outlines how many of the 1171 Black athletes come from humble beginnings versus those whose childhood communities do not fit the criteria of a marginalized community.

Black NFL Players From Humble Beginnings

Evaluating how many of the NFL's Black athletes grew up in marginalized neighborhoods is broken down broadly and specifically based on general profiles of each athlete.

As outlined in Chapter 3, there is no one-stop-shop to gather extended background information on the athletes. As I learned from the journalists I interviewed as well as what I learned over my own 20-year broadcast journalism career, it requires digging for details, using search engines like Google and databases like ESPN, the NFL Network, Pro-Football Reference, 247 Sports and college websites to piece together an athlete's background. Through this process, journalists also find their way to an athlete's hometown media sources for local television and newspaper stories, as well as their social media pages to get a gauge on who they are. While understanding the route sports journalists take in gathering information helped confirm the multiple-source approach for this study, the literature review informed the criteria used in establishing what constitutes a marginalized neighborhood. I pulled from literature describing marginalized and stigmatized neighborhoods, as well as the neighborhood and community characteristics highlighted specifically in the literature around sports sociology and media-framing. Common marginality markers across the literatures included socio-economic status, crime rates, and school performance (Allen et al., 2019; Anderson et al., 2003; Ettema & Peer, 1996; Florida & Adler, 2018; Sampson & Raudenbush, 2004; Wacquant, 2007, 2010, 2016). For this study I tallied four key criteria to determine if the Black 2020 rostered players grew up humble: their hometown's poverty level, violent crime risk, high school performance rating and the Title I status of the high schools from which they graduated. This research used the city that housed the athlete's high school as the athlete's hometown.

Of the 1,171 Black athletes identified, 812 (69%) came from areas that were at or below the Census Bureau's 2019 Supplemental Poverty Measure of 11.7 (Table 4). Additionally, there were 655 (55%) geographies at or above the 4.0 national median for the violent crime risk per 1,000 residents as noted by Neighborhood Scout (2012), a website that notes violent crime can

include murder, rape, robbery and assault. To offer context, the violent crime risk measures for the hometowns evaluated in this study ranged from .29 (Sparta, New Jersey) to 19.53 (Detroit, Michigan). Cities that received a score close to the median included Deerfield Beach, Florida at 4.37 and Mobile, Alabama at 4.44 (NeighborhoodScout, 2021).

To further ascertain the marginalization measures, the number of low performing high schools with a rating of 4 or lower equaled 503 (42%) according to GreatSchools (n.d.a.), and the number of high schools with a Title I status where "children from low-income families make up at least 40% of the enrollment" (U.S. Department of Education, 2018, para. 7) was 597 (50%), according to the Civil Rights Database (U.S. Department of Education, 2018). Table 4 presents these findings and other data found on poverty level, crime rate, school performance and Title I status.

Table 4

Neighborhood Marginality Occurrences

Poverty Level		Violent Crime Risk		School Performance		Title I Status	
Below	Above or N/A	At or above 4.0	Below or N/A	4 or lower	Above 4	Yes	N or Private
812	359	655	516	503	668	597	574
69.34%	30.65%	55.94%	44.06%	49.02%	57.05%	50.98%	49.02%

Figure 7 shows the percentage of 1,171 athlete profiles that fit none, one, two, three or all four of the criteria selected as indicators of neighborhood marginalization. Choosing these four criteria (poverty level, violent crime risk, school performance and Title I status) offered some overlap of marginalized conditions that helped more accurately establish a humble beginnings profile (Figure 7). For example, Title I status also acknowledges school performance challenges and instructs the government funding be used for programs to help "the lowest-achieving students" (U.S. Department of Education, 2018, para. 9).

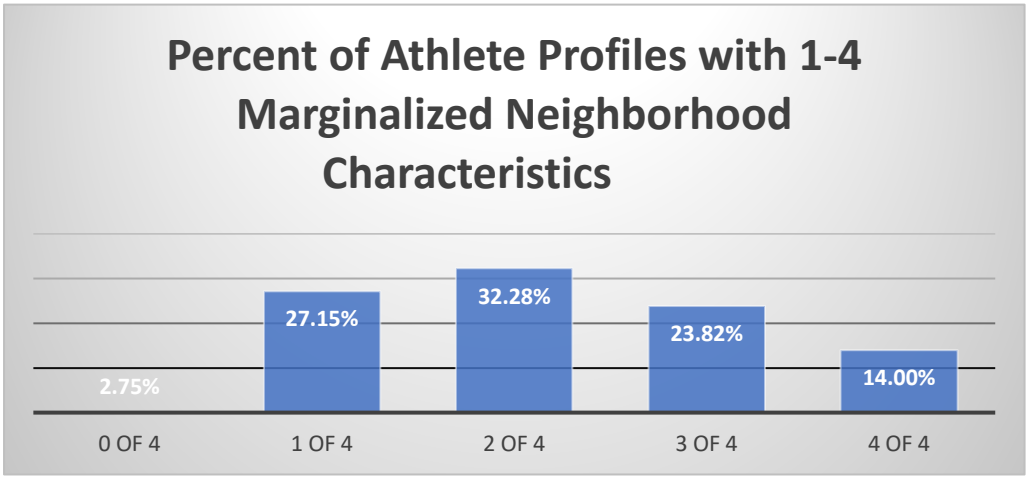


Figure 7. 2020 Black NFL players meeting neighborhood marginality criteria

These findings broadly answer the supporting research question of the prevalence and accuracy of the humble beginnings narrative compared to the lived experience by establishing that the majority of the 2020 Black players, 97.25%, did experience or had exposure to some level of marginality, meeting one, two, three or all four of the criteria. This represents significant support to the dominant rags to riches narrative. Even if the athletes who experienced only one of the four measures of marginalization were subtracted, the humble beginnings experience is still dominant with 70.1% of the athletes who experienced between two and four of the characteristics.

Quantitative Data and Analysis Limitations

Limitations to the quantitative data analysis were the result of relying on the researcher's visual observation and judgement of an athlete's race rather than having access to data where the athletes self-identified their race. As a result, it is possible that I mis-categorized other races as Black. The decision to code for race based on personal observation and judgement was derived

from the coding method used in a similar study on racial framing in social media posts (Johnson & Romney, 2018). I also determined than any mis-categorizations of race would be nominal considering the League's Latinos, Asians, Native Hawaiians, other Pacific Islands, and American Indians/Native Americans – which could have been coded Black in this study - represent approximately 5% of NFL players (Lapchick, 2019).

Qualitative Data and Analysis Limitations

Limitations to this approach to the data analysis were the result of lacking the opportunity to interview each of the athletes to understand what their lived experiences were as compared to the generalizations made with this data analysis. Another limitation was because of the lack of depth allowed in determining which areas of a larger city an athlete considers his hometown. For example, being from the inner city versus the suburbs of Chicago would yield quite different experiences as they relate to humble beginnings—so would growing up in a high crime area but attending a private school. This limitation was balanced by the expectation that this data and its findings may add a general baseline for the rest of the analyses and discussions, especially as this study segues into the original athlete interviews that are discussed in Chapter 5.

Chapter Takeaways

The findings in this chapter established that the majority of the NFL players who were active for the 2020 season were Black, and that 69.9% of them came from some level of marginality. It also provided confirmation to the dominant media-driven humble beginnings narrative established in the literature review (Chapter 3) and offered a snapshot into why sports journalists push forward the same storylines. These were necessary steps to establish a baseline for comparison to the original interviews I conducted with current and former Black NFL players which are highlighted in Chapter 5.

CHAPTER 5

The Lived Experiences of Black NFL Players

Sports plays a unique role in American culture by combining physical play with entertainment and by taking sports fans on emotional journeys as individual athletes and teams compete for bragging rights and championships. Various scholars have considered sports in relation to local, regional and national identities (Bale, 2002; Connolly & Dolan, 2018; Hartmann, 2000; Hylton, 2018). Hartmann (2000) also pointed to the privilege and prominence of athletics "especially with respect to race, which dictates that its organizational structure, dynamics, and struggles carry with them broad cultural import and significance" (p. 230). References to race can be found in behavioral sciences, sociology of sport, and sport management literature as well as popular media and pop-culture references that discuss the commodification of star athletes and commercial sports (Andrews & Silk, 2010; Blackwell, 2020; Brown et al., 2013; Carrington, 2010; Cole, 1996; Eagleman, 2011; Edwards, 2000; Nike, 2019). These same publications regularly depict African American athletes as products of marginalized and often stigmatized communities (Andrews & Silk, 2010; Brown et al., 2013; Deeb & Love, 2018; Nike, 2019). Nonetheless, gaps exist regarding an approach to ground the connection between Black athletes and marginalized neighborhoods in geographic scholarship. Filling this gap is a necessary endeavor because of the media's propensity to push forward the humble beginnings narrative when the story subjects are African American NFL players, and because this narrow way of depicting Black athletes leaves out important alternate storylines that could help deconstruct stigmas (Eaves, 2017; Hawthorne, 2019). A Black Geographies framework is uniquely positioned to address the interconnectedness of geography, race, and socio-political power dynamics (McKittrick, 2011).

The media-driven dominant humble beginnings narrative, as established in Chapter 4, is that Black physical aggressive specimens who come from marginalized neighborhoods, challenging family dynamics and who rely on football to escape their environments. These descriptors lead to stereotypes in which all Black athletes share the same background. It has also been established in Chapter 4 that 29.9% (Figure 6) of Black NFL players from the 2020 season came from some level of privilege, and for those with more humble backgrounds, the story is more complex than often reported. Thus, there is also a gap in understanding the lived experiences of athletes in marginalized neighborhoods. This research helps fill that gap by highlighting variations of the Black athlete experience in general, and brings to light the variations among athletes who emerged from marginalized communities.

Interviewee Profiles and Emergent Themes

Tenets of Black Geographies (Eaves, 2017; Hawthorne, 2019; McKittrick, 2016; Ramírez, 2015) were implemented to analyze original interviews with 30 current and former Black NFL players. By evaluating the athlete's part in the relational place-making process, the role of Black agency, and the social and political sparring between athletes and other members of their marginalized communities, these interviews, patterns, and the themes that emerged provided critical context for the following research question: "What images, stereotypes and resulting impacts on marginalized communities are created through the humble beginnings narrative of Black athletes?" In addition to establishing that the lived experiences of some of the athletes exactly mirrored the dominant narrative, this chapter also provides evidence of different articulations of the humble beginnings experience.

