

Marketing Politics and Resistance: Mobilizing Black Pain in National Football League Publicity

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The 2020 North American Society for the Sociology of Sport (NASSS) Presidential Address analyzed aspects of the National Football League's (NFL) current socially conscious marketing to make sense of corporatized racial justice politics following a summer of mass political mobilization triggered by the police killing of George Floyd. The analysis shows that the mass, multiracial racial justice activism forced corporatized sport leagues such as the NFL to respond to popular political pressure. The NFL followed the lead of the National Basketball Association and instead of resisting popular sentiments, it has incorporated social justice language into its marketing. Guided by Indigenous decolonial scholarship and radical Black scholars, I argue that the NFL's incorporation of social justice language is a politics of recognition and colonial governmentality that insulates it from racial justice politics and helps to stabilize challenges to racial capitalism.

I want to begin by acknowledging that this talk was delivered from the unceded territories and homeland of the Ute nations. This part of what is now called Colorado has also been home to Apache, Arapaho, Comanche, and Cheyenne. This land was a center for trade, community building, information sharing, conducting healing ceremonies, and where people lived their lives. The United States and other settler colonies work hard to erase the narratives of Indigenous peoples. Acknowledging that we reside on the homelands of Indigenous peoples is an important step in recognizing the history of the original stewards of these lands. Land acknowledgments serve in a small way to remind us of the contributions and sacrifices of Indigenous peoples.¹ I also want to acknowledge that White supremacy was built on stolen land with stolen labor and continues to dispossess Black and other minoritized people of health, wealth, and humanity. In fact, it is crucial in any decolonizing process that we recognize how we participate in and benefit from oppressive, colonizing systems.

In so many ways, 2020 was a very challenging year for all of us. In this talk, I draw together different strands of my research to make sense of the world we are experiencing in order to, as Dr. Cornel West (2020) recently said, see clearly so that we better know how to direct our fire. My sense-making is situated within what I currently study, which is National Football League (NFL) marketing. This year, in particular, the NFL has been forced to recognize that many of its on-field workers and fans are furious about violent White supremacy in the United States. In this talk, I want to see what the NFL's incorporation of racial justice rhetoric and recognition of state violence against Black people can tell us about contemporary White supremacy and racial capitalism.

We can begin this exploration with the NFL's 2020 season opener. When the NFL announced that it would perform "Lift Every Voice and Sing" before the first game of the 2020 season, many people reacted to the announcement on social media as the NFL pandering to Black audiences. Of course, it is pandering but for that reason, it is worth taking seriously. "Lift Every Voice and

Sing" became known as the Black National Anthem in the early 20th century after being adopted by the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) and endorsed by Booker T. Washington. Performed in Black Churches and Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCUs) amongst other places, it has remained part of U.S. Black culture ever since and an important statement on the quest for freedom (Dixon, 2020; Lindsay-Habermann, 2018).

The NFL's performance of "Lift Every Voice and Sing" is profoundly ironic and not just because it includes images of Colin Kaepernick, who was blacklisted from the NFL for initiating protests against state violence in Black communities during the U.S. national anthem (Montez de Oca, & Suh, 2019). Featuring narration by actor and producer Anthony Mackie and sung by Alicia Keyes, the NFL chose the LA Coliseum as the site of the performance. The Coliseum might seem like an usual location for the video since it is no longer an NFL stadium. However, it is actually a profound site to set the video. In 1972, Stax Records used the Coliseum to host Wattstax—a fundraiser for the Watts community 7 years after the 1965 uprising. Although no one stood for the "Star Spangled Banner" at Wattstax (Dixon, 2020; Lindsay-Habermann, 2018), the 1973 documentary *Wattstax* shows the audience standing with raised fists for Kim Weston's rendition of "Lift Every Voice and Sing." The documentary captures the revolutionary essence of the song through a montage of images of oppression in a dialectical, back-and-forth struggle with images of resistance. The montage begins with images of slavery and Jim Crow racism, including lynching images. It then transitions to images of historical leaders, including George Washington Carver, Frederick Douglass, Booker T. Washington, and Marcus Garvey. It transitions again to more recent images of the police using dogs and fire hoses to suppress Civil Rights protests. Followed again by images of mid-20th century leaders such as Louis Armstrong, Aretha Franklin, Huey Newton, Malcolm X, and Elijah Muhammad. The live performance of the song is then cut off by Martin Luther King delivering his iconic "I've Been to the Mountaintop" speech (1968). King's Mountaintop speech is irrepressibly optimistic while simultaneously anticipating his assassination that, in

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fact, happened the very next day. The documentary's interpretation of "Lift Every Voice and Sing" suggests that the song's optimism does not come from leaving White supremacy in the past but from a relentless struggle against it.

If history repeats itself first as tragedy and then as farce, the NFL's version of "Lift Every Voice and Sing" parodies the politics of *Wattstax*. Black-led activism following the murder of George Floyd forced the NFL amongst other corporations into presenting themselves as *woke* (Montez de Oca, Mason, & Ahn, 2020). The NFL expresses its wokeness by recognizing that racial oppression exists, but that recognition reiterates a central myth of White supremacy in the United States: racism exists either in the past or is in the process of being solved. The NFL's "Life Every Voice and Sing" video begins with a montage of images and Mackie's narration that establish the United States as a nation of freedom and prosperity that Black people have been excluded from. Images of hate and intolerance quickly switch to images of beautiful African American youth smiling directly into the camera. As Alicia Keyes begins singing in the LA Coliseum, the video shows images of NFL players engaged in respectful protest, working in communities with children, and educating people in different multiracial communities. Phrases like "Black Lives Matters" and "Breonna Taylor" operate as leitmotifs in the video. In this way, the video recognizes racism, Black struggle and "says her name." Optimism thus results from a linear movement into a better, color-blind future thanks to the efforts of the National Football League and its workers (Rugg, 2019).

