

REPRESENTATIONS OF BLACK ATHLETIC BODIES IN NEW MEDIA

A Dissertation

by

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ABSTRACT

Black athletic bodies have been viewed differently due to how various media outlets represent them. Black athletes have been praised for their athletic prowess and often maligned when they speak out against issues that impact Black communities. This study attempts to find out how Black men in sports are represented in new media when they seek leadership positions, when they speak out about social issues, and when they loan their bodies to commercial ads that address social issues. This study explores digital articles on the Rooney Rule to see how Black coaches are represented. The study explores visual Internet memes to see how the Colin Kaepernick protest is depicted. Finally, the study looks at Nike commercial ads posted on YouTube to see how Black athletes are portrayed. What was produced from the study is that Black coaches are depicted as emasculated Black men by sports journalists who covered the Rooney Rule. After viewing close to 600 visual Internet memes, there were two thematic ways Colin Kaepernick is scripted - as unworthy and dangerous. Last, Nike exploits Black athletes in their commercials and still relies upon antiquated stereotypes to portray Black men as only coming from impoverished environments. What is learned from this study is that new media platforms do not create new forms of interpretations about the Black masculine body. Also, nothing has changed about the portrayals of the Black athletic body when it endeavors to speak out against social issues that plague Black communities.

DEDICATION

I would like to dedicate my dissertation to my mother Asenath (Sena) Anderson. Also, I want to thank my uncle Reverend Philip Mann and two of my professors from Morgan State University, Dr. Lucia Hawthorn and Thomas J. Wilcox.

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Contributors

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

	Page
ABSTRACT.....	ii
DEDICATION.....	iii
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS.....	iv
CONTRIBUTORS AND FUNDING SOURCES.....	v
TABLE OF CONTENTS.....	vi
CHAPTER I REPRESENTATION OF THE BLACK ATHLETIC BODY: A HISTORICAL EXPLORATION.....	1
Gender, Masculinity, and Black Masculinity.....	3
The Black Body.....	8
Media Representation & Racialization.....	10
History of Blackness and Sport.....	16
Rhetorical Criticism.....	22
Racial Rhetorical Criticism.....	25
Chapter Organization.....	29
CHAPTER II A LOOK AT THE ROONEY RULE AND THE REPRESENTATION OF BLACK COACHES: WHITE MALE HEGEMONY AND BLACK MALE EMASCULATION.....	32
The Rhetorical Impact of Digital Sports Journalism.....	35
Black & White Masculinity and the NFL.....	39
NFL Owners as White Hegemonic Men.....	44
Black Male Emasculation.....	49
In Need of A White Savior.....	54
Steering Clear of the “Racist” Label.....	57
Conclusion.....	61
CHAPTER III VISUAL INTERNET MEMES AND THE COLIN KAEPERNICK PROTEST.....	63
The Rhetorical Power of Memes.....	66
Black Body, Sport, and White Fear.....	71

Kaepernick Memes	74
Unworthy Memes.....	75
Ungrateful Wealthy Athlete.....	82
Unpatriotic	88
Dangerous	93
Threatens American Values.....	95
Conclusion	99
CHAPTER IV NIKE’S EXPLOITATION OF THE BLACK MASCULINE	
ATHLETE	103
The Digital Platform YouTube	105
Corporate Visual Rhetoric	107
Equality	111
Humble Beginnings	117
The Exploitation of Black Bodies by Nike.....	125
Conclusion	129
CHAPTER V CONCLUSIONS	131
REFERENCES	137
NOTES.....	149

CHAPTER I
REPRESENTATION OF THE BLACK ATHLETIC BODY: A HISTORICAL
EXPLORATION

The Black athletic body has been represented in various ways since Black men and women have participated in amateur and professional sports. The media misrepresented Black athletes because of their race, their believed inferior physical skills, and their supposed substandard intellectual skill. In the early 1900s, for example, the media needled boxer Jack Johnson for his inability to think in the boxing ring and his consorting with white women.¹ The press also attacked Jackie Robinson during his process of integrating Major League Baseball (MLB), and vilified Mohammad Ali for his stance against the Vietnam war and for being a part of the Nation of Islam. In the late 60s the press moved to critique Tommie Smith and John Carlos for their public protest at the 1968 Olympics in Mexico City, Mexico. Regardless how Black men performed in their respective sport, in other words, U.S. mainstream media found ways to misrepresent and denounce them.