The interviews with the athletes who were the participants ranged from 18 minutes to 75 minutes, with the average interview lasting between 30 and 40 minutes. This allowed for a free flow

of information while also respecting the participant's schedule (Jacob & Furgerson, 2012; Mandel, 1974). The majority of the interviews (93%) were with former NFL athletes. Their experience in the League ranged from 1 to 15 years. According to the approved IRB proposal, the interviews were completed in a confidential manner, and pseudonyms were assigned to the participants in lieu of the athletes' real names. The pseudonyms were chosen from a list of boys' names that were popular in the 1920s, the year the NFL as founded. Although most of the athletes were accustomed to having their private lives made public through media coverage, I maintained their privacy in an effort to help them feel safe and free to share their stories.

The remainder of this chapter reveals four primary themes that emerged from the data: (a) there are multiple versions of the humble beginnings experience, (b) the athletes and community members of marginalized neighborhoods internalize and perpetuate the characteristics and stigma created by the dominant humble beginnings narrative, (c) the dominant media-driven humble beginnings narrative solidifies the stigma of being from the hood, and (d) the dominant media-driven narrative creates a racialized spatial identity or Black sense of place and space that accompanies athletes even after they move to neighborhoods of privilege.

Theme 1. The humble beginnings narrative expanded. The media tend to default to a singular way of describing African American athletes—as products of environments in which numerous people live in poverty, exposure to violent crime and easy access to drugs, most households are headed by single-parents, and the athletes became aggressive in order to cope and survive their and communities, while also using football as an avenue to the escape them. In some of the media-driven stories researched for the dissertation, these dangerous depictions were simply data points to explain where the athletes were from. But for most stories, journalists made specific reference to either the athlete who overcame a brush with death or the criminal

justice system, the stress of growing up with an absentee father, or witnessing a close family member or friend who succumbed to drugs or violence (Asylum Entertainment, 2002; NFL Films, 2016b; NFL Productions, 2017b, 2017e, 2017f). While evidence of this narrative was found during in the interviews, very different stories were also shared that contradicted the dominant narrative. These findings answered the supporting research question about the prevalence and accuracy of the dominant narrative versus the lived experience. The responses emerged organically as a result of using an open-ended approach to ask about their backgrounds (Hay, 2010).

Since I had already used the term *humble beginnings* to describe my criteria for interview participation, I was careful to start each interview with a broad version of what it means to be humble. This prevented me from inserting the dominant media-driven narrative in lieu of their own description (Hay, 2010; Jacob & Furgerson, 2012; Mandel, 1974). I framed the question in one of two ways based on the flow of the conversation:

1. When you think of the term humble beginnings, what comes to mind for you?

   OR

2. Tell me about humble beginnings. What does it mean for you when you hear that term?

This was significant because I did not want to perpetuate the stereotypical reporting styles that journalists use. If the athletes did not directly share their personal backgrounds and experiences according to the definition, I followed up by asking them directly if the humble beginnings definition applied to them, "Would you say you come from humble beginnings?"

When participants were asked to define humble beginnings in their own words, they shared a variety of comments including "we grew up in the projects" (Lloyd), "not having a silver spoon in your mouth" (Alfred), and familial dynamics such as "my mom was 15, my dad

was 18 when I was born" (Anthony). Their own descriptions of their humble beginnings along with follow-up questions regarding the details of their childhood neighborhoods allowed for a clearer picture of their social settings and experiences. Each interviewee shared several descriptors that fell into twelve general categories: (a) financial hardships; (b) moved as a child (reasons range from eviction to seeking a safer neighborhood or school system); (c) dilapidated housing and poor living conditions (e.g., property damage, insects, shut-off utilities, food insecurity); (d) negative neighborhood influences (e.g., drugs, crime, gangs, violence); (e) personal sacrifice (when the athlete had to work to help family or chip in at home to help siblings); (f) parent(s) stressing education; (g) low school performance and lack of educational resources; (h)school athletic facilities in poor condition; (i) a place from which to escape; (j) growing up with a single mom; (k) growing up with both parents; and (l) sense of community. Descriptors including financial hardships, dilapidated housing conditions, and poor athletic facilities were negative, as predicted (Table 5). Yet descriptors with regard to parents stressing education, growing up with both parents, and a sense of community represented positive experiences.

Table 5

How Respondents Described Humble Beginnings

Humble Beginnings Descriptors	# of Respondents	Percentage
Financial hardships	25	83%
Moved as a child	14	47%
Dilapidated housing and poor living conditions	11	37%
Negative neighborhood influences	24	80%
Personal sacrifice	8	27%
Parent(s) stressing education	15	50%
Low school performance and lack of educational resources	8	27%
School athletic facilities in poor condition	7	12%
A place from which to escape	11	37%

Growing up with a single mom	12	40%
Growing up with both parents	16	53%
Sense of community	10	33%

Lived experiences and the dominant narrative align. The prevalence and accuracy of the media-driven humble beginnings narrative were addressed during the investigation to offer examples of lived experiences that both align and contradict the dominant narrative. I began with examples of the lived experiences of the participants and attempted to match their descriptions with what was most often shown in the media. For example, 83% of the participants stated they had financial hardships growing up, and 80% were vocal about drugs, gangs, violence, and other negative factors being a part of their neighborhood. One of them was Leland, who played in the NFL for 16 seasons, and recalled his family being devastated by drugs. "My mom, she had been dealing with drug addiction since the time I was maybe 14 years old that I knew of . . . and I had two younger sisters who . . . they needed me to be there." He also shared that his family relied on public assistance, that his brother became a drug dealer, and that he had to switch colleges so he could return home to help support his family financially and emotionally. In Leland's case, the dominant narrative was an accurate depiction of his lived experience. That was also the case with Dennis, a five-year NFL veteran, who explained the instability that financial struggles created for him and his family:

> Probably from first through eighth grade seemed like we changed schools every—you get evicted, you move from project to project to project. So you just, the only thing that kind of stayed consistent was you just always played sports somewhere. . . . It's just the, I guess, the hood life I guess, is the best way to explain it.

Embedded in their descriptions of dilapidated housing and poor living conditions, Dennis and Leland spoke about skipping meals as children, a reality for 23% of the participants. They also discussed missing the influence of a father in the home.

The mainstream media keeps the single parent storyline in center focus, especially when the single parent is the player's mother. According to the Kids Count Data Center (2021), 64% of Black or African American children lived in single-parent households in 2019. Comparatively, 40% of the athletes I interviewed, including Marshall who played in the League for 14 years and James who played for 1 year. They described their mothers as the ones who shouldered the responsibility of caring for their families by themselves. Marshall described his mother as "very strict, very demanding, [a] single parent mother, so she had to be mom and dad a lot of times. And then at times she was working two jobs just to get my sister and I the necessities." James said the following about his mother:

> She did the best she could, and the best she could was more than what I ever needed. You know, all she ever asked of me was, you know, get good grades and make sure the trash was out on Fridays, and that was it. Anything else she really took care of.

Both these sentiments frame single mothers as saviors; both Marshall and James described their mothers' sacrifices as the reasons they worked hard to succeed—all consistent with the dominant media-driven humble beginnings narrative. When questioned about his father's role, Marshall's account also reflected the stereotypical narrative of an absentee father:

> I hardly ever saw him. He came by on Thursdays when he got paid and dropped off 35 bucks as child support money for my sister and I, and we're growing teenagers. What can you do with 35 bucks a week? And so it was just one of those situations where I just thought my dad could have done more for us when we were young. . . . I don't know if he understood or was ever taught what it's supposed to look like to be a dad.

Although his father was not around much when he was young and contributed very little to the family emotionally and financially, Marshall said he forgave his father and that as an adult, they developed a great relationship. While this type of context is sometimes shared in traditional media as it was in "A Football Life: Michael Vick" (NFL Enterprises, 2016), I wonder if the information on a missing father is more often left out. I argue that when it is included (the story

of an NFL veteran who grew up without his father but developed a great relationship with him as an adult), another dimension is added to the story that allows people to step outside the stereotypes and begin to see Black athletes as human by assigning them and their journeys new meaning and spatial identity (Tuan, 1977). It also begins to show the variance of the humble beginnings narrative.

When lived experiences and the dominant narrative differ. Table 5 includes the number of athletes who grew up with both parents in the home and the number of parents who stressed education over athletics. While I approached these interviews with an open mind, I acknowledge that the discourse analysis firmly cemented the idea that Black athletes had absentee fathers, and the images within the stories were so hyper-focused on their bodies and their need to excel on the field that a different Black sense of place and space was not easily imagined. In order to understand a Black sense of place and space as a spatial identity, or what an individual imagines it is like to be a Black athlete from a marginalized and/or stigmatized neighborhood or community (Eaves, 2017; Hawthorne, 2019; McKittrick, 2011), I assert there is enough variation in the lived experiences of the athletes that, if shared, may change the narrative by lessoning the link to stigma and disorder (August, 2014; Sampson & Raudenbush, 2004).

Some of the athletes who described overcoming tragedy as part of their experience growing up humble shared storylines consistent with the dominant media-driven narrative. Dennis, a retired NFL player who spent five years in the League, explained being surrounded by different familial situations.

> So it was always I had to go through a lot of stuff. . . . When I was a sophomore, my mom started to smoke. . . . She was smoking crack. Then my younger brother was in jail, older brother was in jail, older sister was in jail. So I'm an only child by life circumstances. And then I come home, my mom says she smoking and a week later she don't, we don't have anywhere to stay. And for me, my girlfriend was a senior and her mom let me stay with them. . . . So it's always been, you know, having to deal with a lot

> of situations, not only just sports, but everything else around sports, because the sports thing was the easiest thing to do.

Dennis described the details of his mom being addicted to crack cocaine and his siblings being in jail as if he was reading football statistics. His manner was very similar to the approach journalists take when listing tragedies as mere data points. While some may view this as Dennis not caring, it can also be interpreted that Dennis internalized advanced marginality (Wacquant, 1994, 2016) by taking on the role of the responsible one in his family and using football as his escape as evidenced when he said, "The sports, that was the easiest thing to do." Highlighting that he removed himself from his circumstances to stay with his girlfriend and her mother is noteworthy. All of these details provide context that diverts Dennis's story from the single humble beginnings narrative and pave the way for new spatial imaginaries (Andrews & Silk, 2010; Carrington, 2010; Hawthorne, 2019; McKittrick, 2014).