By situating Black resistance in the familiar progressive narrative of nation, the NFL video hollows out the dialectical tension between oppression and struggle in *Wattstax* just as COVID-19 hollowed out NFL stadiums. The NFL's careful, corporate statement is quite different from when saxophonist Mike Phillips and keyboardist West Byrd surreptitiously wove bars of "From Lift Every Voice and Sing" into their rendition of the "Star Spangled Banner" before the June 28, 2020, National Association for Stock Car Auto Racing race at Pocono; the first race after a noose was found in driver Bubba Wallace's garage (Greig, 2020). And despite the NFL's flattening of the song's politics, the dialectic of oppression and resistance was restored when fans booed Kansas City and Houston players for holding hands in a "Moment of Unity" immediately after the video played.

The NFL's politically muted recognition of Black pain follows a branding strategy established earlier in 2020. The video mirrors the rhetorical structure of the National Basketball Association (NBA) commercial *The Truth Is #BlackLivesMatter* which earned the highest Ace Score of all "Black Lives Matter" themed commercials as of July 2020 on the marketing platform Ace Metrix. Their conclusion, like lots of other advertisers over the past few years, is that socially conscious marketing works: marketing research shows that consumers respond positively to brands performing a politics of recognition and taking stands on behalf of social justice (Montez de Oca et al., 2020).

When reflecting upon the past year, we quickly realize that despite narratives of progress, the United States remains a violent, dangerous place, especially for Black, Indigenous, and other racialized people. However, mass radical activism has an impact that even the most powerful institutions must respond to; for example, a mass demonstration in the wake of George Floyd's murder drove the NFL franchise in Washington D.C. to change its name and National Association for Stock Car Auto Racing to ban the Confederate Flags from its events. We should understand these progressive steps, however, as tactics within a strategy to manage a

crisis and protect capital accumulation by sporting capitalist rather than corporate commitments to progressive politics (Montez de Oca & Dehart-Reed, 2019; Montez de Oca et al., 2020). Effectively, socially conscious marketing allows state and economic institutions to insulate themselves from popular politics and rearticulations of the race (Omi & Winant, 1994). We can see that while colonial responses to aspirational social movements are at times violent, as in Portland, Oregon, and Ferguson, Missouri, they are not only violent. Colonial uses of nonviolence attempt to manage people's radical energy by speaking to them at the levels of ethics and emotions. Indigenous decolonial studies scholars call this a politics of recognition (Coulthard, 2014). Recognizing identities (e.g., "Lift Every Voice and Sing" played alongside the "Star Spangled Banner") or recognizing harms (invoking Black Lives Matter, Breonna Taylor, etc.) purports to move us toward a more just, inclusive society by expanding the realm of cultural citizenship and membership in the nation. However, the recognition is not a relationship between equals, and therefore, we should be skeptical of a politics of recognition that does not challenge the imperialist state. Instead, we might understand this recognition as a colonial governmentality.

Colonial Governmentality—A Paternal Relationship

I want to take a step back for a moment to illustrate what I mean by colonial governmentality. Like many sport scholars, sport studies is very personal for me. I became an athlete and a sports fan because of one person in particular, my father Clifford DeOca. Gridiron football created a medium through which he and I developed a relationship. Hours upon hours spent watching and discussing gridiron football provided a foundation to our intimate, emotional relationship. However, this is not a story of patrilineal sport descent since my paternal grandfather was born in Mexico City and not an avid football fan when my father was young. Instead, my father learned football at the Thomas Indian School as a ward of New York state. Originally named the Thomas Asylum for Orphaned and Destitute Indian Children, Salem, as survivors tend to call it in reference to "Asylum," was part of the United States' larger shift to gentle colonization (Montez de Oca & Prado, 2014). Salem was a functioning dairy farm that took the children of Indigenous nations, though primarily Haudenosaunee, and converted them into U.S. citizens who would then be routed into the lowest ranks of the working class and the military (Burich, 2016).

The mission of the boarding school movement was "Kill the Indian, Save the man," which had replaced the older slogan "The only good Indian is a dead Indian" (Adams, 1995). As such, sport like agricultural labor was not an option for the boys. They played football in the fall, basketball in the winter, baseball in the spring, and were taken into the chapel to watch boxing matches on the television. Sport was thus a pleasurable realm of colonial administration (Lomawaima, 1994), which points to the subjective dimension of colonial governmentality. My father and the boys he played with found great pleasure and empowerment in playing football since it gave them the opportunity to engage in state-sanctioned violence against the settler children that lived all around them. Although they grudgingly won the recognition of those kids, their efforts did not challenge settler colonialism. The power and pleasure discovered in football tied their identities to oppressive colonial practices, the state, higher education, and the market. What

this means is that because my father brought me into U.S. citizenship in large part through a shared passion for football, colonial governmentality is sedimented in my very soul. This is something I have tried to honor in my scholarship by building a career that critiques football and U.S. imperialism.

