

Kim Mulkey the Gate Keeper: A Critical Analysis of Heteronormative Whiteness in Women's Basketball

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Abstract

Kim Mulkey has become a symbol in women's basketball based on her extensive accomplishments and experience as a player, assistant coach, and head basketball coach. However, throughout her career she has not squeezed by without a level of controversial behavior, specifically focused on interactions with her players. Although speculation on her relationship with her athletes have floated around in the past, recent events lead to a renewed critical interest into her relationship with players. This was initially sparked by her silence on the incarceration of Britney Griner, a former star athlete during Mulkey's time at Baylor. Failure to speak out on her behalf during this time caused stories to resurface about Mulkey's treatment of Griner. Statements from 2013 shared how Mulkey did not allow Griner to come out as a lesbian justifying that it was not good for recruiting and that she did not want to know about it (Suggs, 2023) Additionally, Mulkey allegedly forced Griner to wear long sleeve shirts in order to cover her tattoos and muscular arms (Suggs, 2023). Although this information stretches back a decade recent controversy with Angel Reese's hiatus from the LSU women's basketball team during this current season and the parting of Kateri Poole from the team after five games sparks some concern about her interaction with Black players and queer Black players.

Common identities shared by players where speculation ensued brings to light a trend in Mulkey's interactions. Considering Griner, Reese, and Kateri were all key players on their respective team roster, it is necessary for other social factors to be considered to understand how Mulkey uses her power and stature in her coaching appointments. Sociology of sport scholars have examined the power dynamics within predominantly Black sports, exploring how leadership and ownership contain primarily white individuals, while the labor is completed by the Black athletes (Hawkins, 2010). As a women's college basketball coach, Mulkey exists in a space in which athletes embrace masculine expression (Mohel, 2022) and 50% are athletes of color (NCAA, 2023). Her ability to profit from their popularity and success, while simultaneously contributing to their silencing, reflects the broader system of Black and Brown exploitation that exists within the sporting industry. Based on this, the purpose of this study is to examine ways in which whiteness and heteronormativity are upheld and leveraged to exploit Black female athletes.

A media analysis will be conducted on interviews Kim Mulkey participated in which she discusses controversial interaction between Britney Griner, Angel Reese, and Kateri Poole. The range of mediums that will be examine are post-game interviews, press conferences, or article interviews. Examining how Mulkey discusses these players and their incidents with the media will provide insights as to how she utilized whiteness and heteronormativity in her position.