To further illustrate the benefit of multiple articulations of the humble beginnings experience, four of the interviewees (13%) talked about losing a parent or sibling to neighborhood violence. One of these participants was Clinton, a retired player who spent 15 years in the League. On the surface, he seemed to be discussing another stereotypical story about the humble beginnings narrative as he described his family. "My sister was shot and killed in crossfire, or she was caught in crossfire between rival gangs. She was shot and killed. And at that point, you know, she was 17." However, Clinton spent around 5 and 1/2 minutes telling me about his older sister and reflecting on the philanthropic efforts he created to continue her legacy. This was a significant break from a traditional media story in which industry time constraints would cut the conversation short. I am not advocating that mediated messages of Black athletes go on for several minutes. But by hearing the additional context and especially the amount of energy he was putting into efforts to keep her memory alive, Clinton's story of her

being killed in rival gang cross-fire left a different impression. His depiction shaped the story of his sister being in the wrong place at the wrong time, versus a quick reference that might lead the viewer to assume she was involved in gangs.

Including more variations of the humble beginnings narrative is also important because Black athletes want them. Each of the 30 respondents, in their own way, called for a change in how stories of Black professional athletes are told. Richard, who played in the NFL for seven seasons, summarized it best:

> I'm tired of the same old stories being told about the kid that grew up in the hood that made good, like some rags to riches type story. There's more to it, you know? There's a lot more pain, there's a lot more anguish, there's a lot more hurt. There's a lot more triumph and a lot more beauty, a lot more of everything to the story. Let's really tell the story. Let's talk about it. Let's, if we're ever going to get beyond this, the racism and the stigmas and the, all of these other things in society, let's really tell the story. Let's connect humanity and human history to it. Like, let's really tell the story of who we are, where we are, why we come from, why are we this way, you know? And also how do we overcome it?

As I discovered during the literature review, how stories are framed, especially if they are routinely framed negatively, essentially trains viewers to interpret future stories negatively (August, 2014; Berry & Smith, 2000; Campbell et al., 2011; Deeb & Love, 2018; Ettema & Peer, 1996; Gangland, 2009; Lapchick, 2019; Muschert, 2009; Wertz, 2019a, 2019b; Yanich, 1998). For this reason, I suggest that it is necessary for popular media to share storylines of Black athletes who come from middle class and privileged backgrounds, as well as variations of the humble beginnings narrative. I also advocate that when journalists report on athletes who have experienced personal tragedy, it is critical that the journalists do more than share data points. If the narrative is to be repaired (as the title of this dissertation suggests), new images must be created (Black Feminisms, n.d.; O'Brien, 2015; Ramírez, 2015). And the media's ability to

frame-change is key to reducing neighborhood stigma, especially when it involves a targeted pursuit to create new messages (August, 2014; Cottle, 2008; Muschert, 2009).

Theme 2. Internalizing stereotypes. While media-driven stereotypes shape the meaning that outsiders assign to marginalized and stigmatized places and spaces, scholars also highlight the capacity of insiders to internalize marginality and neighborhood stigma (Ettema & Peer, 1996; O'Brien, 2015; O'Brien & Wilson, 2011; Sampson & Raudenbush, 2004). As part of evaluating the research questions regarding the impacts that result from media's usage of the humble beginnings narrative, I noticed that this theme emerged from my interviews with athletes and was manifested in two general ways: (a) athletes learning how to cope with their lack of basic necessities just to survive and (b) family, friends, and community members who worked to ensure the athletes did not waste their ticket out of the hood.

Internalization as a way of coping. Interviews with the athletes provided significant evidence that they found ways to cope with their circumstances. For example, 11 of the 30 athletes (37%) described living in dilapidated housing and experiencing poor living conditions that included food insecurity and shut-off utilities. Lloyd, a retired NFL athlete who played in the League for 6 years, remembered going nearly 1 year without hot water. He described how he and his siblings trying to bathe:

> I remember we would jump in the shower, get wet, and then we would kind of lather up, and then we would go "1-2-3" [laughs, gestures, and mumbles like he's cold as he rinses off]. Right? [laughs] And so we would jump out of the shower, and we would laugh so hard. But it was real [said somberly]. You know, and sometimes we would boil water because we didn't have hot water then, you know?

Along with his tone, Lloyd's facial expression changed from a smile to a serious expression as he wrapped up his story of cold showers. In this instance, he seemed to emotionally reconnect

to his struggles as a child growing up in humble beginnings. He had a similar reaction when talking about food insecurity as he remembered the following:

> None of us had food. . . . I remember ,we went to one boy's house. He had a frozen egg in the refrigerator, that was it, right? And so what we did was we would go and we would steal candy. . . . So if my sister said, "I'm hungry," I would go and steal her some candy somewhere from, you know, the little stores around the area. And so you just, you had to survive.

In this case, Lloyd not only acknowledged his reality, but he took action by committing a petty crime to compensate for the lack of food—a predicted outcome as residents internalize neighborhood stigma (O'Brien & Wilson, 2011; Sampson & Raudenbush, 2004).

Another participant, Johnny, revealed a different version of accepting the stigma of his childhood neighborhood and circumstances. The retired player who spent 5 years in the NFL also recalled navigating food insecurity.

> Even though I was good at sports and had all these accolades and you hear as a kid, "Ah, you're gonna to go to the NFL, you're gonna do this," . . . for the most part . . . because we didn't have much, like that stuff never crossed my mind. It was more like, "Okay, cool. I had a good football game. Like, hopefully we can have some food on the weekend." And so to me, humble beginnings is that.

During our interview, Johnny did not readily describe his beginnings as humble until he shared childhood concerns around food insecurity. He seemed to accept, in that moment, a sense that he had lacked the necessities of life as a child and realized he had been marginalized because meals were not guaranteed. It can be interpreted that he internalized his circumstances so much that he could not even see past them to celebrate his success on the football field or imagine a better quality of life despite his athletic potential (Flouri & Sarmadi, 2016; Sampson & Raudenbush, 2004).

The impact of not having some of the basic necessities prompted all 30 of the athletes I interviewed to either desire or envision a better socio-ecological system for their future (Xiang, 2019). New imaginaries surfaced as a driving force for Lyle, who was in his third year in the

League, to maximize his NFL career by using some of his earnings to invest in what he believes are wealth-building initiatives so he can spare his future child/children from having to experience what he endured as a child:

> The main thing for me is just creating wealth so that when you talk about humble beginnings, that can be something I teach them. You know, I don't want them to have to deal with it. I don't want them to come home and the power's off. I don't want them to come home and the water's not working and the water's cold. I hated those moments.

Since the athletes could recall these difficult years so vividly years later, it can be argued that interpretations of these experiences are indicative of internalizing marginality (O'Brien, 2015; O'Brien & Wilson, 2011; Sampson & Raudenbush, 2004). It also speaks to their desire to change the narrative, and as Lyle described it, create a different imagery (and life) for his children.

Dennis shared a litany of negative circumstances that made up his childhood neighborhood experience and had dedicated his second career to showing kids from his hometown a different example. He had experienced his own struggle as a child and trying to see past his mother being addicted to drugs, he encountered another tragedy. "My brother died. He got killed when he was like 25. And in my head growing up, I just had the understanding of, "Man, once you get to 25, you just may not make it." To show that it was possible to make it past age 25, Dennis became a middle school science teacher following his professional football career:

> I just break stereotypes, really, because when the kids see me tatted, nose ring, . . . [they say] "You don't look like a teacher." Well, what is the teacher supposed to look like? Right. . . . I think just them seeing that should help break stereotypes out in the real world.

Along with actively creating new imaginaries and helping shape the way he and his students contribute to the making of place, Dennis shared he wants people to rid themselves of the assumption that children from stigmatized communities are bad kids, despite what literature and

what the media-driven humble beginnings narrative suggest (Akers, 1998; Sampson & Raudenbush, 2004; Simons & Burt, 2011). This is significant because it answers the following supporting research question: "What do this narrative and the lived experienced reveal about what resources are needed in marginalized communities?" In this case, it confirms a need to keep people from giving in to the perceived worst images and stereotypes, since residents of the hood may become part of the solution.

Escaping the neighborhood stereotypes. Some of the athletes assumed that if they escaped their neighborhood, they would no longer be challenged with the characteristics and stigma created by the dominant humble beginnings narrative. The second way in which the stigma internalization theme emerged was through the collective acceptance among the athletes and community members that their neighborhoods were places from which they needed to escape, and with community members protecting the athletes until they got out. These findings also speak to the research question about resulting impacts the humble beginnings narrative has on marginalized neighborhoods. These initial excerpts establish the notion that the quality of life within marginalized communities would be so dire that the only choices were to survive, succumb, or escape. John, who participated in one NFL preseason, explained the situation of using athletics as a route out this way:

> That's kind of the narrative that I saw. That was the example that I saw. And so as a result, that's kind of where I put all my effort and energy because I knew if I wanted to go to school—like I said, I had a great upbringing, but if I wanted to go to school, I was going to have to figure that part out on my own. . . .You know, I saw people that honestly excelled academically but didn't necessarily get those same opportunities. So it was just like . . . football is my ticket.

John represented 37% of the athletes who said they felt the need to make it out of the neighborhood and believed specifically that football was the way to do it.

Richard, who retired from the League in 2012, admitted he was drawn to some of the negative influences growing up, *"*because the only people that had anything in my neighborhood were the drug dealers." He explained the rationale for not choosing that path in this manner:

> I saw the faults in it. I didn't know how to fix it or get out of it, but I saw the faults in it and I realized at some point that those same dudes that was out there hustling on the block, selling dope and whatnot, they were in and out of jail. They're getting shot at.

While Richard decided for himself to reject the negative aspects of his environment, others had the decision made for them. James, who spent one year in the NFL, was born in the Southern Region of the United States "which is the country," as he described it. When he was two or three years old, he moved to the west side of a city of over 800,000 in that state. He recalled the environmental factor that prompted his mother to move the family a third time.

> My mom always told me about an incident where just the environment where I had picked up a gun thinking it was a toy gun, and I was like kind of pointing it around and then from there and she was like, 'We're going to Matthews." You know what I'm saying? [laughs]

For James and his mother, it became clear after this incident that they needed to move to another neighborhood so that they would not internalize the perceived dangers of his neighborhood; they chose to live in a nearby suburb where they felt was less dangerous.

