

# Sport and National Identities

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## Chapter 8

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### Confronting America

**Black commercial aesthetics, athlete activism and the nation reconsidered**

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## Confronting America

### Black commercial aesthetics, athlete activism and the nation reconsidered

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#### **(Re)introducing the Black athlete within American politics**

At the start of the 2016 National Football League (NFL) preseason, San Francisco 49ers quarterback Colin Kaepernick exercised his constitutional right to freedom of speech by sitting silently during the national anthem. In doing so, he confronted, and confounded, the notions of freedom and egalitarianism through which the American populace has come to imagine, and indeed mythologise, itself. Importantly, this act of civil defiance articulated him to the emergent yet loosely coalesced Black Lives Matter movement, thereby bringing Kaepernick not insignificant levels of popular support. Amidst a climate of persistent systemic racial discrimination, and seemingly unrelenting police shootings of unarmed people of colour, Kaepernick drew attention to inequities institutionalised within the American justice system. According to his stance – rather than being an institution of justice, fairness, and rehabilitation as is oftentimes uncritically assumed – America’s punitive law and order complex functions as a mechanism for reproducing the racial inequities and injustices that have long characterised the American condition (Feagin, 2010; Giroux, 2006). Continuing the protest into the regular season, Kaepernick stated that he is:

not going to stand up to show pride in a flag for a country that oppresses black people and people of color. To me, this is bigger than football and it would be selfish on my part to look the other way. There are bodies in the street and people getting paid leave and getting away with murder.  
(Quoted in O’Connor, 2016)

In taking this stand, Kaepernick joined a venerable list of Black American athletes who, in response to distinct social and historical moments throughout the twentieth and early-twenty-first centuries, defied America’s systemic white privilege by drawing attention to the persistent race-based hierarchies and inequities responsible for the racially fractured nature of the American experience (Colby, 2013).

Following the lead of Muhammad Ali, Tommie Smith, John Carlos, Jim Brown, Kareem Abdul-Jabbar, Althea Gibson, and many others rooted in America's sporting past, Kaepernick's resolute protestation spoke to a long-standing tradition of Black athletes challenging racial injustice within America (Boykoff, 2016; Carrington, 2010; Zirin, 2005). However, he also drew inspiration, and subsequently motivated, less-heralded figures stirred by the recently reignited protest movement against various forms of race-based discrimination. For example, Ariyana Smith, a Knox College women's basketball player enacted a courageous, and inceptive, 2014 protest in Missouri following the shooting of Michael Brown in nearby Ferguson (during the anthem, Smith raised her hands in the 'don't shoot' gesture before lying on the court for four and a half minutes to symbolise the four and a half hours that police allowed Brown's corpse to lay in the street (see Zirin, 2014)). A year later, the University of Missouri football team lent significant weight to a broader student-led protest movement by refusing to practise or play until University President Tim Wolfe resigned<sup>1</sup> (Pearson, 2015). Increasingly, athletes at high school, collegiate, and professional levels across the country are using their sport-ascribed platforms to speak out, opening up new spaces of dialogic engagement to address the existential realities of racial oppression within the nation. Each week, more NFL players joined Kaepernick by sitting (Jeremy Lane (Seattle Seahawks)), raising a fist (Marcus Peters (Kansas City Chiefs)), taking a knee (Arian Foster and teammates (Miami Dolphins)), or interlocking arms during the anthem (San Diego Chargers) (cf. Teicher, 2016), and his actions even drew support from sections of the military, police, and service communities.

By publicly defying expected performances of uncritical deference to the American project through the powerful symbolic gesture of refusing to *honour* the flag (as metonym for the nation), Kaepernick predictably stirred a welter of public criticism on traditional and social media alike. Sportswriters, news media pundits, fans, and athletes (NASCAR driver Tony Stewart typified the views of his ilk when referred to Kaepernick as an 'idiot' on the social media site Twitter (see Martin, 2016)), have chided the racially mixed star quarterback for being 'disrespectful' of the flag, anthem, and America itself (Moore, 2016), and intrinsically unpatriotic. Far from lacking patriotism, the resistive acts and utterances of these activist athletes demonstrate a deep-rooted commitment to, and concern for, the state of the nation and its peoples (Zirin, 2005). As Kaepernick later commented (in response to opposition fans directing 'USA, USA' chants at him in a manner that questioned his patriotism):

I don't understand what's un-American about fighting for liberty and justice for everybody, for the equality this country says it stands for ... To me, I see it as very patriotic and American to uphold the United States to the standards that it says it lives by.

(Quoted in Wagoner, 2016)

In what Frantz Fanon (1986) would likely consider to be the psychological internalisation of the master's oppressive racial logics, some negative responses to Kaepernick's performative resistance also emerged from a few Black athletes; former NFL player Rodney Harrison later apologised for suggesting that, 'he isn't even black', while San Francisco 49er legend Jerry Rice Tweeted that, 'all lives matter ... I respect your stance but don't disrespect the flag' (Martin, 2016). However, as he himself intoned, as a continuation of a progressive tradition of athlete resistance, Kaepernick's act of seated dissent is fundamentally patriotic; challenging the uncritical genuflection toward flag, and nation, that a politically neutered American citizenry is socialised into embodying.