Militarism and Consumerism Within U.S. Imperialism

What I have attempted to do in my scholarship is use imperialism as a central category of analysis through which I have studied sport. I believe using imperialism as a frame of analysis allows me to engage in intersectional analyses that locate identities within political economy and colonial administration. The anti-imperialist frame was present in my first book *Discipline & Indulgence* (2013) that used a study of the cold war to comment on the so-called “global war on terror.” The title attempts to capture the United States’ two-pronged foreign policy throughout the cold war, known as the strategy of containment and football’s place within U.S. imperialism. The first prong was a military strategy that led to the military-industrial complex and millions of deaths globally. Discipline is central not just to the military and football, however, but across different productive institutions from Fordist manufacturing to schooling. The second prong of U.S. foreign policy was the development of consumer culture from entertainment to kitchen appliances, often referred to as the cultural cold war. Whereas the military prong to contain the Soviet Union to limited spheres of influence was violent, the cultural prong gave a vision of a consumerist utopia embedded in the “American Way of Life” that people living behind the Iron Curtain could only dream about. However, the consumerist prong was as much about assimilating ethnic Whites into U.S. capitalism as it was about speaking to Soviet citizens (Montez de Oca, 2013).

What I hope *Discipline & Indulgence* shows is militarism and consumerism are twin heads of U.S. imperialism. Militarism mobilizes naked coercive force, or moments of conquest that Harvey (2010) calls “accumulation by dispossession,” whereby people and land are forced into capitalist accumulation and turned into commodities. Consumerism mobilizes ideological forces that foster identities consistent with the needs of capital and attempts to minimize resistance to capitalist domination as well as soaking up surpluses of mass production. We can also understand this through Manning’s (Marable, 1983) statement that capitalism is based on fraud and force. Fraud is the ideological forces that say freedom and opportunity (the good life) are only possible within capitalism when that reality is in fact materially impossible for most people. Force, such as police or vigilante violence, emerges when the fraud is revealed, and people need to be forced back into line (Marable, 1983, pp. 106–107). In sport sociology, we do a very good job of analyzing and critiquing the ideological forces of capitalism, which is mostly what I will do in this talk. However, we need to remain mindful that militarism is a structural reality of imperialism, which makes violence a feature of everyday life.

Militarism—Stabilizing Crises

When discussing governmentalities, it is easy to overlook the violence endemic to capitalist imperialism. This is true even for colonial governmentality. For instance, the Indian boarding school movement was theorized by the imperialist state as a project in

gentle Americanization; after all schools, not bombs sound pretty good. But this overlooks the constant reality of physical, emotional, and sexual violence within the schools (Archuleta, Child, & Lomawaima, 2000; Lomawaima, 1994; Szasz, 2005). Plus the violence of dispossession drove Haudenosaunee parents in the 20th century to beg New York state to accept their children into Salem (Burich, 2016). Since U.S. colonization in North America attacked key institutions of Indigenous societies (Ross, 2005), boarding schools were a violent attack upon Indigenous families as well as language and culture. So as the U.S. conquest of Indigenous nations and land shifted from conquest to assimilation, violence was obscured, but it never went away and remains a structural component of settler colonialism.

As many sport sociologists have pointed out, the ascendance of neoliberal capitalism in the 1970s has led to increasing levels of exploitation and inequalities. We have simultaneously seen the growth of the prison-industrial complex and the militarization of police forces (Gilmore, 1998/1999; Parenti, 2008). Throughout this period, race has been a key tool in splitting the working classes (Lipsitz, 1998). Downward economic mobility of White workers from deindustrialization and the weakening of labor consistently gets blamed on workers colonized within the system. Since at least the 1990s, this has presaged the rise of survivalist and White supremacist groups in the United States (Sturken, 2007). These same forces and White anxiety would lead to the Tea Party Movement that itself created the ground for Trumpism (see Skocpol & Williamson, 2016). To make a bad situation worse, economic research shows that neoliberal capitalism has been in crisis since the Great Recession and sub-prime crisis of 2007 and 2008 (Duménil & Lévy, 2011). In effect, we may be looking at the end of neoliberalism without knowing what comes next. We cannot view the deaths of George Floyd, Ahmed Aubry, Breonna Taylor, Vanessa Guillen, and so many others as accidents, coincidences or otherwise aberrations to an otherwise just system. The fear produced by abstract, random violence by the state and vigilantes to whom the state delegates the rights of racial violence is central to the operation of racial capitalism since it stabilizes crises caused by resistance to U.S. imperialism (Marable, 1983).

Cedric Robinson (2000) used the term racial capitalism to argue that racial and economic domination are inseparable; they are two sides of the same oppressive coin. His larger point is that rather than negate feudalism, capitalism brought feudal racial hierarchies into the political and economic order of the modern world (Kelly, 2017). Therefore, the particularities of feudal Europe (racial and ethnic, linguistic, tribal, class, and regional) were brought into contemporary capitalism. Capitalism did not root out feudal slavery; it expanded it and made it more virulent. This also means that capitalist accumulation is based on particularistic violence, just like feudalism (Pulido, 2017). Workers, whether wage or slave, have always been policed by states that use violence to protect unstable systems of accumulation. So while there are important differences between feudalism and capitalism, for example, capitalism globalized feudal social hierarchies, feudal strategies of accumulation were repurposed and updated under new conditions. We can see this in how feudal notions of race remain sedimented in nationalistic discourses of blood and soil (Kelly, 2017). So just as serfs and Slavs had taken the “natural” role of slaves in feudalism, peoples of the Global South became natural slaves under capitalist imperialism (Robinson, 2000). Or, as I tell students, racial capitalism names the system in systemic racism (see Feagin, 2006).