As another example of a resulting impact that the humble beginnings narrative has on marginalized communities (the overarching research question), I also found several instances in which family members, friends, and associates kept budding athletes out of trouble, especially as they became teenagers and their football trajectory became clearer. Whether it was "a lot of gang activity" (Nathan), "drugs" (Morris), or "people were getting killed . . .[and] going to jail" (Marshall), family, friends and neighbors manipulated the power dynamics to keep the athletes safe. Two quotes particularly illustrate this point made by many players. Billy spent three

seasons on and off in NFL practice squads and training camps. He reflected on other youth in his childhood neighborhood.

> There are so many other people that I knew growing up, or I played with growing up, that could have made it to the NFL, you know, just like myself. But they made bad decisions, or they made wrong choices. And it sucks because you see it every day. But I think . . . like the decisions I made were based off of people not even allowing me to do certain things

Matthew, who played in the League for 5 years, felt the community protected his future.

> I feel like I had a pass because people knew I was good at football. So anytime I would come around, it was like . . . "No, don't mess with him, like, he's good." Even when I go back to this day, like, it's like a respect thing, like, "You the one that made it out. So we're going to make sure that you're taken care of."

Billy's and Matthew's experiences are examples of giving in to socio-political power dynamics that kept them from internalizing the stigma of their neighborhood. From a Black Geographies perspective, the athletes and the community members were engaging in relational-placing making, particularly as it is related to the making of a Black sense of place and space (Allen et al., 2019; McKittrick, 2006, 2011; Pierce et al., 2011).

As an co-author in the making of his place and space, Jimmy, a retired athlete who played in the League for 12 years, tried to counter the efforts of community members and tried to avoid internalizing the stigma. The following except demonstrates his efforts to contest the notion that he should be excluded from negative neighborhood influences. Nonetheless, the neighborhood dynamics and power hierarchy within his Black community convinced him to stay out of trouble.

> When I was going in an entirely different direction, they would say something to point me back to my long view. You know, even individuals that were knee deep in their troubles, right? Knee deep in their troubles, they saw what I had and what I looked like I was striving for. . . . They saw it and they would say "Hey." [laughs] "You don't need to be here, you don't need to be here, and this is why you don't need to be here, right? Because you have that."

Jimmy reflected on this socio-spatial relationship at play and his desire to reciprocate the advice in their shared place-frame. When someone told him to leave a potentially violent and/or criminal event because he had a potential ticket out of the neighborhood with football, they chided him. "You have that. You don't need to be here." But Jimmy then told me, "But I wish I could go back and I can say that 'You don't need to be there. You know? Because this is what you have in front of you.'"

These excerpts show the athletes were as much consumers of their political economies as they were authors of their social geographies. This made it relatively easy to internalize neighborhood disorder (O'Brien, 2015; O'Brien & Wilson, 2011). Whether they were dabbling in selling drugs, completely shying away from negative influences because they feared their mother more, or latching on to football as a way out of their neighborhood, the athletes I interviewed seemed to be in a constant state of understanding, navigating and re-negotiating their world, their role within it, and resisting the urges to internalize their circumstances.

Theme 3. The dominant media-driven humble beginnings narrative solidifies the stigma. Because Black Geographies are concerned with the making of place as members of a community interact with their environment, the process is iterative; subjects negotiate and renegotiate the terms as they go (Ramírez, 2015). When the negative attributes of that geography are amplified by outlets such as the media that try to show the most extreme success stories, stereotypes proliferate and dictate the perceptions of outsiders. Individuals respond to and acknowledge those stereotypes, especially when there are no new images introduced to replace what people have seen repeatedly, and the unambiguous neighborhood information that helped shape their perceptions proliferates (Sampson & Raudenbush, 2004).

Although athletes and other members of marginalized communities may internalize and accept being poor, hungry, subject to violence and danger at any moment, or expect a short life trajectory and few opportunities to escape as normal ideas, the humble beginnings narrative can also shape how outsiders view marginalized neighborhoods. This theme provides further context to the images, stereotypes, and resulting impacts created by the humble beginnings narrative and experience. It emerged as athletes articulated their encounters with strangers who either tried to impose stereotypes or highlight how the athletes were the exception. Thaddeus's experience revealed the former. He explained that during his four years in the NFL, he used to wear team apparel while traveling, which prompted strangers to ask him questions:

> They would notice . . . Jets gear or Chiefs or whatever team I was with and then come and ask me questions . . . like oh, "Was it a struggle growing up or how did you overcome?" Or "Did you buy your mom a house?" or this, that ,and the third. I'm like, "How did you, why did you come to that conclusion?" Like, my mom didn't already have the house or things like that.

Having thoughts about someone struggling or overcoming adversity but never articulating their thoughts keeps those perceptions as mere thoughts and opinions. But it is suggested when these considerations are said aloud, the stigma are reinforced, as happens when media outlets routinely share their stereotypical singular narrative of Black athletes.

In the case of Anthony, strangers felt so strongly that he and his family were the exception to the humble beginnings narrative they imposed their thoughts on him, his wife and their children when they were at dinner:

> Sometimes it's really shocking to people when they see us as a family . . . and they see our five kids sitting at the table. . . . And they feel the need to come over and say something about our kids behaving and us being a nice family, you know. And it just always makes me wonder . . . "What else did you expect?" [laughs]

This speaks to the engrained stigma of Black athletes being rough, aggressive, and dangerous; that strangers feel compelled to highlight difference—a tactic of Black Geographies that is

recognized as a critical step in the place-making process. Such steps are significant because the strangers also expose the athlete's children to the idea that they are different, or unique, or an exception; stigma they may not have been exposed to otherwise are introduced. When community outsiders highlight differences or disorders during their interactions with Black athletes, and they assume the athletes are from humble beginnings, the stereotypes are solidified. This is a result of the intersection of place, space, and power dynamics that allow the outsider to relegate the athlete to stereotypes, and the role of Black agency that prevents the athlete from contesting the stereotypes is negated (Eaves, 2017; Hawthorne, 2019; McKittrick, 2011; Sampson & Raudenbush, 2004). This was exemplified in the reactions of Anthony, Thaddeus, and others who held back from challenging the stigma, presumably for fear they would be stereotyped even more (Powell, 2008). For example, in another encounter Anthony had, he seemed to feel torn between appreciating the privilege a 10-year NFL career afforded him and having to prove that he was not the stereotypical Black athlete from humble beginnings.

> So you're proud of it—10 years in the NFL is something to be proud of. But I don't want all the things that come along with it sometimes, you know? Not faithful to your wife and family, or lazy or whatever. I don't want to be that guy.

Instead of being "that guy," Anthony shared that Black athletes from humble beginnings are complex, and that he hopes this research can help others formulate new imageries of Black athletes, including that they have dreams and desires to be more than a height and weight measurement of "6-5, 270" that defines their physical abilities. This is significant because it articulates not only a lasting impact that the humble beginnings narrative has in reproducing and solidifying stigmas, but also highlights the emotional toll it takes on athletes having to carry the persona with them, which they must repeatedly contest if they want to destroy the stigma by disproving the public's misperceptions.

Morris provided a variation on this theme with his lived experience playing in the NFL for 10 years. He shared that athletes initially "get a pass" from being stereotyped by other athletes and fans, especially when they get to the NFL, which is the highest level of their sport. Yet the moment they do something that is considered immoral or illegal, they get removed from the protective "bubble."

> So the stereotypes—they're not bringing them up right now because all these good things come before that, right? But if you do something, then it goes to that "Oh yeah, this guy. It makes sense, you know." Now you got to deal with it, which is now what happens with the conflict in our head, right? We're like, "Hold up. I thought we was a god to you." "Oh, no, no. You just another Negro." Now all these things become who you are.

Morris said witnessing teammates fall from grace did not only force them to face the stigma of being a Black athlete from the hood, it also highlighted the unrealistic expectations of trying to be perfect.

> And I think that's a tough thing, too, because we're not gods and we do mess up. And so what happens is that we start to try to live like gods. And that puts even more pressure on us. And so when you have that pressure, now all of a sudden you have to release it somewhere.

The pressure Morris spoke of also plays a significant role in reinforcing neighborhood stigma because it keeps the images of the humble beginnings narrative constantly on the minds of athletes who are trying not to "mess up." It has been established that the repetition of the dominant narrative created the stereotypes and keeps reinforcing them (Brown et al., 2013; Hartmann, 2000). And when the storylines are highlighted by strangers as they interact with athletes and their families, and when the athletes themselves set expectations of perfection, it gets even harder to replace the sentiments with new imageries.

Theme 4. Creating a mobile Black sense of place and space. The dominant media-driven narrative creates a racialized spatial identity or Black sense of place and space that accompanies athletes even after they move to neighborhoods of privilege. As has been

established in this research, Black athletes have shouldered race-based stereotypes including being more aggressive and sexually deviant than their White counterparts (Brown et al., 2013; Powell, 2008). The media also typically links them to stigmatized neighborhoods with easy access to factors including crime, violence and drugs. When Black athletes become legally involved or face moral dilemmas, their connections to societal ills from their hometowns become stronger, as if violence and crime were an intrinsic part of their DNA. These framings create a Black sense of place and space; or an imagined sense of what it means to be around and interact with a Black athlete who grew up in humble beginnings (McKittrick, 2006, 2011). A Black sense of place and space is more than a stereotype. The theory behind Black Geographies is centered on a Black sense of place and space as a way of understanding how Black people "undertake space-making practices within a specific set of circumstances" (Eaves, 2017, p. 81). However Black geographical scholarship is most often used to understand the making of place in geographies inhabited by predominately by Black subjects (Hawthorne, 2019; McKittrick, 2011; Ramírez, 2015); the scholarship offers an opportunity to expand the framework to explain Black agency when Black subjects move away from their marginalized communities. This research builds on Black geographical scholarship's Black sense of place and space, establishing it as transient—although the athlete moves away from his home neighborhood and community, the Black sense of place and space travel with the athlete wherever he goes. He cannot get away from it no matter where he lives as a professional athlete. This is a theme that surfaced throughout my interviews, as athletes explained their lived experiences.

There are several general assumptions made about athletes, and during the interviews, the participants described how they confronted stereotypes in new locations. For Johnny, it meant

defending his physique while living in two different cities during his 5-year NFL career, especially as strangers tried to make sense of who he was and what images he represented.