Despite intimations up to this point, this chapter is not an in-depth examination of Kaepernick's actions, intentions, or the variegated responses to it. Rather, its preoccupation is what could be characterised as the Kaepernick moment. Our aim is to delineate the contextual forces (cultural, economic, and political) that coalesced to create the space for high-profile Black athletes, such as Kaepernick, to become more visible representatives, and thereby effective agents, of the seemingly more strident and progressive Black politics presently in evidence. Primarily as a means of diversifying product offerings, and thereby expanding market reach, post-Fordist capitalism's preoccupation with the aesthetic and/or stylistic dimensions of racial and ethnic difference (Davidson, 1992) has led to the commercial mobilisation of the 'languages of the margin' (Hall, 1992: 34). Representations, embodiments, and performances of (predominantly urban) Blackness are now redolent features of the popular cultural economy. They are signifiers of a form of alterity that imputes commodities with a symbolic value exuding a seemingly authentic notion of difference (Hall, 1992: 31). American mainstream (read: White) culture's residual fear of Black bodies (Boyd, 1997, 2003) is thus complicated by a commercially fanned popular fascination with it: today's is a cultural condition simultaneously exhibiting both 'blackophilic' and 'blackophobic' tendencies (Yousman, 2003). Black bodies may appear in all manner of American advertising, media, music, entertainment, and sport, yet they continue to be oppressed in both material and symbolic terms (Tucker, 2003; Watkins, 2005). It is our contention that the dichotomy between spectacularised and vernacular forms of Blackness has prompted numerous highly visible and popular Black Americans specifically within popular cultural fields such as music, entertainment, and sport (for example, actors Jesse Williams, Viola Davis, and Laverne Cox; musicians Beyoncé, D'Angelo, and Lupe Fiasco; and athletes Serena Williams, Maya Moore, and Dwayne Wade) to use their commercially initiated public personas as platforms for advancing politically progressive ways of thinking, and acting, which challenge the enduring iniquities and injustices of the American racial formation. Previously, the mainstream commercial appropriation of the aesthetics, representatives,

and symbolism of Black political movements of the 1960s and 1970s saw the depoliticising of this progressive politics through its reduction to being little more than a stylistic flourish (Frank, 1997; Gilroy, 2001). In the present moment – and whether intentionally or not (and everything points to the latter) – post-Fordism’s covetous colonisation, and monetising advancement, of various expressions and embodiments of Black difference has arguably contributed to the re-energisation of Black politics within the USA. This is the Kaepernick moment: a confluence of economic, cultural, and political forces, enabling the emergence of twenty-first century Black athlete protests, realised through the hyper-visibility of what are richly commodified and highly spectacularised sport celebrity-advocates, and rooted in a critical response to both recent events of highly publicised police violence against people of colour, and the more general persistence of institutionally and informally wrought race-based discrimination.

Within this chapter we offer a preliminary mapping of the Black athlete’s place within this moment of fraught national dialogue around issues of race and racial difference. In doing so, we consider the role of prominent Black athletes as high-profile figures within a progressive political movement that threatens to challenge the exclusive whiteness of American national identity, by unequivocally incorporating bodies of colour within popular (re)imaginings of national citizenship and belonging. The discussion begins with an explication of how, within an era pre-dating the current reignition of issues pertaining to race and raced-based discrimination, high-profile Black bodies were oftentimes used by commercial interests as seductive signifiers of Black aesthetics and culture, in a manner that expunged any originally intended vestiges of political derivation, intent, or effect. Through reference to the widespread commercial re-articulation of Muhammad Ali, and the more specific utilisation of singer Marvin Gaye’s iconic performance of the US national anthem at an National Basketball Association (NBA) All-Star Game, the discussion outlines how the aesthetics, representatives, and symbolism of Black political movements of the 1960s and 1970s were subsequently appropriated by mainstream commercial interests in a wholly depoliticising fashion. The focus subsequently turns to a discussion of NBA basketball player Carmelo Anthony, arguably a figure who most graphically embodies the commercial–political fusion characteristic of the twenty-first-century Black vernacular sporting intellectuals (Farred, 2003) existing and operating within the current conjuncture. The commercially mediated construction of Anthony’s public persona has consistently, and indeed persuasively, cast him as the emblematic progeny of America’s simultaneously mythologised, and pathologised, urban spaces and populations. Promotionally articulated as not only Baltimore’s, but also America’s, basketball-playing *ghetto child*, Anthony was ascribed a level of perceived popular visibility – and, perhaps more pointedly, *urban* cultural authenticity – that ignited interest in, and subsequently corroborated, his heightened

political stridency that materialised as part of the insurgent Black Lives Matter movement. Finally, we consider future potentialities, and indeed obligations, of high-profile athletes to use their considerable public platforms to continue to challenge the social inequities, and injustices, that always already threaten to disallow the realisation of a truly egalitarian American project.