What we have witnessed this past year is a serious challenge to racial capitalism. Radical Black activism is the Achilles Heel of

U.S. imperialism and White supremacy (Marable, 1983). The level of state and vigilante violence in recent years has been so egregious, sustained, and visible that Black activists have triggered a multiracial movement for racial justice. I do not want to overstate the role of athletes in these movements since they exist in a dialectical relationship with broader activism. However, the impact of Colin Kaepernick's protests in 2016 is hard to overstate. We also need to place Kaepernick within a tradition of Black athletic protest against colonial state violence: in the early 1970s, African American cheerleaders at Brown University protested racial violence by kneeling during the national anthem ("The cheerleaders," 1973); Ariyana Smith of Knox College protested police violence in 2014; and WNBA players were protesting state violence prior to Kaepernick in 2016 (Vasilogambros, 2016). While citizen activists are inspired by athletic activists, recent street protests give athletic activists courage and the opportunity to engage in far more radical industrial actions than Kaepernick's iconic protests. When Naomi Osaka, NBA teams, or the University of Missouri football's team engage in wild cat strikes for racial justice, they recognize themselves as workers with interests beyond their own bread and butter concerns. By withholding their labor power even if it is only fleeting, it creates a labor problem for sporting capitalists that triggers a crisis by blocking the movement of capital and hence capitalists' ability to accrue surplus values (Harvey, 2010). The protests present a crisis for sports leagues on two fronts: on the labor side, leagues like the NFL and NBA rely on Black labor power, but their workers are furious about state and vigilante violence against Black people and the leagues that attempt to avoid those issues. On the consumption side, during a period of racial crisis, fans are polarized over athletes engaging in progressive politics during sporting events, which creates another divisive theater of the contemporary culture wars.

Protect the Shield

Athletic activists' protests against state violence in communities of color is fundamentally an attack upon racial capitalism. The NFL has tried to insulate itself from this attack by treating it as a publicity crisis in need of management. In other words, the NFL is trying to situate the current crisis within their existing marketing model. The NFL views the protests as militant Black workers threatening capital accumulation by alienating large groups of fans. Its response, initially, was highly inconsistent but has got much more consistent and sophisticated. Ultimately, the NFL has integrated Black players' protest against state violence into its marketing to form a colonial governmentality. To explain this, I first need to outline the NFL's marketing over the past decade or so.

The NFL set the goal of making \$25 billion a year by 2027 (Soshnick & Novy-Williams, 2019), which meant it would need to aggressively expand its already large, diverse market. However, that goal is challenged by broader forces that drive cultural change and market instability. One challenge is demographics and society, the United States is quickly becoming truly multiracial and youth have a greater range of and more flexible gendered identities to choose from than in previous generations (Montez de Oca, Scholes, & Meyer, 2016, p. 4). Similarly, in the 1990s, the NFL realized it would need to attract women to expand its market since the male market was essentially saturated (Montez de Oca & Cotner, 2018, p. 112). The NFL is further challenged by an expansion of entertainment options such as competing sports (e.g., basketball, soccer, mixed martial arts, alternative sports, etc.) and new media technologies (e.g., video games, social media, portable devices,

etc.). Finally, it is challenged by growing anxieties about the health risks of football, especially amongst middle-class parents (Montez de Oca, Meyer, & Scholes, 2016, p. 103).

Consistent with marketing theories of experience (e.g., Holbrook, 2000; Pine & Gilmore, 1998), the NFL developed a powerful, emotional marketing strategy. The campaign "Together We Make Football" drew a connection between football, community, and family while its more recent "Football Is Family" campaign gets to the central, pleasurable experience of sports fandom: football is central to the emotional connections in our families, amongst our friends, and in our communities (Montez de Oca & Cotner, 2018). It suggests we are all the children of football. Through programs such as USA Football and Heads Up Football, the NFL has argued that the game can not only be made safe through improved techniques and technology, it is healthy (Montez de Oca, Meyer, & Scholes, 2016). Ultimately, the NFL responded to the growing competition, changing demographics, increased health concerns, and addressing new market segments by appearing more diverse and inclusive; by offering more entertaining products that have greater production quality; and, most importantly, with the argument that not only can football be made more safe, but it is also actually healthy to individuals, families, and communities (Montez de Oca, Scholes, & Meyer, 2016).

The Black players' protests and the conservative reactions to the protests, including tweets and speeches by the U.S. President, disrupted the happy story the NFL was telling (Montez de Oca & Suh, 2019); as had the gendered and sexual violence of many of its players previously (Montez de Oca & Cotner, 2018). Its reaction was contradictory attempts to appease both its liberal and conservative fans as well as its mostly Black on-field workers—the people whose labor generates those billions of dollars (Montez de Oca & Dehart-Reed, 2019). It seemed to constantly switch from a position of tolerance to cracking down on its "ungrateful" (which Jelani Cobb calls a codeword for "uppity"; Cobb, 2017) workers. Over time, and especially in 2020, the NFL has gone beyond a position of tolerance of the protests to incorporating the protests into its spectacle. We should not think that Roger Goodell suddenly woke up to Black pain, but understand the shift as a strategic response to how the players' protests and mass street protests shifted the zeitgeist in 2020 that in turn led to increased pressure on the NFL from sponsors (e.g., Carpenter, 2020).