> It's one of three things. You're a professional athlete, you're a musician, or you're a drug dealer [because you're a wealthy Black man]. You know what I mean? Not saying that everybody thinks that, but I mean, there is no other options. They're not gonna be like, "Oh, he looks like a successful doctor" . . . especially . . .when you have big ass traps [trapezius/back muscles] and your shoulders are big and maybe you have jewelry on. . . . So usually that's kind of the look that you get from just being who you are in those cities.

As Johnny continued sharing his lived experience during our interview, he became visibly frustrated about these assumptions, particularly feeling the need to defend his affinity for jewelry and a nice car—something I offer he would not have to defend in his childhood neighborhood. Instead, because Black athletes are often depicted wearing what is perceived to be expensive jewelry and owning a number of luxury cars, it can be interpreted that stereotypical framing contributed to outsiders assuming he fit the dominant narrative. In so doing they were evaluating his ability of access to this new environment (Black Feminisms, n.d.; Hawthorne, 2019; McKittrick, 2011).

Dean shared a similar experience during one of his first nights in a new suburban area outside of Detroit, Michigan, when he stopped by a convenience store.

> It was a CVS. . . . When I first moved over there [to a new city] . . . it bothered me because I mean, it was just the first thing she [the store clerk] said to me, "You must be an athlete." "Why you say that?" The part [about] you must be an athlete—that didn't bother me. It's when she said "I know what y'all look like" that bothered me. . . . That triggered something.

It triggered anger and surprise that in this brand-new city, he would be perceived as representing the worst characteristics from his childhood community and associated with a perceived poor, dangerous Black neighborhood from which football was their only method of escape. In this case, a Black sense of place and space traveled with him from his hometown to one of Michigan's suburbs. Similarly, the assumption that Black athletes are forever tethered to the

perceived drugs, gangs, violence, and poverty of their childhood neighborhoods followed Max to his post-football career as a financial analyst, a career he selected after playing 4 years in the League.

> I had to put my foot down at a place one time. They talking about drugs, and then they look at me and was like, "Hey, you know, this would be a really great opportunity if somebody would bring drugs from over this side of town over here." And I'm like, "Well, y'all better figure out that opportunity because I ain't gonta do it for you, plain and simple."

In each of these interview snapshots, Max and Dean had to navigate their access to environments based on a Black sense of place and space that was tethered to them even outside of their marginalized neighborhoods and stigmatized communities.

Along with implications of potential geographic exclusion, a transferable Black sense of place and space presents opportunities for outsiders to highlight assumed knowledge, like the notion that Black athletes lack intellect (Derickson, 2017; Eaves, 2017; Pierce et al., 2011). Nathan, who played in the League for 8 years, shared a scenario in which it was assumed he lacked financial literacy. He described how the father of one of his high school friends worked hard to track him down once he moved to a bigger city to join an NFL franchise.

> He's like borderline badgering me like, "Hey, can we meet up? Can we meet up?" And turns out he's a life insurance salesman or something . . . I guess I was the Black athlete that was going to spend it on X, Y, Z, because in our conversations he was like, 'Yeah, you know, you need to be saving this much. If you want to get a car, that's fine. Or if you want to get . . . an Escalade" and like all these stereotypical things . . . [and] him just assuming a whole bunch of stuff based on where I was from.

Nathan was even more frustrated when outsiders made such bold assumptions, and when those assumptions led them to ask offensive questions. He also shared that he struggles with stereotypes because they are based on something, "But at the same time, you have to leave some space for somebody not to fit it." Additionally, it is necessary to create less stereotypical imaginaries, again, if the humble beginnings narrative is to be repaired.

Without expanding the narrative, the Black sense of place and space will continue to travel with athletes and, as in the case of Stanley, create friction even within the League. Stanley started his career with the Atlanta Falcons, got traded to another team after a few years, then returned to Atlanta. He explained the challenges he faced when his personality seemed to fit the Black sense of place and space established by the dominant humble beginnings narrative.

> When you're loquacious, and you speak up, and you're assertive, sometimes they take it the wrong way and they're like, "we got to get this N--- out of here." . . . And that's what I felt when I came back to Atlanta. Like the coaches here, they were kind of like . . . "He's a little too progressive." . . . They want us to be, you know, fast and run fast and that's it.

This is a perfect example of what McKittrick (2016) described as an overemphasis on the Black body that "detracts from the study of Black life by 'singularizing' and 'flattening it' into mere biology (p. 6). I contend that the emphasis on the Black physique is one of the resulting impacts of the humble beginnings narrative. He has a big body, so he must be an athlete, so he must have come from humble beginnings. Even his body form is central to a mobile Black sense of place and space that positions Black NFL players to negotiate "race, practices of domination and geography" throughout their career and beyond (McKittrick, 2011).

What is Needed in Marginalized Communities

To learn what the humble beginnings lived experiences revealed about what is needed in marginalized communities, I asked all of the athletes a version of: "If you could go back in time and insert one thing into your childhood community or environment, what would it be?" It took 24 responses before I heard the same primary resource named twice (Table 6).

Table 6

Community Resources Athletes Would Like to See Added

Pseudonym	Desired Resource
1. Alfred	Someone who genuinely cared about the youth, answering any question
2. Anthony	Power to remove the stereotypes that athletes are just physical bodies
3. Bennie	Someone to share they can be more than a drug dealer or athlete
4. Billy	Community advocates to keep all youth out of trouble, not just the athletes
5. Carl	Community library
6. Clinton	A perspective that his community was safe and desirable
7. Dean	He would change anything
8. Dennis	Volunteers from different professions
9. Duane	Summer educational development programs
10. Hugh	A nearby grocery store
11. Jacob	Would not add anything
12. Jackson	Community center
13. James	Outreach program to take kids on field trips outside of the community
14. Jay	Family structure
15. Jimmy	Wherewithal to make a drug dealer leave the party with him
16. John	Avenue to change how they are perceived in society
17. Johnny	Program to show other avenues to success (not sports, lawyer, or rapper)
18. Leland	Resources, an updated playground
19. Lloyd	Humble beginnings don't mean the same for everyone
20. Lyle	Financial literacy education
21. Marshall	Black-owned business to keep money in the community
22. Matthew	A dream center
23. Maurice	Resources and a different community narrative
24. Max	Resources and an understanding of why the community declined
25. Morris	People willing to listen
26. Nathan	A Saturday school program to take kids on field trips colleges, other places
27. Richard	Fruit at gas stations/convenient stores
28. Shelby	High school Black head coach
29. Stanley	A clear understanding of what it means to be an NFL athlete including the
30. Thaddeus	challenges and disappointments during and post-career

Ideas ranged from tangible to intangible assets including "financial literacy" (Lyle), a high school "Black head coach" (Stanley), and "people willing to listen" (Nathan). When considering an asset to add to his childhood neighborhood, Carl reflected on his love of reading.

> Oh, man, resources like libraries… My mom worked day and night, so getting to the library was pretty much impossible and the library was maybe 20 minutes away . . . [and] mostly everybody in my community couldn't get there. Although it seems close now thinking about it, but it was so far away back then.

Carl shared that transportation to the nearest library was the biggest hinderance for him and other children in his community. This is significant because it disrupts the body-centric narrative, and instead creates a new way to know Black male youth from marginalized communities.

Matthew and Dennis respectively shared more abstract ideas of infusing their childhood communities with people to fill voids and offer new perspectives.

> I would say like a dream center… where, you know, young Black men that don't have that father figure in their home or don't have that positive example could go there. And there is men and women . . . to let you know that it doesn't just have to be sports.

> Just more people… that come and just infuse information into the kids that's different than what they're actually seeing. Because what happens is… there'll be a drug dealer at the end of the street and he may be trying to get you to go a different way.

This research has established the significance of replacing the media-driven narrative with new imaginaries as a pivotal way to begin to disrupt the stereotypes that outsiders use to evaluate Black geographies. Similarly, Matthew's and Dennis' ideas show the significance of creating new imaginaries as a way for residents to debunk the stereotypes from within their communities and improve the quality of life. Jay also offered another perspective:

> I was pleased to do what we wanted to do. My mom was always looking out for us, always. But it was like, you know, I was always free. She's working. So I was always free so I can go out, stay out, hang out with whoever . . .So just a little bit more structure in the home because I done seen some crazy crap that I shouldn't have been seeing, you know what I mean?

The dominant narrative of Black athletes rarely highlights a desire for life skills or family structure. Yet these types of resources were top of mind for the athletes I interviewed.

Other athletes stressed the need for personal development tools and strategies within marginalized communities (Richard), the need for healthy food choices (Shelby), and a desire for money management education instead of idolizing drug dealers who boasted jewelry and the nicest cars (Jimmy). Duane reflected on how he wished someone had shown him a different mindset about education.

> If I knew then what I know now, I would read more and push reading. I was that guy that thought that I would learn everything through life experiences. . . . But understanding that the summertime is when kids really separate themselves in terms of how they develop, [I would have focused more on education]. Because in black communities we go to the park. In the White communities, they go to camp all day and then go to the park.

Duane shared how he has become an avid reader as part of his quest to learn something new every month. Stories highlighting a Black athlete's quest of non-athletic resources would give the humble beginnings conversation much needed context to help repair the narrative, as the title suggests. And while the desired additions and alterations to their childhood communities may not have shifted the humble beginnings narrative, the pluralities of ideas supports the complexity of the lived experiences.

Chapter Takeaways

In answering the research question regarding the images, stereotypes, and resulting impacts on marginalized communities created by the dominant humble beginnings narrative while comparing it to the lived experience, this chapter shared four themes. First, there are multiple articulations of the humble beginnings narrative. Even when two athletes may come from neighborhoods that meet the same measures of marginality, their individual stories will differ, and when the details of the stories are shared, the nuances offer context and texture that could organically lead to a reduction in neighborhood stigma by creating new imaginaries. Additionally, highlighting such variations among Black geographies is necessary to understand "Black political struggle and spatial creation" (Bledsoe & Wright, 2019).

The second theme addressed the athletes and community members who internalized the characteristics and stigma of marginalized neighborhoods. Each of the individuals were co-authors in the making and renegotiating of their shared community as they tried to navigate their surroundings. Examples that substantiated this theme included several categorizations of a

marginalized neighborhood with such undesirable living conditions that people needed to escape it, and that progressing to a professional career in football was a way out.