### **From Black progressives to Black aesthetics**

Commenting on late capitalist consumer culture's ability to depoliticise, even the most troubling aspects of Black history and experience, Gilroy noted:

Blackness can now signify vital prestige rather than abjection in a global info-tainment telesector where the living residues of slave societies and the parochial traces of American racial conflict must yield to different imperatives deriving from the planetarization of profit and the cultivation of new markets from the memory of bondage.

(Gilroy, 2001: 36)

This point was empirically extended by Michael Eric Dyson (2016) in his recent recounting of Muhammad Ali's shifting position within the American popular imaginary:

We loved and adored [Muhammad] Ali when he was silenced by disease. But we deplored him when he stood at full stature and full voice against racial injustice. That same Ali tossed his Olympic gold medal into the river because he realized it meant nothing in a country that didn't offer freedom and justice to his people back home. We loved Ali when he was shaking, and quiet, not when he roared like a lion and upset the power dynamics of the culture.

As a charismatic and effusive embodiment of pan-Africanism, Black Nationalism, Black pride and power, Ali had directly challenged the USA's white ethnocentrism by refusing to be a pawn of neocolonial capitalism in Vietnam; refusing to 'be what you want me to be' (Marqusee, 2005: 8). Ali's physically weakened, and thereby politically neutered, state made him more palatable to mainstream white sensibilities – his understated medical struggle now eclipsing his *radical past*. Certainly, commercial interests, especially in the period following his emotive lighting of the Olympic torch at the 1996 Summer Olympic Games in Atlanta (Ezra, 2009; Lemert, 2003; Marqusee, 2005), capitalised upon his physically diminished, yet personally defiant, identity in producing a de-radicalised, racially neutered, and pro-American Ali, who exuded neoliberal America's prerequisite individual

fortitude, determination, and defiance against the indiscriminate foe of Parkinson's disease, rather than targeted against the tyranny of white America.

Ali's transformation from national pariah to American treasure illustrates late capitalism's capacity to accommodate, and thereby defuse, oppositional agents who once embodied a radical racial politics. A memorable Adidas advertisement from 2004 provides a compelling example of this process of commercially driven historical revisionism. Therein, footage (drawn from Leon Gast's 1996 documentary *When We Were Kings*) of Ali running through impoverished villages in Zaire in preparation for his 1974 world title bout with George Foreman, was digitally reproduced to embed the sound and moving images of modern-day Adidas brand athletes (David Beckham, Zinadine Zidane, Maurice Green, Laila Ali, Haile Gebrselassie, Tracy McGrady, and Ian Thorpe). These latter-day sporting celebrities, part of Adidas' 'Impossible is Nothing' campaign, appear to be jogging alongside, and playfully interacting with, the younger boastful Ali. In a postmodern pastiche intended to conjure memories and stimulate the affective sensibilities of consumers, the advertisement seamlessly blends the 'familiar themes of past and present' (PRNewswire, 2004). As noted by then president and CEO of Adidas America, Erich Stamminger, the concept, 'captures in one short thought the essence of Adidas as a brand ... this is what we think at Adidas. It is what we feel – and what our athletes feel as they strive to go further, break new ground and surpass their limits' (PRNewswire, 2004). Historical figures and inspirational stories that corroborate Adidas' brand identity are purposefully selected to reflect the core values of the company and achieve the greatest potential return on investment. In this case, Ali's return to boxing champion in 1974, and the context of his overcoming the odds (indeed, leading up to the fight, prognosticators largely doubted Ali's chances, citing Foreman's brisk annihilation of Joe Frazier and Ken Norton, both of whom had beaten Ali in 1971 and 1973, respectively (Early, 2006)) provided a compelling reality-based historical narrative that expressed Adidas' 'impossible is nothing' mantra. Through the insertion of celebrity athletes (taking the place of African children), original audio snippets of Ali's voice, and the narration of Adidas' brand rhetoric, the advertisement playfully draws upon the past merely as a modality of authenticity to corroborate the valued meaning of achieving against the odds.

Thoroughly decontextualised from the original event, the infamous 'run' has become a widely popular and isolated historical event – being reproduced as not only a metaphor for the life and career of Ali, but for any individual seeking to work hard enough to achieve their goals. The politics of Pan-Africanism, Ali's earlier role in Africa as an emissary of Elijah Muhammad, and the complex racial and cultural politics of the fight's production itself (see, for example, Mailer, 1976; Marqusee, 2005) have

been conveniently erased under the weight of Ali's latter commercial and cultural repositioning. As suggested by Andrews (1999: 80–81):

Ali has in fact become an embodied example of what the novelist E. L. Doctorow described as the 'disappearance of the American radical past': a potentially progressive figure whose insurgent history has been creatively revised, and by that means neutered, in the name of commercial avarice.