Incorporating Protest—My Cause, My Cleats

The NFL's first step in incorporating the protests was the "My Cause, My Cleats" initiative that allows players to put statements of support for causes of their own choice on their shoes ("NFL players'," 2016)—generally shout outs to different nonprofits. My initial reaction was that My Cause, My Cleats dilutes the players' focus on state violence into lots of other good causes and thereby incorporates the players' protests into the NFL's existing marketing strategy; volunteerism in communities that suggests the NFL and its workers are good for community health. This is visible in Roger Goodell and Doug Baldwin's "Letter to Senate Judiciary Committee" when they stated:

Football and community are the twin pillars of the NFL. Whether nationally at the league level, locally at the team level, or individually through the volunteerism and philanthropy of owners, players, coaches and club personnel, there exists a powerful NFL-wide commitment to giving back . . .

Last season, as part of our My Cause, My Cleats initiative, *several players chose to highlight equality and justice on their cleats, while others chose causes related to supporting the difficult work of law enforcement.* These expressions of player advocacy aptly capture the challenges we currently see as a nation—ensuring that every American has equal rights and equal protection under the law, while simultaneously ensuring that all law enforcement personnel have the proper resources, tools, and training and are treated with honor and respect (Goodell & Baldwin, 2017: emphasis added).

To test my dilution hypothesis, I conducted a content analysis on the messages players put on their shoes. A comprehensive list of the causes that players put on their feet in 2018 shows that 790 players put 805 messages on their 1,580 feet (Goldberg, 2018). Table 1 shows that 45% listed physical and mental health causes (e.g., breast cancer, lupus, brain tumors, suicide, ongoing medical research, etc.), and 27% listed youth welfare causes (e.g., mentoring, free breakfasts, youth athletics, etc.). This means that almost three-quarters of the causes promoted on players' feet were either health or youth welfare-focused. While these are good causes, they are not directly related to the players' protests against state violence in Black communities. Instead, they were more consistent with the NFL's traditional corporate social responsibility marketing (The United Way, the Boys & Girls Club of America, and breast cancer awareness, which were on some players' feet). Messages directly related to the protests, police violence, and criminal justice reform only made up 1% of the statements.² And of that 1%, several were in support of the Ross Initiative in Sport for Equality that was founded by Miami Dolphins owner Stephen Ross and includes former-NFL commissioner Paul Tagliabue on its Board ("Who we are," 2020). So the messages of NFL worker-activists that wanted to further the protests through My Cause, My Cleats were rearticulated through NFL messaging and organizations.

The numbers show that, in fact, My Cause, My Cleats appropriates the radical energy of Black NFL players in a feel-good

initiative that doubles as NFL marketing. We need not question any of the foundations or initiatives supported by the players or the player's good intentions since recognizing players' good works in different communities for different causes is exactly the dilution.

Players Coalition and Politics of Recognition

Anquan Boldin and Malcom Jenkins founded the Players' Coalition to work with the NFL on social justice issues. The Coalition has some notable accomplishments:

- It is credited with getting the NFL to commit to donating \$90 million to social justice organizations ("Impact," 2020).
- And it has lent support for criminal justice reform.
 - They collected 1,400 signatures on a letter calling for an end of Qualified Immunity and pressured the federal government to investigate the shooting death of Ahmed Aubry, amongst other achievements ("Impact," 2020).
 - It has done important work in connecting unequal COVID-19 health outcomes to racial inequality and raised "\$3.05 million toward 'relief efforts in communities of color through 34 organizations in seven markets'" (Simon, 2020).

There is no question that these are good things and illustrate the power of celebrity activism. But this also begs the question, what is the model of activism? The Players Coalition is an example of what gets called the nonprofit industrial complex, or a set of relationships whereby people on the ground doing social justice work get funded by foundations and private corporations via 501(c)(3) status (INCITE!, 2017). Douglas Hartmann's (2016) research on midnight basketball demonstrates that this neoliberal strategy is not unique to the NFL. Small grassroots organizations desperately need funding to do their work, which creates the opportunity for foundations and private corporations to exert control and surveillance over their social justice work. This does not mean the people doing social justice work are not sincerely committed or able to do good work, but the very system in systemic racism funds and thus exerts control over the work to dismantle systemic racism, amongst other things.

This means that the tactical solutions to racial capitalism get organized in a way that does not actually challenge racial capitalism. Two things we see emphasized by the Players Coalition are education and voting. Of course, education is valuable in and of itself but is limited as a strategy to address the racial wealth gap or internal colonialism. Education may create a more valuable, expensive worker, but it does not generate socially just economic development, which is what poor communities really need (Ball, 2020). Also, data shows that Whites tend to have more resources to invest in education and consistently out-earn Blacks with equal education, which means education actually advantages Whites relative to Blacks (Darity et al., 2018, pp. 6–7). So, although important, education is only part of a solution to racial inequality that demands addressing other structural issues. Voting is also presented as a primary solution to the problems in communities. Democratic processes are important, but elections oftentimes also reify the system that needs to be challenged. Or, as my students like to say, capitalists are not going to let you vote them out of power.