This misrepresentation is situated within a larger context of intersectional oppression against Black men. Throughout history, regardless of industry, when Black men were juxtaposed with white men, Black men were labeled as inferior, less capable, incompetent, and situated under white authority. Black men were rarely chosen over white men when it came to employment. When companies hired Black men, they were often considered tokens. Companies made token hires to stave off the bad press that

companies were receiving. Black men were not afforded the same opportunities that white men were given when it came to employment. In the wake of the migration of Black men from the South to the North, Black men were oppressed when they worked in the different warehouses and factories.

Outside of employment, Black men were also treated differently by law enforcement and the health industry. The physical brutality that Black bodies had to endure is not as rampant today as the eras of slavery and Jim Crow; however, the physical violence inflicted on Black men has not been eradicated: Trayvon Martin, Michael Brown, Eric Garner, Tamir Rice, Sean Bell, Alton Sterling, Philando Castille, Freddie Gray, George Floyd, Daunte Wright, Andrew Brown. The constant surveillance of Black bodies by police coupled with the unwarranted stop and frisk of Black and brown men engenders distrust by communities populated by marginalized groups, perpetuating a schism between law enforcement and these communities.

Despite these problems Black bodies are dominant in the world of sports. Black bodies have proven they can compete and dominate in various sports, which leads onlookers to believe they are in a position of power within these hypermasculine spaces. While lauded this striking display of physical power appears to be as threatening as it is athletically skillful. For example, Tom Johnson who played for the Minnesota Viking was out at a night club and was accosted by two off-duty cops for using his phone to film the police while they berated and shoved him out of the night club. The two off-duty police officers unjustly tased him.² Former Milwaukee Bucks player, Sterling

Brown was also confronted in an unjust manner by police outside of a drugstore. Police wound up tasing him too.³

In consideration of the ways Black athletic bodies are celebrated and censured, admired and abhorred, in this dissertation I investigate new media representations of Black masculine athletes as sites that are emblematic of the larger society. In doing so, I will offer contemporary modes of scripting, emasculating, and disciplining of Black masculine bodies to understand better the ways media coverage of Black athletes contributes to an anti-Black rhetoric. This anti-Black rhetoric can have serious consequences. Negative representations proliferated through new media platforms, for example, give Black boys a pseudo representation of Black masculinity and the Black masculine body. Janelle R. Goodwill *et al* explain that young Black Americans spend a great deal of time watching television and young Black Americans spend more time on social media than any other demographic.⁴ Goodwill *et al* make it clear when they explain how young Black boys are less likely than Black girls to uncover harmful stereotypes about Black men and are more likely to emulate these negative behaviors.⁵ This type finding makes it critical to examine the Black athletic body in new media to see potential harmful outcomes that an anti-Black rhetoric can foster.

Gender, Masculinity, and Black Masculinity

Over the past few years, the push for diversity, equity and inclusion in academia and other industries have reinvigorated discourse surrounding the intersection of race and gender. Like race, gender is a social construction, and it is not based on biology. Masculine scholar R. W. Connell solidifies this thought by stating, “gender is social

practice that constantly refers to bodies and what bodies do... gender exists precisely to the extent that biology does not determine the social.”⁶ While gender as a social construction has been well established, it is my understanding that gender norms are social realities, which women and men are measured. For example, Patricia Hill Collins spells out traditional gender norms for masculine and feminine bodies. She explains how men are supposed to be strong and virile; they must be dominant breadwinners who take care of the family. Conversely, women are supposed to be weaker, dainty, and sexually alluring.⁷ When men and women fail to live up to these norms they are ridiculed and often face unfortunate consequences.

Although “gender studies” should imply an in-depth examination of all genders, too often, “gender studies” is a surrogate for women and feminists studies. Sociologist Michael Kimmel, for example, argues that courses on gender are synonymous with feminist discourse.⁸ Nevertheless, as Hill Collins clarifies, “talking about gender does not mean focusing solely on women’s issues. Men’s experiences are also deeply gendered.”⁹ Recent discourse surrounding masculinity has not been favorable in or outside of the academe. Talk of toxic masculinity has been the mainframe when discussing masculinity. Notwithstanding the adverse climate around the discourse on masculinity and patriarchy, Black masculinity is worthy of extended study.

There are various meanings for manhood and masculinity. Kimmel derives his definition of manhood by calling into question the feminist analyses of masculinity, which is the motivation for power and control. Kimmel refutes this notion by explicating manhood as more of having a fear of being dominated or controlled. He asserts that

“American men define their masculinity, not as much as in relation to women, but in relation to each other. Masculinity is largely a homosocial enactment.”¹⁰ Kimmel argues that it is more important for men to be validated by other men than from women.¹¹ While Kimmel informs us of the driving force behind men proving their manhood, other scholars discuss the components of manhood and masculinity. Steve Estes apprises us that Black and white men shared the same beliefs about what it means to be a man in America as he states, “manhood entailed an economic, social, and political status ideally achievable by all men... he also had a political voice deciding how his community, his state, and his country were run.”¹² Estes is laying out the gender norms, which men strive to acquire so that they can be viewed as masculine. Owning these qualities was significant if one wanted to be considered a man in the eyes of other men and women.