In Theme 3, the patterns found in the data showed that the dominant media-driven humble beginnings narrative solidifies the stigma of being from the hood. The interviews with the athletes revealed the propensity of outsiders to approach Black athletes and their families to measure how much they fit the profile of an athlete from humble beginnings or to share how impressed the strangers were that the athletes were atypical. This was important in understanding the need to decentralize the Black physique (Hawthorne, 2019).

The last theme demonstrated how the dominant media-driven narrative created a mobile Black sense of place and space. This was critical to understand the pressure athletes are under to prove they belong in their new environments. Theme 4 also added to Black Geographies scholarship by expanding the application of a Black sense of place and space to a mobile spatial identity that travels with the athletes as they relocate to new cities.

All of the athletes I interviewed were well aware of the stigmas associated with their humble beginnings. But they did not call them stigmas, but rather their lived experience growing up around challenged school systems, people using and selling drugs, joining gangs, and in situations where their families lacked financial resources. While I did not ask specifically, I perceived that the interviewees accepted these conditions as a part of life happening around them. But they did not accept when outsiders tried to adhere them to these societal characteristics, whether real or imaginary, especially because they themselves worked hard to steer clear from the negative elements. Nonetheless, as they traveled outside their childhood geographies to new neighborhoods, the humble beginnings narrative and their connection to it traveled with them, making their sense of place and space mobile. The assumptions,

stereotypes, and false narratives about their lives forced them to yet again negotiate the world around them. For these reasons, it is time to not only acknowledge the complexities of place and space in Black marginalized communities, but also to create new Black imaginaries that can exist outside stigmatized spaces and places (Eaves, 2017; McKittrick, 2011, 2014, 2016).

CHAPTER 6

Black Geographies and Recommendations

Discourse, quantitative content analyses, and data from original interviews with five sports journalists and 30 current and retired Black NFL players that provided for a qualitative analysis were employed as the framework for the dissertation. The results of this research were used to answer the following research question: "What images, stereotypes and resulting impacts on marginalized communities are created through the humble beginnings narrative of Black athletes? The multi-level answer discovered in my research, as described in the previous chapters, is that the dominant humble beginnings narrative depicts Black athletes as extensions of the hood who use athletics to escape, who lack the intellect for other professions, and whose success on the field is attributed to the aggression and grit needed to survive a dangerous, crime-ridden hometown. The resulting impact, as was assumed, is that these stereotypes routinely position Black athletes to prove they belong in places and spaces they occupy, and that they have more to offer than just their physical bodies. McKittrick (2016) asked "how black *bodies* rather than *black people* are informing how we understand the production of space" (p. 4). The athletes I interviewed were subtly asked the same question as they explained their frustrations and exhaustion with having to maneuver new geographies based the imagined characteristics of their hometowns. By making this connection, this research highlighted that the journey of the Black athlete from humble beginnings is uniquely geographic, and that because the stereotypes of Black athletes are tethered to marginalized place-frames, the mediated messages create a Black sense of place and space that travels with the athlete, even when he moves to new communities.

Answers to the research question draw on the process of place-making as a nuanced, iterative process that is "constantly being contested, negotiated, and renegotiated within a complex, multi-scalar set of power relations" (Allen et al., 2019, p. 1010). Building on these understandings, my research also examined if there were additional impacts that the dominant Black athlete narrative had on marginalized communities, especially as residents and outsiders engage in relational place-making. In seeking answers to this part of the research question, I examined the needs of marginalized communities as articulated by the athletes. Based on their responses, I have concluded that the dominant humble beginnings narrative locks in a cyclical process of creating and reaffirming stigma that, in turn, prevents customized resources from being added to marginalized neighborhoods. Continually seeing marginalized communities narrowly depicted as poor, dangerous, and crime-ridden areas creates an expectation that all marginalized neighborhoods have the same problems and, therefore, need the same resources to improve quality of life. In contrast, this research proved there are variations of the humble beginnings experience and variations to the needs of each community. As detailed in Chapter 5, the athletes listed 25 different resources when asked what they felt their hometowns needed to improve the quality of life. This is why atypical stories about athletes need to be told—to repair the narrative and create new imageries that chip away at the stigma that comes from being from the hood. I contend that Black Geographies is uniquely suited to guide the process of re-evaluating neighborhood marginalization and reducing stigma as a result of its interdisciplinary process, its application of Black agency, and its iterative approach to negotiating socio-political power dynamics. The remainder of this chapter summarizes the application of Black Geographies in the interpretation of the findings and themes presented in this dissertation. The paragraphs that follow also share the significance of my research, recommendations for the

media, academia, athletes and professional sports leagues, and future research opportunities that emerged from these findings.

Summary of the Dissertation

To holistically understand what stereotypes, images, and impacts the humble beginnings narrative of Black athletes creates for marginalized communities, this research began by establishing the media-driven dominant narrative. As outlined in Chapter 4, the results from an evaluation of 72 sports stories showed that Black athletes are routinely depicted as overcoming adversity or tragedy before making it to the League, including having an absentee father or growing up in a dangerous neighborhood with access to negative community influences like drugs. The results also concluded that journalists push forward narratives of athletes who use their bodies rather than their minds to achieve success; the athletes are framed as mean, tough, and aggressive—traits, according to media depictions, developed because of their connection to the hood. My interviews with journalists revealed that some of them highlight the humble beginnings narrative to share the most extreme success stories, while other reporters focus on marginalized neighborhoods when covering athletes who return to their childhood communities to give back. The journalists also shared seeing an overemphasis of the humble beginnings narrative for Black athletes, and that they often try to balance it by sharing other lived experiences of Black players.

Once this narrative was substantiated, the prevalence of the narrative compared to the lived experience was addressed. This required establishing an understanding how many of the League's Black players came from marginality. In Chapter 4, through careful investigation, I established that of the 1,171 Black NFL players who were active for the 2020 season, 70.1% of them emerged from marginalized childhood neighborhoods as defined by meeting at least two of

the four marginality markers. For this determination, I created profiles of each Black player that included childhood neighborhood and high school characteristics. Specifically, I used the following criteria as predictors of marginality: (a) growing up in a neighborhood that was at or below the poverty level, (b) growing up in a neighborhood with a high risk of violent crime, (c) attending a low-performing high school, and (d) attending a Title I high school. These criteria are often used in traditional geographical literature to describe communities in relation to marginality and stigma. I argued that if a player's profile met at least two of the four criteria, he came from a marginalized geography. These findings also meant that 29.9% of the players did not come from humble beginnings. These calculations proved there were other storylines that had little or nothing to do with stereotypes such as beating the odds to escape a dangerous community environment, dealing with a drug-addicted parent, or growing up surrounded by gang bangers. As stated in Chapter 4, these findings support the need to share stories of athletes who did not grow up marginalized. My contention is that it is time to share different variations of the humble beginnings narrative to establish new imageries. This desire was shared by the athletes as well during their interviews discussed in Chapter 5.

During my interviews with current and former professional athletes, I spoke with 30 NFL players who, by their own admission, came from humble beginnings. Chapter 5 focused on their similarities, including their love for the game and an appreciation for the opportunities an NFL career afforded them. The interviews also highlighted the diversity of their experiences and the neighborhood challenges not typically mentioned in popular media. Examples shared in the interviews included food insecurity, athletes who took time from football to care for siblings or to work to support their families, and the emotional stress of debunking stereotypes and potentially not living up to everyone's expectations. I contend that if outsiders heard these

storylines more frequently, even though they are also indicative of marginality, neighborhood reputations would begin to shift. Tuan (1977) opined that space "becomes place as we get to know it better and endow it with value" (p. 6). Building on this understanding, I also assert that sharing positive storylines creates value that can help neighborhoods reduce and possibly eliminate the stigma attached to them. In Chapter 5, the athletes shared stories about how, although they came from humble beginnings, they grew up with both parents in the home. Another storyline was that despite growing up as poor families, their parents stressed education over athletics. Each of these variations of the humble beginnings lived experience present significant examples that debunk stereotypes of marginalized communities. Both Chapters 4 and 5 represent different articulations of the images, stereotypes, and resulting impacts the humble beginnings narrative has on marginalized communities.

Emerging Themes

While several themes emerged throughout this process, this research revealed four overarching themes: (a) there are multiple versions of the humble beginnings experience, (b) the athletes and community members of marginalized neighborhoods internalize and perpetuate the characteristics and stigma created by the dominant humble beginnings narrative, (c) the dominant media-driven humble beginnings narrative solidifies the stigma of being from the hood, and (d) the dominant media-driven narrative creates a Black sense of place and space that travels with the athlete to new geographies. First, although images of Black professional athletes from the hood are over-represented in the media, other versions of the humble beginnings experience exist. Specifically, this research found that while 83% of the 30 athletes I interviewed experienced financial hardship growing up, less than half (40%) grew up raised by a single mother. Instead, 53% of them reported growing up with both their parents in the home,

despite the stereotype that popular media push. Not only does this give context to the supporting research question about the prevalence of the narrative versus the lived experience, but it also establishes that there are other ways to imagine neighborhood marginalization. I assert that pointing out the variations of the humble beginnings narrative in the media coverage of athletes is the quickest and most effective way to begin to re-shape the narrative. Star athletes are sensationalized and therefore garner extensive amounts of attention when featured by media outlets. This is the very reason why the dominant narrative is dominant—because it consistently features professional athletes who are forced to deal with the societal ills they have been challenged by all of their lives. I argue that if the media is going to commodify the celebrity status of Black professional athletes, they should be held responsible for being more accurate in their reporting by showing a more complete representation of the Black athlete experience. For example, this research found 29.9% of the Black NFL players on the 2020 rosters came from communities and/or schools of privilege, so media outlets should actively search for opportunities to share those storylines. Exercising their unique position in the relational place-making process would help repair the neighborhood scars created by the dominant narrative.

The second overarching theme revealed in this research involves residents of marginalized communities who, themselves, perpetuate the stereotype that Black athletes use athletics as a way out of the ghetto. As detailed in Chapter 5, several athletes shared experiences of neighborhood drug dealers keeping them out of trouble, even turning them away from parties and other gatherings where drugs were present or violence was likely. As explained through the theory of Black Geographies, the drug dealers in these scenarios became political and social powerbrokers who created a Black sense of place and space unique to the

Black community. I contend that residents who internalize their hometown as a place from which anyone needs to escape are representatives of advanced marginality—yet another resulting impact of the humble beginnings narrative (Ettema & Peer, 1996; Sampson & Raudenbush, 2004; Wacquant, 1994, 2016). Further, these actions excluded athletes from spaces within their own neighborhoods, simply because it was perceived that the athletes wanted to escape—to have a ticket out of the hood. My position is that having to negotiate these social and political dynamics also created long-lasting impacts on the athletes, as evidenced by their comments about feeling left out while simultaneously appreciating the exclusion.