(Andrews)

Once represented to, and widely perceived by, white Americans as a dangerous, Black man, a radical threat to the established systems of white supremacy, Ali's embodiment of Black pride and power was creatively refashioned to complement contemporaneous imaginings of American national identity. In particular, within the last decades of his life, Ali became a figure whose previous radicalism was celebrated for its demonstration of his individual courage and fortitude, while his incitement to progressive action was rendered irrelevant through the widespread questioning of the relevance of race-based politics in the era of post-racial delusion (Bonilla-Silva, 2006; Wise, 2010). Thus, a politically de-racinated Ali was enthusiastically welcomed into the pantheon of contemporary American metonyms.

Another instructive example of commercial discourse employing historical figures to convey new imaginings of race and nation can be discerned from a 2008 Nike advertisement featuring the legendary soul singer, Marvin Gaye. The commercial paired archive footage of Gaye's controversial rendition of the national anthem at the 1983 NBA All-Star Game with practise videos of the USA men's basketball team in preparation for the 2008 Beijing Summer Olympics. Given the current national conversation around racism, protest, and the significance of the anthem, the advertisement is useful for deconstructing the manner in which expressions of Black cultural style become stylistically appropriated and conditionally appended to the symbolic weight of an imagined American nationalism. Purposely splicing together images of contemporary NBA players, who are seen flashing in front of Gaye as he performs the 1983 national anthem in his own inimitable style, 'an attempt is made to magically recapture feelings of the past, to convey, with the use of [*soul*, *R&B*] nostalgia, the collective memory and moods' from distant eras (Howell, 1991: 260). Strategically, Nike drew upon the iconic image of a culturally resonant, edgy but not too controversial, deceased figure of authentic Black cultural style, one that can no longer speak for himself but is made to speak and represent any manner of ideas or commercial products in the contemporary late capitalist moment. Gaye's highly stylised anthem performance provided the template for redefining the performative embodiment of commercially viable Black American patriotism, juxtaposing footage of the 2008 USA Men's basketball team



practising fundamentals and downplaying their individual celebrity. It is in such moments of commercial reproduction that the negotiation of cultural meaning is carried out; although the meanings of the past are already representations of themselves, their political impact is further disrupted by the purposeful imposition of new meanings and contexts.

While Ali's radical political past was refashioned by stylistic commercial appropriation of his image in the wake of physical decline, Marvin Gaye's oppositional and subversive style of embodied politics – most notably his seminal 1971 album *What's Going On*, which highlights issues of racism, sexism, poverty, war, and environmental pollution (Dyson, 2005; Neal, 1998) – has been appropriated well after his tragic death. At the 1983 NBA All-Star game, Gaye sang the anthem with a smooth soulful voice and rhythmic inflection that, against the simple backing of a drum machine, countered the normative standards of tonal solemnity. Recounting the event, All-Star centre Kareem Abdul-Jabbar stated that, 'Marvin changed the whole template, and that broadened people's minds. It illuminated the concept, "We're Black and we're Americans. We can have a different interpretation [of the anthem], and that's okay"' (Batchelor, 2005: 43). Jose Feliciano's performance of the anthem at the 1968 World Series, and Jimi Hendrix's 1969 rendition at Woodstock, also spoke to the existential moments of injustice and protest marking the 1960s and 1970s. Neal (1999) notes that Feliciano's performance, concomitant to the pinnacle of anti-Vietnam and Black Power demonstrations, was 'invested with a clear reference to the political discourse(s) of the era' (p. 72). The performance was especially critical given that, amidst increased government surveillance, harassment, and counterintelligence activities directed at groups like the Nation of Islam (NOI), Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC), Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC), and after Dr Martin Luther King's death, the Black Panther party in particular, Black political discourse had been characterised as 'anti-American and anti-law and order' (Neal, 1999: 68; see also Marqusee, 2005; Van Deburg, 1992). Such sentiments, and the continued struggles over defining American identity, consistently reappear in media discourse following any perceived slight by a person of colour against American emblems like the flag or anthem. Black athletes, as representatives of America in international sporting competition, have long known and felt the hypocrisy and conditional love of their country.