When researching masculinity, one uncovers there is not just one masculinity but various masculinities. Gender scholars define masculinity as a set of behaviors, manners, and conditions in which men identify.¹³ Most academics are proponents of recognizing different masculinities, such as Black masculinity, white masculinity, working-class masculinity, or middle-class masculinity. Connell, for example, offers a useful masculinity typology that positions varying masculinities not as character types but as certain hierarchal positions: hegemonic, subordinate, complicit, and marginalized. According to Connell, as a group, Black men do not occupy the hegemonic position in the United States and never have. Under Connell’s scholarship, Black masculinity would fall under the umbrellas of subordinate, complicit, and marginalized masculinities. When using power as a measuring stick and juxtaposing Black men and white men, it is

irrefutable that white men hold more power, therefore making Black masculinity subordinate to hegemonic whiteness. Black men do reap patriarchal dividends over women, but such dividends are only paid in a context wherein Black men have little social authority.¹⁴

Generalized false narratives and perpetuated stereotypical tropes have maligned Black men throughout history. Black men are still dealing with ramifications from enduring slavery and fighting segregation. Joy DeGruy argues that the mistreatment that Black men faced, which existed during these eras, caused trauma passed on through generations. DeGruy goes further when she articulates how the media's negative portrayal of Black men contribute to the poor self-image that some Black boys adopt. She believes the passing on of slave narratives and historical accounts of the subjugation that Black folks faced during segregation coupled with ongoing police brutality trigger traumas for Black men, which she labels Post Traumatic Slave Syndrome.¹⁵ Because of the barrage of mislabeling and mistreatment of Black men, Black men are in a never-ending battle to be (self)recognized as men. The constant tropes about Black men being absent fathers, bad providers, consistently unemployed, underemployed, non-caring, non-political, criminal, and incompetent can all be viewed as emasculating the Black male body. This fight against the negative public perception of Black bodies is difficult to cope with, and it becomes exhausting for men of color to have challenged these spurious claims of ineptitude. Scholars should explore Black masculinity, not to secure a position of hegemonic authority for Black men, but to better understand how the struggle to be recognized and respected as men in America has been a daunting task.

Indeed, the pernicious treatment that Black bodies had to survive was made possible by and in service to hegemonic white masculinity. Connell uses the scholarship of Paul Hoch to explain, for white male dominance to work, white males need a body to dominate, so the subjugation of Black masculinity by white masculinity was significant. Tommy J. Curry understands this social order was significant to get the populace to buy into the all-mighty white male. In his words, “the dominant culture needs its nigger, boys,’ its ugly inferior, its ‘other’ in order to construct itself as superior and beautiful ‘men.’”¹⁶ The dominant culture accomplishes this task of marking the Black masculine body as inferior and criminal by using the media to represent Black masculinity to the public poorly. When Black masculine bodies are positioned as such, it is easier for publics to posit Black men as a lesser than white men.

Finally, the research on Black masculinity is in-depth, but it mainly details how the Black masculine body is perpetually misrepresented as unfavorable and constantly underrepresented as good. There are a variety of versions of recognizable Black masculinity, and all versions are consistently surveilled and punished. Although several Black feminist scholars have scrutinized Black masculinity, calling it an iteration of white masculinity. Athena Mutua, rightly argues Black masculinity should be understood as an embodied practice by “men who take an active and ethical stance against social systems of domination and who act personally and in concert with others in activities against racism, sexism... Moreover, other systems of oppression that limit the human potential of the Black masculine self and others.”¹⁷ These defining characteristics frame how I understand Black masculinity—not as toxic, or as dependent

on the subjugation of women, but as loving, benevolent, family and community centric. These masculine Black men help shape the Black youth and look out for the elderly. These masculine Black men share the responsibility of leadership in the community with other adults despite their sex or sexual status. These masculine Black men encourage social activism, but do not demand it, they request ambition but do not require it, and they teach without indoctrinating. These masculine Black men are unequivocally capable.

Such a definition is crucial for this dissertation as I explore how Black male professional athletes dare to challenge hegemonic whiteness, and how their Black bodies are punished and disciplined as a result. When these same Black athletes endeavor to become leaders of their communities, by questioning white supremacy, they are excoriated and vilified in the media and these negative ideas spread through the media are adopted by some publics with minimal contact with Black male bodies. These representational tactics are blatant examples of hegemonic whiteness and white supremacy controlling the narrative of Black male bodies.