The third major theme that emerged in this research was that the dominant media-driven narrative locks in neighborhood stigma. As in the first theme, the popularity of NFL athletes results in these internalizations. Stories about star athletes draw a lot of attention from fans. Add to that the journalists who consistently mention star players in relation to humble beginnings (e.g., gangs, drugs, crime, poverty) and share those stories on multiple platforms, then take the same stance when referring to another Black athlete, as if every one of them came from the same hometown neighborhood. This cyclical rinse and repeat process cannot help but solidify the stigma about the athletes and the hood. I assert that this viscous cycle, if left uninterrupted, forecloses neighborhoods from alternate articulations of place and space, thereby locking in neighborhood stigma.

The fourth and final overarching theme highlighted in this dissertation was that the dominant media-driven narrative creates a racialized spatial identity or Black sense of place and space that accompanies athletes even after they move to neighborhoods of privilege. This mobile Black sense of place and space represents another impact the dominant narrative has on marginalized communities. It also presents the strongest tie to Black Geographies scholarship

by considering the role of Black agency in the making and re-negotiating of place and space. As documented in Chapter 5, athletes often found themselves caught off guard by strangers who questioned why they were in neighborhoods and settings outside marginalized spaces. Whether it was Dean, who felt offended after a store clerk in a Detroit suburb assumed he was an athlete or drug dealer, or Jimmy who was put on the spot when a stranger approached him and his family at a restaurant to comment on how well-behaved his kids were—having to account for his or his family's presence was a constant for the Black athletes who were interviewed (Chapter 5). I maintain this is a direct example of how a Black sense of place and space becomes mobile. In these cases, what outsiders think they know about athletes from humble beginnings creates a Black persona or spatial identity that dictates how unknowing or biased individuals interact with the athletes as they see the athletes occupying affluent neighborhoods throughout their NFL careers._ As it pertains to the resulting impact portion of the research question, athletes shared during their interviews that this process burdened their emotional well-being (Chapter 5).

Significance of the Research

My research is significant because of three main contributions: (a) it connects three areas of scholarship to establish a new approach to study neighborhood stigma and marginality for the first time, (b) it contributes scholarship to a relatively new geography specialty category, and (c) and it furthers the idea of a Black sense of place and space.

First, this work establishes the journey of Black professional athletes as a new lens through which to evaluate neighborhood marginalization and stigma. It accomplishes this by displaying the intersections of geography, race, and the media-framing of African American male athletes by applying the Black Geographies field of inquiry to centralize a Black sense of place and disrupt "the normative conceptualization and mere geographic containment of Black

subjects" (Eaves, 2017, p. 80). Connecting these three areas of study is necessary because of how deeply rooted and normalized the stereotypes have become with regard to Black athletes and marginalized communities based on the humble beginnings narrative that are repeated in the media. The interdisciplinary approach of Black Geographies to an understanding of race, place and space is uniquely suited to guide how these areas combine to explain the humble beginnings phenomena. Additionally, because this field of inquiry promotes the creation of new imageries, it is best suited to explore solutions for reducing neighborhood stigma (Hawthorne, 2019).

Second, Black Geographies is a relatively new geography sub-group in the early 21st century, with applications in feminism, Latinx geographies, Black queer communities, public health, ecological injustices and carceral cities (Black Geographies Specialty Group, 2021; Hawthorne, 2019; Ramírez, 2015). This dissertation research contributes to the Black Geographies body of literature by expanding its application to the study of marginalized neighborhoods and stigmatized communities, especially when race is not explicitly stated as part of a neighborhood's demographic makeup.

The data from this study provide further information on a core tenet of Black Geographies—the development of a Black sense of place and space. Like other critical geographies, Black geographical scholarship does not see place solely as a fixed location. Instead, while it is linked to socially constructed places, it is also an iterative process that ebbs and flows, and functions alongside and beyond traditional geography (Black Feminisms, n.d.). It accounts for Black agency and the various structural and social power dynamics always at play in the making and negotiating of space and place. This research takes the idea of a Black sense of place and space one step further to mobilize it. A socially constructed Black sense and place and space now travels with African Americans as they enter new and unfamiliar environments.

As detailed in Chapter 5, this mobile sense of place and space dictates how others treat athletes as they move from perceived marginality to more affluent neighborhoods. One of the resulting impacts is that athletes are forced to routinely navigate and renegotiate their new surroundings. Fully comprehending this notion can be of benefit in better understanding the significance of Black Geographies as a field of inquiry.

Recommendations

As mentioned in the reflections, my positionality as a scholar, former broadcast journalist, and media coach for professional athletes has inspired this dissertation that grounds in Black Geographies the intersection of race, geography, and the mediated messages of Black athletes. Just as Black athletes are co-authors in the making of place and space within in their respective communities, so are the media, the League and academia in the making and reproducing of the humble beginnings narrative. While stakeholders in each sector operate within socially constructed structures, they also have agency to change and resist those structures. Each faction, in its own way, contributes to the dominant messages, articulations, and images that are continually reproduced and consumed by Black community insiders and outsiders. Based on this scholarly investigation, I offer the following recommendations for the media, for Black athletes, professional sport leagues and academic scholars.

Recommendations for the Media. As shown throughout this research, the media is the primary actor in the creation of the humble beginnings narrative. Whether the stories are hour-long deep-dives on an athlete's rags to riches journey or quick 40-second stories about an athlete returning to a marginalized hometown to donate school supplies and backpacks, the dominant messages speak to a poor Black athlete who made it out of the hood. I argue that while these

realities cannot be ignored in storytelling, they need to be balanced with variations of the narrative and context. It is recommended that the media:

1. Show variations of the humble beginnings narrative. While this study demonstrated the majority of Black NFL experienced some community marginality, it also showed a complexity to those experiences and an adeptness at navigating and resisting them. Those variations, the nuances of their lived experiences, need to be shared regularly. No longer is the rags to riches storyline unique. I urge the media to draw on their training to dig for something new, and for example highlight stories of athletes who, after years of not knowing their father, go on to develop meaningful relationships. Reporters can also ask an athlete what he wishes he had access to as a child. This research unearthed a plurality of resources ranging from community-based Black-owned businesses to desiring a parent to check their homework. Such rich context allows for community outsiders and insiders to see Black athletes and their communities differently.
2. Seek out atypical stories. Just as the majority of the League's Black players came from humble beginnings, some did not. Again, drawing on journalistic training to find the hidden nuggets that make a story stand-out, highlight when an athlete grew up with both parents in the home, or how much some parents stressed education over athletics.
3. Take responsibility for the lasting impacts and stereotypes created through repeated stories that highlight blight, crime and decline. Along with helping shape urban geography, stories that position Black athletes as coming from poor, dangerous communities create a Black sense of place and space that never leaves them. Instead, it creates a burden that they are forced to carry no matter where they relocate, and positions them to continually defend their right to be included in new environments.

4. Discuss the story angle with the athlete before the interview begins. In the media space, journalists exercise their hierarchal positionality without letting the athletes know they can shape their own story. I argue that the stories of Black athletes would be significantly richer and more interesting to the audience if the athlete were invited to focus on what he wants to highlight.
5. Make sure that the reporters at any given station represent the diversity of sports. A White journalist may highlight different aspects of a Black athlete's story than a Black or Latino reporter would. A male may articulate the story differently than a woman. It is imperative that the people who are continually selecting what descriptors and supporting images to use are as diverse as the sports world.

Recommendations for Black Athletes. While athletes are on the receiving end of the stereotypes and assumptions, they are also actors in the making (and reshaping) of the humble beginnings narrative. This is something that several of the athletes I interviewed discovered early in their professional careers, yet they were unsure how to circumvent the process. Here are my recommendations for athletes:

1. In the case of pre- and post-game interviews, or interviews done right after an athlete has been drafted, be prepared for questions from journalists indicating the athlete came from a poor background. Anticipating the goal of the media to cement that narrative gives the athletes time to map out their answer. And while there is no way of controlling which soundbite(s) the journalists will select when sharing a story, it is still suggested that the athlete give their entire background story, providing context in the most concise way possible. For example, if an athlete grew up with a single parent but also saw their parent return to school to get his/her degree to create better financial opportunities, that

could be highlighted. Or if an athlete's family partnered with other families, rotating child-care duties so parents could log extra hours at work - that should be offered up as an angle for the media.

2. In the case of longer, human interest stories, I recommend athletes ask the journalist questions before even agreeing to an interview. The pre-interview questions should focus on story angle, the length of the story, when it will air, and a firm understanding of why the media wants to cover the story. This positions the athlete to be a co-author and co-producer of the story, creating new imaginaries for Black subjects and their communities.
3. Watch the story or have someone in the athlete's inner circle watch the final outcome. If the story veers from the intended and/or agreed upon angle, the athlete has every right to challenge the media on their portrayal.
4. Develop relationships with journalists. This goes a long way in holding the media accountable and in securing media coverage for the topics and events that are important to the athlete – another opportunity to help steer the athlete's preferred narrative.

Recommendations for Professional Sport Leagues. The sports leagues and their internal media are complicit in the humble beginnings narrative as well. This is not an attempt to encourage that the humble beginnings storyline be downplayed. But this is an opportunity to represent all facets of the League. My recommendations for sport leagues, especially the ones with predominantly Black and Brown athletes who come from marginalized communities:

1. Understand the leagues are providing a structure that benefits athletes from humble beginnings while also commodifying their rags to riches narrative. The NFL's "A Football Life" docuseries demonstrates the ability to share rich context not only of the

humble beginnings storyline, but also deliver stories that highlight alternate experiences. I recommend that the League build on this.

2. Understanding the all storytellers have a choice in their word selection, and in the case of broadcast stories, in the pictures and videos shown, I recommend that the League-generated stories not show a current video clip of the athlete's home they lived in 20-years prior. While the home may have been run-down while the athlete lived in it, it will appear far worse decades later. This gives an exaggerated view of their home environment.
3. When a story highlights an athlete touring their former home or community, it is recommended that the athlete walk the viewers through, in his own words, that lived experience. Diverting this part of the story-sharing process to the athlete allows the athlete to focus on the aspects of his childhood community in a way that best represents his experience, rather than a deep-voiced narrator telling a story of blight or perseverance.
4. Continue to put former players in a position of content creation within individual teams and league offices. This is an instant way to broaden perspectives while continuing to capitalize on the many personalities and stories that make up any given league.