In and of themselves, these are not bad tactics, but the real issue is strategic. Are these tactics employed to stabilize racial capitalism in crisis? Or, are they employed to build a more just world that will actually move us beyond the middle ages? The

Table 1 My Cause, My Cleats Messaging in 2018

Physical and mental health	45% (359)
Health general	26% (212)
Breast cancer	4% (32)
Mental health	4% (32)
Youth health	10% (83)
Youth welfare	27% (218)
Support for military or police	6% (50)
Community development	6% (46)
Education	5% (38)
Families	2% (17)
Animal rights	2% (18)
Peace and justice	1% (10)
Violence (not IPV)	1% (10)
IPV	1% (9)
Police violence and CJ reform	1% (9)
Sustainability	1% (9)
Sexual violence (not IPV)	1% (8)
Total	100% (805)

Note. Source: Goldberg (2018). IPV = intimate partner violence; CJ = criminal justice.

Players Coalition engages in a politics of recognition whereby certain select social justice organizations are recognized and funded by the League for the purpose of racial reconciliation. The goal of the nonprofit industrial complex is to put racial violence and the racial wealth gap in the past but without dismantling the institutional structures that created the violence and inequality in the first place. This is what Glen Sean Coulthard (2014) calls “colonial governmentality,” whereby the space of recognition and reconciliation is not a space of freedom and dignity but a field of power through which colonial relations are produced and maintained. Instead of fostering decolonial subjectivities, it fosters colonized subjectivities to manage the labor and consumption power as well as the land of colonized people. Which is why I think Eric Reid accused Malcolm Jenkins of being “a neo-colonial sellout” (Connolly, 2018).

Making Sense of Shawn (Jay-Z) Carter?

This perspective on colonial governmentality gets us to the ROC Nation-NFL-Inspire Change strategic partnership. When ROC Nation partnered with the NFL, many people immediately called Shawn Carter a sellout. Others responded that it is too soon to judge his actions and intentions. He should be given more time to see if he is a sellout or not. Debating whether or not Shawn Carter is a sellout is asking the wrong question since it individualizes Jay-Z’s political strategy and reduces his politics to morality and individual intentions. Although he is a successful business person, Shawn Carter is not unique in political-economic philosophy or strategies of action within a society structured by racial capitalism.

A way to understanding Shawn Carter is through what I consider the best defense of his strategic partnership with the NFL. This line of thinking says that Jay-Z is not a sellout, he is a pragmatist who acted with political *maturity* rather than with emotions or idealism. Michael Eric Dyson provided the best example of the maturity defense (Dyson, 2019; also Granderson, 2019). Dyson makes a one-two argument of what he sees as a natural progression of effective social movements. He begins by equating Kaepernick and Jay-Z to Malcolm X and Martin Luther King: “those pairs reflect an eternal tension—the outside agitators who apply pressure and the inside activators who patrol the halls of power, bringing knowledge and wisdom—in civil rights and black freedom movements” (Dyson, 2019). We don’t choose between one or the other; he continues, we need the outsider applying pressure, so the insider can get things done.

Dyson then pivots to argue that Jay-Z actually reflects not King but Jesse Jackson, who extended King’s activism by suing corporations to achieve civil rights gains. “This reflected a shift in civil rights strategy from street protests to suite participation. Jackson leveraged the threat of boycotts and the rhetoric of persuasion to get more Blacks placed on corporate boards, compel banks and major companies to direct more business to minority-owned contractors, and help integrate more Black and other minority folks into the nation’s economic power base” (Dyson, 2019). Developing the idea of natural progression in social justice struggles, Dyson explains: “Jay did not write off protest when he said we are ‘past kneeling.’ He simply cast Kaepernick as a runner in a relay race rather than a boxer fighting alone in the ring” (Dyson, 2019). The evidence of success that Dyson offers is the amount of money the NFL now donates to social justice causes.

While I have already argued Inspire Change operates within the nonprofit industrial complex, I also want to add that Dyson’s defense of Shawn Carter indicates a philosophical orientation

toward racial justice. As Brentin (Mock, 2019) explains, “There are those who see justice in terms of truth, fairness, and equity. And then there are those who . . . see it in terms of wealth, power, and equity. The latter group [tend to be pragmatists impatient with abstract] goods [like] “rights” and “equality”—[If] asked to choose between “a Lexus or justice” . . . they . . . would answer, “Justice is forming a partnership with Lexus.” In other words, people that Marable (1983) calls opportunists want to use the market to achieve social justice since the problem apparently is a lack of wealth by itself. Buying in becomes what is defined as mature political action rather than idealists who like Kaepernick who hold radical positions. I agree with Dyson that Shawn Carter should not be considered a sellout since he is *buying in*, not *selling out*. But buying into the system in this situation is using Black capitalism as an antidote to racial capitalism.

Black Capitalism

This begs the question, what is Black capitalism? Andrew F. Brimmer, the first Black member of the Federal Reserve System, defined it as “Black business ownership and the location of these businesses in ghettos” (Brimmer & Terrell, 1969, p. 3). The political-economic philosophy that would eventually get called Black capitalism first emerged after the Civil War as a strategy of economic development for freed slaves. The social context of violent exclusion led to the creation of Black banks in order to control the flow of Black wealth (Ball, 2020; Baradaran, 2017; Marable, 1983). Keeping Black wealth within the Black community would foster the Black community’s economic development. A core tenet of Black capitalism is investment in Black ownership and entrepreneurialism, which is expressed in slogans such as “Buy Black” and “Bank Black.” It is important to recognize that Black ownership and entrepreneurialism goes beyond economic development. It also became a force of community pride and esteem amidst extraordinarily oppressive, stigmatizing conditions (Baradaran, 2017, p. 2).