After a bronze medal finish at the 2004 Athens Summer Olympics – largely perceived as a *tragic* loss of America's global dominance in basketball – media pundits quickly blamed the 'black male baller' through demonising associations with hip-hop music, cornrows, tattoos, and an individualistic arrogant swagger – the very same characteristics most prized within the broader cultural economy of basketball (Boyd, 2003; Lane, 2007). With all manner of racially charged euphemisms, media sources implicated that it was the 'juvenility between the players and their coach'

(Araton, 2008: 1), and the NBA's 'punks and thugs' with their individualistic, pretentious, and selfish style of play that were the source of the problem (Kindred, 2004 quoted in Leonard, 2006b). One reporter proposed that, stemming from the dominance of the 1992 Dream Team, there was 'an atmosphere among NBA stars of divine right and entitlement that has led to a generation of egocentric players unable to grasp the simple concept of team' (Kindred, 2004: 80). Nike's portrayal of the 2008 'Redeem Team' purposely disrupted the popular signification of the *ghettocentric baller* (Leonard, 2006a), instead relying on the seemingly more palatable, historical image of authentic blackness provided by a Marvin Gaye. Stripped of his progressive politics, the stylistic elements of Gaye's performance offered just enough Black cultural expression to maintain the perception of *urban* authenticity, without overshadowing the implicit message of self-sacrifice, teamwork, and collective effort projected onto the bodies of Team USA's all-Black roster. Thus, the advertisement sought to directly counter the negative racialised perceptions of ungrateful and un-American Black superstars, through the reframing of Gaye's 1983 anthem as an example of *soulful*, yet not oppositional, Black patriotism.

### **Sport's authentic urban activist**

As Black vernacular intellectuals (Farred, 2003), imbued with the power of unparalleled commercial centrality, compounded by immense levels of mass and socially mediated public visibility, today's Black athletes possess the potential to invoke more political intent and influence than their predecessors. This capacity is exemplified by the compelling synthesis of commercially mediated urban authenticity and racially progressive political stridency of NBA player, Carmelo Anthony. Highly popular and commercially relevant, Anthony's hyper-mediated public persona has persuasively positioned him as the emblematic progeny of America's simultaneously mythologised and pathologised urban spaces and populations. Hailing from the unforgiving and, since the death of Freddie Gray while in police custody, the ever more culturally resonant streets of West Baltimore, this urban provenance has proven effective in both legitimising his commercial viability while simultaneously corroborating the form and intent of his recent activism. Already ascribed the status and popular visibility as an arbiter of urban cultural authenticity, Anthony's politicisation is further confirmed through his very real connection to, and first-hand experience of, the plight of urban poverty and racial oppression. In a recent interview discussing his decision to speak out on these issues, Anthony suggested that:

timing is everything, and for me the Freddie Gray thing was the one that tipped me off. It was like something just exploded. It was like [snaps] now was the time. Enough is enough. And everybody's calling

me like, 'We should do this' or 'We should do that,' and I was like, 'I'm going home.' If you want to come with me, you come with me, but I'm going home. I'm not calling reporters and getting on the news; I'm actually going there. I wanted to feel that. I wanted to feel that pain. I wanted to feel that tension.

(Bryant, 2016)

A native Baltimorean, Anthony has long felt a deep connection to the people of Baltimore, particularly those severely isolated communities of colour who have been neglected throughout waves of neoliberal retrenchment, economic restructuring, and targeted criminalisation (Harvey, 2001; Giroux, 2006). Following Gray's death while in police custody in April 2015, Anthony returned home to march in the streets alongside fellow Baltimoreans demanding justice: 'the Freddie Gray situation is right in my backyard. These are my people, people that I grew up with. It's affecting me' (Spears, 2016). Amidst masses of peaceful protesters, demonstrations, and candlelight vigils, mainstream media networks focused much of their attention on an otherwise small group of frustrated young people that looted and burned down a local CVS store. Freddie Gray's arrest record also became a popular headline for commentators to explain, rationalise, or justify the excessive use of force by Baltimore City Police, a department that has paid out millions in legal settlements for police brutality cases involving ethnic minorities (Fernandez, 2015). Little attention was paid to the frightful reality that young Black men are disproportionately victimised by police, that Baltimore has an entrenched history of racist police violence, or the existential reality that 'a riot is the voice of the voiceless' to use the words of Dr King (Fernandez, 2015).

As racial politics in the US regarding poverty, incarceration, and police violence have become more pronounced, Anthony has concurrently become increasingly vocal, organising town hall meetings, and taking the stage at the 2016 Excellence in Sports Performance Yearly Awards (ESPYS) – alongside compatriots LeBron James, Chris Paul, and Dwayne Wade – to express the point that 'the problems are not new, the violence is not new, and the racial divide is not new, but the urgency for change is definitely at an all-time high' (Spears, 2016). Connecting himself to the people of Baltimore, Black people everywhere, and the historical context of struggle against racial oppression, Anthony is redefining the role of the twenty-first-century athlete as revolutionary. In an open letter, Anthony directly addressed America's unchanged racial injustices and called upon his fellow athletes to stand up and be part of the movement for change:

The system is Broken. Point blank period. It has been this way forever. Martin Luther King marched. Malcolm X rebelled. Muhammad Ali literally fought for US. Our anger should be towards the system. If the

system doesn't change we will continue to turn on the TVs and see the same thing. We have to put the pressure on the people in charge in order to get this thing we call JUSTICE right ... I'm pretty sure a lot of people don't have a solution, we need to come together more than anything at this time. We need each other. These politicians have to step up and fight for change. I'm calling for all my fellow ATHLETES to step up and take charge. Go to your local officials, leaders, congressman, assemblymen/assemblywoman and demand change. There's NO more sitting back and being afraid of tackling and addressing political issues anymore. Those days are long gone. We have to step up and take charge. We can't worry about what endorsements we gonna lose or whose going to look at us crazy. I need your voices to be heard. We can demand change. We just have to be willing to. THE TIME IS NOW. IM all in. Take Charge. Take Action. DEMAND CHANGE. Peace7 #StayMe7o.

