



**Shireen Ahmed, Amira Rose Davis, Brenda Elsey, Lindsay Gibbs, Jessica Luther.** *Burn It All Down*. 2017-20. Podcast

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U.S. Women's Soccer star Megan Rapinoe triggered fierce backlash when she refused to kneel for the National Anthem at the World Cup games in 2019. Cultural misrepresentations of women in sports is deeply rooted in American culture, despite efforts by feminist scholars to correct this imbalance. As historian Susan J. Bandy describes, feminist sport history emerged in the 1970s as women's studies scholars strove to diversify scholarship in the field. Up to that point, sports history was an exclusively masculine domain which either neglected female athletes altogether or offered shallow and homogenous social constructions of female athletes' bodies. Hostility toward athletes who use their platforms for political activism is common, but the hatred aimed at Rapinoe was even more vitriolic and personal than what was leveled at her male colleagues. Shireen Ahmed, host of the podcast *Burn It All Down*, told interviewer Amy Goodman that Rapinoe was targeted so forcefully because "sports are inherently political" and still grounded in the insipid misogyny that continues to pervade our culture.[1] For these reasons, Ahmed and her colleagues—Amira Rose Davis, assistant professor at Penn State University; Brenda Elsey, associate professor of history at Hofstra University in New York; Lindsay Gibbs, freelance women's sports reporter in Washington DC; and Jessica Luther, doctoral candidate at the Uni-

versity of Texas—were inspired to launch their podcast, *Burn It All Down*, in early 2017.

Now in its third year of production, *Burn It All Down* provides an engaging listening experience for anyone looking to debate sports activism and unpack social constructions of women athletes. Masters of long-distance collaboration, the five podcasters meet virtually each week to plan and record their shows, most running over an hour long. The hosts typically use a roundtable approach to engage in discussions of sports culture, often inviting guests and featuring a "Badass Woman of the Week" to spotlight a notable woman in sports news. Audience members are invited to engage with the hosts via social media, who in turn incorporate these questions and comments into future episodes. The website platform is clearly designed and navigable, each episode posted with complete transcripts and extensive links to references for further reading.

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shallow and homogenous social constructions of female athletes' bodies. Since then, women's historians have redefined gender in sports and rejected these outdated masculine frameworks in order to "forge connections between feminist theory, sports institutions, and the social practice of sport." [2] Sports history today more often advances intellectual understandings on the intersectional nature of race, gender, sports, and political activism.

*Burn It All Down* is a political as well as a professional pursuit. It is a fair assessment to say that this podcast is rooted in the "unapologetic anger" of post-2016 feminism. [3] The 2016 presidential election triggered a political radicalization for many liberal American women when the first female candidate for the presidency won the popular vote by more than three million but lost her White House bid to an accused sexual assaulter. Desiring to channel that rage into action, Ahmed, Davis, Elsey, Gibbs, and Luther launched *Burn It All Down* in 2017, an era marked by the Inauguration Day Women's March on Washington, the viral #MeToo campaign for female victims of sexual violence and harassment, and an unprecedented surge of Democratic women considering political offices for the first time.

Nearly two hundred episodes later, *Burn It All Down* hosts Ahmed, Elsey, Luther, Gibbs, and Davis and their guests continue to navigate the contentious topics that often define life for women and minority athletes. Over three years of production, the podcast has explored such issues as team names and mascots, pay equity for female athletes, the #MeToo and Black Lives Matter movements in women's sports, and the exclusion of minority groups from leadership positions in sports. There has not been a shortage of related current events for *Burn It All Down* hosts to unpack. One recent episode, for example, features Samantha Shepard and guest host Courtney Cox discussing the NBA walkout for social justice ("Hot Take: Athletes on Strike," August 28, 2020). *Burn It*

*All Down* challenges all of us to amplify our voices against racial injustice, in hopes of promoting restorative solutions for more equal playing fields in sports, in the academy, and in society.

The phrase "burn it all down," commonly associated with social justice movements of the 1960s, invokes apocalyptic destruction, a way to cleanse a society of insurmountable prejudices, systemic racism, and injustice. Despite the implications, Ahmed, Elsey, Luther, Gibbs, and Davis intend this podcast to be a vehicle for deconstructing misogyny in sports culture and shaping a more equitable society for future scholars and athletes.

*Burn It All Down* has predictably triggered hostile responses on platforms like "Toxic Twitter." [4] Usually those who fail to see the relevance of gender analysis in sports news are offended by the show's no-holds-barred critiques of constructed masculinity in mainstream sports or fear the influence of feminists in academics. In sum, *Burn It All Down* provides the playbook for feminist activists to use their own professional platforms to challenge oppression and discrimination and an engaging listening experience for anyone looking to expand their knowledge of activism in current times.

#### Notes

[1]. Shireen Ahmed and Amira Rose Davis, interview by Amy Goodman, "U.S. Women's Soccer Team Wins World Cup, Condemning Pay Discrimination and President Trump," directed by Rebecca Staley, Democracy Now!, KMOS PBS, July 8, 2019, [https://www.democracynow.org/2019/7/8/seg\\_1](https://www.democracynow.org/2019/7/8/seg_1).

[2]. Susan J. Bandy, "Gender," in *Routledge Companion to Sports History*, ed. S. W. Pope and John Naught (London: Routledge Publishers, 2010), 132.

[3]. Rebecca Traister, *Good and Mad: The Revolutionary Power of Women's Anger* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2019), 57.

[4]. Amnesty International, "Toxic Twitter: Violence and Abuse against Women Online," 2018, <https://www.amnesty.org/en/latest/research/2018/03/online-violence-against-women-chapter-1/>.

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