The term “Black capitalism” was promulgated in the late-1960s by Richard Morehouse Nixon, and many Black scholars were highly critical of it at the time (Bluestone, 1969; Boggs, 1970; Booms & Ward, 1969; Tate, 1970). Nixon saw Black radicals as an internal threat to national sovereignty during the cold war, and so he offered Black capitalism as a means of pacifying radical Black activism (Weems & Randolph, 2001a, 2001b). Essentially, a socialist Black Power movement was rearticulated as Black capitalism (Ball, 2020; Marable, 1983). This shifted the focus from the state’s obligation to underdeveloped communities to private enterprise and individual entrepreneurialism (Baradaran, 2017). It allowed some activists to buy into the system and opened up racial justice work to business people (Bashir, 2019; Coleman, 2019; Mock, 2019).

The idea of building parallel institutions that cater to a specific racial or ethnic group in a segregated society is not unique to the Black community. In the 19th and early 20th centuries, building racial and ethnic businesses within segregated ghettos was a common response to White supremacy. But we need to keep in mind that segregation is not just social, it is also economic. Which gets us to the limitations of Black capitalism within a virulently anti-Black, capitalist society. When ethnic Europeans like Jews and Italians became White in the 20th century, both they and their capital left their ethnic ghettos (Lipsitz, 1998). For instance, Italian Americans founded the Bank of Italy to serve their community. But as economic segregation broke down and Italians became White,

they integrated not just into U.S. society but the U.S. economy. And thus, the Bank of Italy became Bank of America (Baradaran, 2017, p. 6). Therefore, it was the removal of institutional barriers, not advanced business sense that allowed Italians to become White.

The critique of Black capitalism, whether practiced by Madame C.J. Walker, John H. Johnson, Roy Innis, or Shawn (Jay-Z) Carter, begins with E. Franklin Frazier (Ball, 2020; Coleman, 2019). The Black bourgeoisie supports Black capitalism since it minimizes White competition and allows them to achieve market capture. Black pride and solidarity get mobilized to serve the economic needs of the Black bourgeoisie (Baradaran, 2017; Darity et al., 2018). When Black liberatory politics was moved into the market, Black capitalism moved the politics of Black activists into the hands of Black business people, and Black activism shifted to Black consumerism (Ball, 2020).

Further, Black capitalism is predicated on highly destructive racial stereotypes (Dixon, 2017). Specifically, it presumes Black people lack financial literacy or discipline and therefore do not use their wealth wisely—think of Jay-Z's song *The Story of OJ* (Ball, 2020; Coleman, 2019). Unsupported by financial data—Black people are as economically sophisticated and responsible as any other racial group (Darity et al., 2018)—the stereotype pathologizes, individualizes, and distracts from the operation of White supremacy (Ball, 2020). We can see this in the argument that homeownership will close the racial wealth gap. So while homeownership may drive wealth, as Darity et al. (2018, p. 11) point out, homeownership is wealth which is the same as saying that wealth drives wealth. Keep in mind that it wasn't just ethnic Whites that escaped the ghetto; it was ethnic White capital as indicated by the Bank of Italy becoming Bank of America. The problem is wealth has been segregated, although capital flows throughout the market. Therefore, this is not about individuals making good investment choices; instead, the racial state needs to intervene as it did for ethnic Whites (Ball, 2020; Baradaran, 2017; Lipsitz, 1998). As Mehrsa Baradaran states: "The truth was that segregated communities could not segregate their money. In fact, Black banks, which were created to control the Black dollar, became the very mechanism through which Black money flowed out of the Black community and into the mainstream White economy" (Baradaran, 2017, p. 5).

Black capitalism is based on false assumptions about wealth and the operation of capitalism. Jared (Ball, 2020) argues that there is a myth based on bad interpretations of data that Blacks in the United States have \$1 trillion of buying power. He replies that unlike wealth, buying power is a consumerist measure of economic strength—consumers can only buy what is made available to them—that is used by corporations to promote their products (Ball, 2020, pp. 8–15). Ultimately, the myth of buying power obscures the structural realities of how racial capitalism actually works. White supremacy and economic segregation create barriers that people cannot buy their way out of. What Black capitalism does is shift the onus and cost of racial and economic equity from the state to individuals and communities, which costs little for politicians and business people while offering large political and financial returns.

What we see from Nixon to Trump's "opportunity zones" is formal statements of concern without meaningful investment in communities (Coleman, 2019). The words appeal to liberals while the policies appeal to conservatives. But as Andrew Brimmer argued, Black capitalism was doomed to failure for structural reasons (Brimmer & Terrell, 1969). Think about it like this, Walmart "employed 2.2 million more workers than the entire top 100 Black-owned firms combined. In fact, Walmart's annual revenue—the largest private employer in the United States—also

exceeds those of all 2.58 million Black-owned businesses combined" (Darity et al., 2018, pp. 17–18). Ultimately, Black capitalism does not address the structural problems that create Black poverty and anti-Black violence; at best, it shifts more Black money into a few Black pockets—transferring Black exploitation to Black exploiters (Ball, 2020; Baradaran, 2017). At the same time, we have seen increased policing of dissent through discourses of "law and order" since the 1970s (Parenti, 2008). Again capitalism is based on fraud and force.