(Anthony, 2016a)

As one of the NBA's premier talents, Carmelo Anthony speaks from a unique position of authentic street credibility that, in concert with his actual lived experience, has been intertextually layered and thoroughly leveraged by the 'promotional vortex' (Wernick, 1991) of ghettocentric media producers (Leonard, 2006a). As a Black male athlete who has achieved against the odds and risen from the dangerous and dilapidated streets of West Baltimore, Carmelo's inspirational personal story has become further embedded as a more hip, cool, and commercially profitable reformulation of the 'Horatio Alger' American success story (Maharaj, 1997). Ironically, we argue that the very same commercial processes responsible for essentialising the supposed 'urban authenticity' of a player like Anthony, have so thoroughly popularised the myopic tropes of his blackness, that this assumed nature lends further credence to his recent outspoken activism.

As alluded to in the previous section, the commercial media has played a significant role in normalising – to the extent of essentialising – the relationship between race (African American) and space (urban) in the eyes of the viewing and consuming public. In this regard, Kelley (1997: 196) rightly identified the fact that 'representations of the ghetto as a space of play and pleasure amid violence and deterioration are more than simply products of the corporate imagination'. Basketball has long been the game of choice for America's ethnically shifting urban throng (Riess, 1991), and clearly the game was noticeably African Americanised, as that population came to dominate inner city America in the mid to late decades of the twentieth century (Boyd, 2003). However, that is very different from the routine assumption made by the popular media that any Black player within the professional or intercollegiate ranks is assumed to be the progeny of the hyper-ghetto, with all the stereotypical assumptions that arouses. The plain

fact that the majority of NBA players do not hark from such surroundings (Leonard, 2010) clearly becomes obfuscated under the symbolic weight of basketball's overdetermining ghettocentrism, which mobilises stereotypical signifiers of the urban African American experience and associated aesthetics: including socio-spatial location; family history and constitution; and preferences for particular cultural practices, forms of attire, music, hair style, and modes of verbal and non-verbal communication.

Perhaps more than most NBA players, Anthony's mediated image and persona has been at least partly constructed upon minor indiscretions and affiliations that, transposed through the promotional discourses of the 'ghetto-centric imagination', thoroughly connect him to the everyday lived realities of poverty, struggle, and Black oppression within the notorious streets of West Baltimore. These included various traffic violations, marijuana possession charges, and seemingly unwitting involvement in the notorious 'Stop Snitchin' video (Woestendiek, 2005). As a result, Anthony has been closely associated with a specific urban space, that of the poverty-, drug- and crime-ridden streets of West Baltimore. In a city where conditions of intense inequality, social division, and public retrenchment have severely isolated Black communities, ignoring their plight, and leaving them behind in the process of commercialised tourist redevelopment (Friedman, Bustad and Andrews 2013; Harvey, 2001; Silk and Andrews, 2011; Wacquant, 2007, 2009), Anthony's social ascendance through basketball, combined with his long-standing commitment to never forget where he came from, further cements his status as a hometown hero. Indeed, he has even been used as an arbiter of authenticity regarding fictional depictions of Baltimore for NBA.com readers:

While most who watch *The Wire* enjoy the comforts of leather couches and surround sound, Carmelo Anthony watches with an insightful eye. He grew up on the same streets that the show depicts. Carmelo knows the plight of the young black men who survive on the cold corners of West Baltimore ... Carmelo Anthony says, 'It's real. Everything is real about it.'

Carmelo's confirmation about the show's authenticity is frightening. *The Wire's* fourth season focused on middle school children who are sharp and intelligent, but are unable to overcome shattered families: absent fathers, addicted mothers, and grinding poverty.

(Ruderman, 2008)

Furthermore, Anthony's fluid yet dynamic playing style fits easily with common assumptions related to the expressive individualism of inner city basketball, as does his choice of corporeal attire and adornment. Such a comprehensive and compelling urban provenance has provided Anthony with a seductive aura of *ghetto* authenticity, which has proved to be a lucrative form of cultural capital within the commercial marketplace.