Recommendations for Academia. Academic scholarship plays an integral role in dispersing marginalized narratives of communities of color without necessarily accounting for Blackness. Black Geographies is uniquely positioned to evaluate Black communities in a way that acknowledges race and Blackness, as well as the structures that bind and group people into geographies of blight, decline and danger (Hawthorne, 2019). Evaluating Black marginalized communities differently is necessary to help reduce the stigma that often follows years of studies

and scholarly conclusions that continually position communities of color as less than, lacking or existing outside of what is desirable. This research offers a case study to understand the political economy and Black agency that go into the making of Black sense of place and space, in hopes of circumventing the propensity to negatively label Black communities without offering effective solutions. It is recommended that academia:

1. Expand the application of Black Geographies to evaluate and understand marginalized communities, and to disrupt their racialized landscapes by acknowledging the role of Black agency in the facilitating, navigating, and renegotiating of Black place and space.
2. Consider the ways in which a Black sense of place and space stays tethered to Black subjects from humble beginnings. While the depiction of Black professional athletes has traditionally illuminated difference, their journeys also provide a valuable approach to understanding the role of Black agency in adapting to new environments. This is necessary to reimagine how, as geographers, we discuss Black communities and to take partial responsibility for the burden academia places on Black citizenry.

While the above recommendations and this dissertation research consistently referenced Black professional athletes, the need for alternate imaginaries is needed to disrupt the humble beginnings narrative for all Black subjects who live and come from marginalized communities.

Future Research

I have maintained that when residents of a marginalized community identify their neighborhood as a place from which to escape, this is a sign of internalizing stereotypes and an indicator of advanced marginality. These reflections also included the concept of a community savior because of the athlete's talk about the drug dealers and other community members who turned

them away from parties and gatherings. This sets up an opportunity for potential future research on the savior complex at play in Black marginalized communities, including a detailed look at the sacrifices community members make and their unique role within the making of place.

As a Black and Brown woman raising a young daughter, I am constantly reflecting on the stigma that follow people of color and the neighborhoods we represent. My positionality as a geographer and a former journalist has created my hyper-focus on the media's role in the making and shaping of urban geographies. As an avid sports fan and media coach for professional athletes, I continually pay particular attention to how their platforms and voices are elevated.

With these perspectives in mind, I have become even more interested in Black geographical scholarship. One future research area prompted by this work would be to investigate the effectiveness of a Black Geographies approach in reducing neighborhood stigma. The first overarching research theme considered how to repair neighborhood scars brought on by the dominant humble beginnings narrative. This idea could be pursued by using case studies to test the effectiveness of some of the core tenets of Black Geographies (social and political capitalism, space-making, Black geographic imagination, and an interdisciplinary approach) to position and imagine new articulations of Black place and space (Eaves, 2017; Hawthorne, 2019; McKittrick, 2006).

This work also opens the door to an expansion of research on the evaluation of how place and space are socially and politically constructed and re-negotiated. Knowledge concerning Black Geographies is expanded by new data on the Black sense of place and space to a mobile spatial identity; the same methods could be employed in investigations of other racial groups to show how (or if) these groups are treated in a similar fashion as African Americans once they leave marginalized neighborhoods. Because I am someone with several races and cultures represented in my family, a multi-cultural approach to seeing and being seen by the world is an ever-present

dynamic. As a result, I am interested in evaluating an East Asian or Latino sense of place and space that accompanies members of these groups as they enter new geographies, especially when their spatial identities include languages other than English. For example, what assumptions are made about Spanish-speaking men and women when they walk into a new, non-Spanish speaking environment—and how does that Latino sense of place and space control how the Spanish-speaking individuals are received? Further, how are the Spanish-speaking individuals now having to reassess and negotiate their new surroundings? Through these interests, I hope to continue research informed by this dissertation.

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APPENDIX A: INTERVIEW GUIDE (ATHLETE)

1. How long have you been/did you play in the NFL?
2. What do you enjoy most about playing your sport on the highest level?
3. What do you enjoy least?
4. When you think of humble beginnings, what comes to mind for you?
5. Tell me about your journey to the NFL including what college you attended.
6. What was it like the moment you heard your name called in the draft/got the call to join your team?
7. At what age did you start playing football?
8. What led you to start?
9. Tell me about your first few years playing. Was it Pop Warner or at school?
10. What did you enjoy most and least about playing in middle and/or high school?
11. Describe your training facilities at school.
12. What was your community like?
13. What did you like most about your community?
14. What was your biggest challenge about your community?
15. If you could have added resources to your community or school when you were a youth, what would they have been?
16. Were your parents active in your life?
17. What, if any, outside influences were you tempted by or were trying to avoid?
18. Were there other professional athletes before you who came from your community?
19. How would you describe the media coverage of you and your story?
20. How did becoming a professional athlete change your life?
21. How has your childhood impacted your life as a professional athlete?
22. Have you given back to your community? If so, how and why?
23. What would you like people to know about your community?

24. What would you like people to know about your journey?

25. How would you like to see this research used?

APPENDIX B: INTERVIEW GUIDE (JOURNALIST)

1. Walk me through your broadcasting career, including what attracted you to this field. (OR) What made you make the transition from athletics to broadcasting?

2. What markets and/or stations have you worked in?

3. How long have you been in this space?

4. What sports do you typically report on?

5. As you think about the stories and athletes you cover, under what circumstances do you include their backgrounds?
   (OR)
   At what point during commentating conversations does someone's journey include their childhood community or experience?

6. When you hear the term *humble beginnings* in sports, what comes to mind for you?

7. In your space, is the humble beginnings narrative shared more with any one group of athletes?

8. How is the storyline typically shared?

9. What is your assessment of how the stories of an athlete's background are shared when the athlete is White? What about when the athlete is Black?

10. Is there anything else you'd like to share?

APPENDIX C: NFL ATHLETE PSEUDONYMS AND PROFILES

Pseudonym	Years of NFL Experience
Alfred	2
Anthony	10
Bennie	1
Billy	3
Carl	10
Clinton	15
Dean	11
Dennis	5
Duane	9
Hugh	8
Jacob	1
Jackson	7
James	1
Jay	3
Jimmy	12
John	1
Johnny	5
Leland	16
Lloyd	6
Lyle	3
Marshall	14
Matthew	5
Maurice	2
Max	4
Morris	10
Nathan	8
Richard	7
Shelby	9
Stanley	7
Thaddeus	4

APPENDIX D: PHONE/EMAIL RECRUITMENT SCRIPT FOR ATHLETES

Research Project Title: *An Athlete's Humble Beginnings: A Place-Based Narrative in Need of Repair*

Hi. My name is Barbara Lash, a PhD candidate at UNC Charlotte. I received your contact information from_____.

I'm studying the humble beginnings narrative of Black athletes including how prevalent and accurate it is, as well as the variations of the lived experience to better understand what it says about what is needed in marginalized neighborhoods.

I would love to speak with you about your journey to the NFL including your experience in your childhood neighborhood(s).

This interview will be part of the research for my Dissertation project which also includes evaluating pre-existing news/sports stories of the dominant media-driven humble beginnings narrative. My goal is to offer another approach to evaluating and understanding stigmatized neighborhoods, especially for those wanting to help provide resources in marginalized neighborhoods.

That being said, can I interest you in a one-on-one, on-camera virtual interview done via Zoom? It would take up no more than two hours of your time. Although you are a public figure, your interview will be confidential and no identifying information will be shared when I write-up the research results.

Please respond via email to blash1@uncc.edu if you are interested.

Thank you,

Barbara Lash
PhD Candidate

This study has been approved by UNC Charlotte IRB (uncc-irb@uncc.edu), IRB# 21-0077.

APPENDIX E: DIRECT MESSAGE RECRUITMENT SCRIPT FOR ATHLETES

Research Project Title: *An Athlete's Humble Beginnings: A Place-Based Narrative in Need of Repair*

Hi _____. How are you?

I'm studying the humble beginnings narrative of Black athletes including how prevalent and accurate it is, as well as the variations of the lived experience to better understand what it says about what is needed in marginalized neighborhoods.

I would love to speak with you about your journey to the NFL including your experience in your childhood neighborhood(s).

This interview will be part of the research for my Dissertation project which also includes evaluating pre-existing news/sports stories of the dominant media-driven humble beginnings narrative. My goal is to offer another approach to evaluating and understanding stigmatized neighborhoods, especially for those wanting help provide resources in stigmatized neighborhoods.

That being said, can I interest you in a one-on-one, on-camera virtual interview? It would take up no more than two hours of your time. Although you are a public figure, your interview will be confidential and no identifying information will be shared when I write-up and share the research results.

Please respond via DM or email to blash1@uncc.edu if you are interested.

This study has been approved by UNC Charlotte IRB (uncc-irb@uncc.edu), IRB# 21-0077.

APPENDIX F: PHONE/EMAIL RECRUITMENT SCRIPT FOR JOURNALISTS

Research Project Title: *An Athlete's Humble Beginnings: A Place-Based Narrative in Need of Repair*

Hi _____. How are you?

I'm studying the humble beginnings narrative of Black athletes including how prevalent and accurate it is, as well as the variations of the lived experience to better understand what it says about what is needed in marginalized neighborhoods.

I would love to speak with you about your experiences as a sports journalist, including your approach to covering Black athletes and their stories.

This interview will be part of the research for my Dissertation project which also includes evaluating pre-existing news/sports stories of the dominant media-driven humble beginnings narrative. My goal is to offer another approach to evaluating and understanding stigmatized neighborhoods, especially for those wanting help provide resources in marginalized neighborhoods.

That being said, can I interest you in a one-on-one, virtual on-camera interview done via Zoom? It would take up no more than two hours of your time. Although you are a public figure, your interview will be confidential and no identifying information will be shared when I write-up the research results.

Please respond via email to blash1@uncc.edu if you are interested.

Thank you,

Barbara Lash
PhD Candidate

This study has been approved by UNC Charlotte IRB (uncc-irb@uncc.edu), IRB# 21-0077.