Viewing Inspire Change through the frame of the nonprofit industrial complex and Black capitalism clarifies how it operates within a colonial governmentality. It shifts the obligation of the imperialist state to undo its harms (conquest, slavery, segregation, etc.) onto small nonprofits and small businesses. It provides solutions consistent with the logic of capital to problems of its own creation. Funding allows the NFL to present concern about racial justice while insulating itself from a political challenge. Shawn Carter legitimates the strategy by offering a symbol of authenticity, an image of radical Blackness within a strategy of Black capitalism (Ellis, 2020; McNeill, 2019; Mock, 2019; Wallace, 2019).

Conclusion

Fred Hampton argued that the greatest threat to U.S. imperialism is a multiracial, socialist solidarity movement (Ellis, 2020). For this reason, capitalists inside and outside of the NFL have every reason to fear the current wave of racial justice activism and especially the activism of Black professional athletes. Without a doubt, the imperialist state continues to use violence as a means to stabilize crises in racial capitalism. But naked violence does not effectively respond to the moral claims of racial justice activists that call attention to the immorality of highly visible state violence. This is the role of entertainment like professional sports. It obscures the militarism of U.S. imperialism by focusing on the pleasures of consumerism. But that also empowers radical Black athletes. When professional sports leagues are dependent upon Black workers who come from communities pinched in the vice-like grip of White supremacy, they can challenge the consumerist illusion through industrial actions, such as kneeling during the national anthem. The NFL and other leagues are now working very hard to restore the illusion. Whether it is preapproved social justice statements, playing "Lift Every Voice and Sing," or providing limited funding for nonprofits doing the work that the state should be doing, they engage in a politics of recognition rather than decolonial praxis.

Hiring Black entrepreneurs like Shawn Carter provides a sheen of authentic Blackness on old practices. Like my father teaching me to love gridiron football, this is a kind of colonial governmentality whereby the liberatory energy of radical Black politics is routed into the very system in systemic racism—racial capitalism. As Manning Marable reminds us, there is no path to liberation within capitalism and imperialism (Marable, 1983, p. 256). And we do not need conspiracy theories to explain high levels of coordination between different sectors because the logic of capitalism creates a confluence of interests between state and corporate actors that is contrary to the interests of the vast majority of workers, whether athletic or not.

Once again, this demonstrates the significance of the Black athletic body within racial capitalism. The centrality of Black athletes within sporting regimes of accumulation makes sport a key site in the formation, deformation, and reformation of race. The aspirational racial projects of Black athletic activists whether in the

National Collegiate Athletic Association (NCAA), NFL, NBA, Women's National Basketball Association (WNBA), or Women's Tennis Association (WTA) contest the corporatist strategies of their leagues that attempt to reincorporate them into their regimes of accumulation. As Ben Carrington explains, "... the black athlete as a commodity-sign is thus appropriated, its political symbolic potential neutered, and finally 'domesticated' by its exploitation within contemporary consumer society and its attendant media culture The black athlete is imagined in all of these iterations as containing and quite literally embodying *power* itself." (Carrington, 2010, p. 88 [emphasis in original]). The question for athletic activists is whether or not they will be able to rearticulate Blackness and politics outside of racial capitalism and colonial governmentalities?

As I wrote the conclusion to this talk, I wondered what paths outside of capitalism are available to us. So I turned to the theme of this year's conference: change agents and WEB Dubois. It turns out Dubois, amongst many other African American intellectuals, including A. Philip Randolph, Marcus Garvey, E. Franklin Frazier, Nannie Helen Burroughs, Ella Baker, Fannie Lou Hamer, and John Lewis advocated for Black co-operatives. That discovery led me to Jessica Gordon Nembhard's (2014) incredible book *Collective Courage: A History of African American Cooperative Economic Thought and Practice*. Nembhard shows that there is a buried history in the United States of Black people organizing collectively and co-operatively to not just survive White supremacy but to prosper. While organizing collectively does not have to be anti-capitalist, it often is because it is fundamentally about community empowerment and solidarity (Patmore & Balnave, 2018). Cooperatives pool a community's wealth to overcome barriers, they provide a means of keeping the wealth workers' generate in the hands of workers, and they foster workplace democracy.

I see this as a subject for further research since the idea of sport co-operatives is fairly new to me (though I am familiar with the Green Bay Packers), and little research on sport co-operatives exists. This is a useful focus for further research since a successful global co-operative movement already exists, it is consistent with Indigenous and traditional economic organization, it can chart a noncapitalist path, and not only are sports already co-operative, but sport co-operatives could foster healthier forms of sport such as what Jay Coakley (2020) calls "people's sport" and other models of sport outside of the dominant elite model. So hopefully, I will be able to talk to you about successful sport co-operatives in the future.

Notes

1. Adopted from Gracie RedShirt Tyon, Oglala Lakota.
2. I was similarly curious about the messaging on players' shoes in 2016 when the program began. Since I could not find a comprehensive list for the 2016 season, I pieced together the messages of 52 players out of the 800 players that participated in 2016. While we should approach these numbers with caution given the sample size, I found that over 63% placed statements in support of physical and mental health, over 25% supported youth welfare, and none placed messages calling out police violence or support for criminal justice reform.

Acknowledgment

Special thanks to Sherry Mason for research assistance.

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