Anthony's mediated ghettocentrism, as communicated through a bevy of commercial advertisements and media appearances, has not only (re)produced the logics of neoliberal individualism, but also elevated his stature within the broader movement of Black Lives Matter wherein, amidst contemporary circumstances of racial injustice, he symbolises the authenticity and struggles of the Black 'urban' experience. Speaking out on behalf of those populations most often ignored, oppressed, and criminalised within American politics and media, Anthony is utilising his public platform to raise awareness, demand justice, and garner widespread support for Black Lives Matter, criminal justice reform, and an end to the long and tragic history of police brutality and violence within communities of colour. This is perhaps also where Anthony's established commercial and cultural credibility becomes particularly relevant and timely as he speaks from an authenticated position of experience, which connects him to the struggles of Black Baltimoreans, Black Americans, and people of colour everywhere. Simultaneously, and given his vastly diverse, and indeed globalising fan base as an International Team USA Basketball All-Time Gold Medal leader, the significant power of Anthony's voice also concerns how he is able to draw attention to issues affecting impoverished Black communities that most privileged white Americans are either oblivious to, or sorely misinformed about (Moore, 2016). Specifically, with regard to the pressing issues of police brutality, Anthony suggests:

You've got to be educated to know how to deal with police. The police have to be educated on how to deal with people. The system has to put the right police in the right situations. Like, you can't put white police in the 'hood. You just can't do that. They don't know how to react. They don't know how to respond to those different situations. They've never been around that, you know? When I was growing up, we knew police by their first name. We gave them the nicknames. But that's only because we related. And when the white police came into our neighborhood, the black police said, 'Yo, we got this.' That doesn't happen anymore. You got black police afraid to go into black communities now, and the white police are like, 'Shit, I'll come. It's a job. I'll go in there and do it.' Not knowing what's going to happen.

(Bryant, 2016)

Drawing upon his own experiences, and linking them to the broader history of distrust between Black communities and majority White law enforcement agencies, Anthony is directly broaching topics of American race relations that have, for too long, been concealed under the stultifying weight of colour-blind politics (Bonilla-Silva, 2006) and the auspicious hyper-mediated displays of successful, and politically neutralised, Black athletes, musicians, and entertainers. In effect then,

while the profit-driven ghettocentrism of NBA and NFL cultural producers, as previously articulated (Andrews, Mower and Silk, 2011), sought to essentialise, exploit, and thereby neutralise the capacities of the Black athlete as politically progressive public figures, the abundant popularity of Black American culture has actually helped produce a mass platform for new and more diverse imaginings of American citizenship and social activism.

Nevertheless, sporting bureaucracies and media conglomerates continue their attempts to control the discourse around race, activism, and American politics. In the summer of 2016 the Indiana Fever, New York Liberty, and Phoenix Mercury were each fined \$5,000 (in addition to each player being fined \$500) by the Women's National Basketball Association (WNBA) for violating the league's uniform policy by wearing black warm-up shirts to protest recent shootings of unarmed Black men by police (Evans, 2016). Carmelo Anthony was quick to speak out in support of WNBA players like Tanisha Wright who noted that the league was quick to disperse t-shirts to all WNBA players in support of the Pulse nightclub shooting in Orlando in June, but then was quick to enforce the uniform policy when players wore shirts in remembrance of Alton Sterling and Philandro Castile (Evans, 2016). Although LeBron James and Derrick Rose were not fined for wearing 'I Can't Breathe' t-shirts in honor of Eric Garner in 2014, NBA commissioner Adam Silver made a statement about on-court attire that largely quelled further infractions (Evans, 2016). While both the NBA and NFL have profited from the promotion of its teams, and specifically its constitutive celebrity brands (players) as embodiments of 'the street cool that moves the merchandise' (Starr and Samuels, 1997: 28), both leagues simultaneously continue to actively police what they clearly perceive to be the problems accompanying its incontrovertible Blackness (Andrews, Mower and Silk, 2011).

Relatedly, and particularly in what could be termed the Kaepernick moment, such racialised perceptions crudely equate any act of defiance, when enacted by a Black athlete, as evidence of unpatriotic anti-Americanism, which for individuals shrouded by the parochialism of the white racial frame (Wingfield and Feagin, 2012), appears to be a commonsensical reaction in defence of America. Discussing the realities of racial perceptions and sporting protest in an aptly titled article, 'What white fans don't understand about black athletes', Evan Moore (2016) suggests that, 'To those outside the black community, people who are largely unaware of the nuances of black life in America, professional athletes speaking out on social issues appears to be breaking news'. For the misinformed masses of American sport fans, this is precisely where the synergised celebrity status and political platform of an athlete like Carmelo Anthony can begin to disrupt not only racial misperceptions but also the long-standing embargo on athletes voicing their opinion on social issues.

Arguably the most formidable contemporary mouthpiece of twenty-first-century athlete activism, Anthony's words are compelling when he proclaims the pressing need for today's athlete to eschew the status quo, sporting bureaucracies, and the historically entrenched taboos concerning sport and politics:

We all know our history, especially when it comes to sports and activism. We know Ali. We know Jim Brown. We know Kareem Abdul-Jabbar. But over the years as athletes started making more money, they started thinking: *I don't want people to talk bad about me for talking politics*. But this is not really about politics. There's nothing political about taking a stand and speaking on what you believe in. The teams and the support systems around athletes urge them to stay away from politics, stay away from religion, stay away from this, stay away from that. But at certain times you've just got to put all of that aside and be a human being. That time is now.

(Anthony, 2016b, original emphasis)

Acknowledging the deeply embedded, systematically reproduced, and institutionally enforced idea that athletes should be silent about potentially controversial topics, Anthony is leading an incipient movement to question the power elite (Mills, 1956). Drawing upon Dr Harry Edwards' notion that today's athletes are 'walking corporations' who carry more weight than 'the doctor up the street or the lawyer around the corner or even the community organizer' (ESPN.com, 2016), this power has emerged from the confluence of individual wealth, celebrity status, and new social media technologies that exponentially connect the individual athlete to a vast global audience. For example, and reflective of just one of his personal media platforms, Carmelo Anthony's official Twitter account boasts a following of more than 8.4 million people. This means that every time Anthony posts a message about getting involved in solving the racial divide (30 July), not letting the conversation end (26 July), how to register to vote (27 September), honouring the victims of 9/11 (11 September), or a video message encouraging young people to 'Stay Humble. Stay Committed. Stay Determined' in their pursuit of educational success (8 September), he is instantaneously reaching out to millions using the power of his own self-directed personal media platforms. This is precisely the kind of newfound power that Dr Edwards suggests makes it economically impossible to ignore today's modern athlete (ESPN.com). As a Black vernacular intellectual, the sheer popularity and street credibility of an athlete like Carmelo Anthony means that he commands not only the attention of millions of potential consumers, but also millions of potential supporters and activists.



## **Coda: reworking the American project**

According to Michael Eric Dyson (2016):

We live in what author Gore Vidal called the United States of Amnesia. We forget that black athletic courage paved the way for a generation of black athletic genius. Tragically, we now have a generation that is often more interested in its brand and bank and bottom line than the lives of the people who loved them before they became famous.

While an attuned and astute cultural commentator, perhaps on this occasion Dyson has overlooked a discernible popular and political trend? While a prominent exponent of the phenomenon, Carmelo Anthony is clearly not alone: there would appear to be an emphasised and ongoing politicisation of high-profile Black athletes no longer willing to be constrained by the values, views, and identities that fit comfortably within the conservative-nation, status quo sensibilities of the corporate sport model (Andrews, 2006). Numerous celebrated Black athletes presently use their public visibility as a platform for progressively questioning the race-based injustices and inequalities historically obfuscated by the stultifying conservatism of American popular nationalism. Hence, the contemporary Black athlete has emerged as a potential ‘revolutionary agent of resistance to the most total forms of racial domination and white supremacy’ (Carrington, in press). S/he is both a product, and a potential disruptor, of the late capitalist commercial order shaping national popular culture and national political discourse.

The emergent forms of athlete protest are related to the broader ubiquity of Black commercial aesthetics, and the heightened visibility of political protest (i.e., the Black Lives Matter movement) related to the tragic, and all-too-frequent killings of unarmed people of colour at the hands of US law-enforcement agencies (Gill, 2016). These issues have demonstrated that discussions of race and national politics have implications for citizens from every background. Indeed, we suggest that the problem of American racism can no longer be treated as an isolated issue, or rather a ‘Black problem’, to which other groups feel no responsibility to help ameliorate. Gilroy’s (2001: 15) thought is perhaps instructive here when he suggests that whites

may not have been animalized, reified, or exterminated, but they too have suffered something by being deprived of their individuality, their humanity, and thus alienated from species life. Black and White are bonded together by the mechanisms of ‘race’ that estrange them from each other and amputate their common humanity.

(Gilroy, 2001: 15)

Those occupying the privileged social status position of whiteness must recognise, and learn to see, the insidious and dehumanising falsities of institutionalised and systemic race logics which continue to divide the people, and weaken national prosperity, for all but the white power elite (Lipsitz, 2006; Mills, 1956). As the celebrated heroes of contemporary American culture, and in spaces that can bring people of all backgrounds together, athletes hold tremendous potential to influence the redefinition of American identity according to principles of democracy (life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness) rather than being driven by some spurious 'possessive investment in whiteness' (Lipsitz, 2006), which has historically marked the centrality of race as the key barometer of national membership. In this regard, the actions and voices of activist Black athletes such as Ariyana Smith, Colin Kaepernick, and Carmelo Anthony provide instructive models for all those concerned with confronting the debilitating constraints of race logic, and the institutions of governance that uphold it.

## Note

- 1 Student protests at the University of Missouri in the fall of 2015 began in reaction to racial abuse on campus towards students of colour, and the delayed and limited response to these incidents by University President Wolfe. Following the protests by the football team, which took place in conjunction and solidarity with other students and student organisations, Wolfe resigned in November 2015 and University Chancellor R. Bowen Loftin resigned at the end of that year.

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