The Black Body

The Black masculine body has been misrepresented in mediated text throughout history. It has been inscribed as not normal when juxtaposed with the white bodies. The main reason for the negative representation of the Black masculine body is so that white men could continue their domination and exploitation of the Black body. I use the term Black body because Black men were seen as physical specimen that provided labor for white men during slavery. Black bodies were exploited for their physical attributes that

helped white men generate revenue. Black men also had physical markers used to identify the body. The broad nose, thick lips, defined muscles, hair textures, and male phallic were used to identify the physical Black body and classify it as subhuman. These physical characteristics also led to representing the Black body as dangerous, hypersexual, and incompetent. These inscriptions of the Black body that were conveyed to the broader public helped to maintain the institution of slavery. Ron Jackson explains that “The social assignment of Black bodies to an underclass is a historical conundrum that has multiple origins, two of which are the institutions of slavery and the mass media.”¹⁸ Jackson is implicating that because the Black people were viewed as less than human there were certain racialized projections attached to the Black body.

In examining the representation of the Black masculine body, I find that the extracting of humanity from Black men made it easy to see Black men without any humaneness and therefore seeing them as physical bodies. Jackson explains that Black bodies were dehumanized and this made it simple for people to support the institution of slavery. He explicates that the Black body was used for labor and when certain Black bodies were not fit for work, deceased, or diseased, they were easily discarded.¹⁹ I argue that the Black athletic body is used the same way; it is commodified to generate revenue for white owners. White team owners use Black bodies for their athletic prowess, but not for their intelligence. White team owners do not hire Black bodies to work in front office positions at the rate they hire them to perform athletically on the field. White team owners seem reluctant to put Black bodies in authoritative positions. Inscribing Black athletes as strong, fast, and athletic, but not as smart, leaders, or decision makers, marks

them as physical bodies and not cerebral bodies. This statement amplifies the value of the Black physical body in the field of sports.

Since Jackie Robinson entered Major League Baseball (MLB) the Black athletic body performances on the playing field has been represented in media by the white gaze. The Black athletic body has been praised for its ability to perform athletic feats on the field of competition. Whether it has been high flying dunks, hitting towering home runs, or running 50 yards touchdown, Black athletic bodies have been discussed in the media about their ability to perform. Some of these same physical abilities that are applauded in the media are also seen as something to be feared. Jackson explains that “The Black body is consistently scripted as in inherently violent, irresponsible, an angry street urchin.”²⁰ Once the Black athletic body steps away from the field and court of play he is not glorified but seen as suspicious. The body that is needed to perform on the public stage is the same body which is negatively represented in mediated text. To examine the Black masculinity through the lens of the body helps better understand the duality that the Black athletic body has to cope with.

Media Representations & Racialization

In 1989 a 28-year-old white woman named Trisha Meili was brutally beaten and raped while running through Central Park in New City. Subsequently, six boys of color were apprehended and held responsible for the vicious assault on Ms. Meili. One of the six boys received a reduced sentence for providing information, which eventually led to the indictment and the incarceration of these young boys of color. The media portrayed the offense as the most heinous crime in years, and they portrayed the young African

Americans and Latino boys as monstrous.²¹ Before holding the office of President of the United States, real estate mogul Donald Trump took out an ad in the local newspapers in New York City, urging the state to bring back the death penalty. Also, Trump went on television and said that he hated these kids, and he wanted everyone to hate them. The jury took ten days to deliberate before finding the young boys guilty. Perhaps this lengthy deliberation was due to a combination of how young these boys were and how they were vilified in the media. News organizations painted these young Black boys as criminals. These young men served time in prison before they were exonerated in 2002 from all charges after the attorney general was provided with a signed confession and DNA evidence. Ten years after their release, filmmaker Ken Burns produced a documentary titled the *Central Park Five*, and recently filmmaker Ava Duvernay directed a Netflix series, which was based on their lives appropriately entitled *When They See Us*. Arguably, Burns and Duvarney were both offering correctives to previous misrepresentations of this crime and young men.

Indeed, some of the most deplorable depictions of Black bodies comes by way of local news stations across the nation. The narratives perpetuated on the local news paints Black bodies - particularly Black masculine bodies - as drug offenders, robbers, murderers, and deadbeat dads. Travis Dixon and Daniel Linz address the overrepresentation of Black and brown bodies as lawbreakers. They articulate how these negative overrepresentations conjure up and convey harmful perceptions about bodies of color to the public.²² In broadcast news, like movies, dramas, and sitcoms, there is someone responsible for the decisions of what to report on and what not to report.

Specific topics and issues in the news receive more attention than others. Shanto Iyengar and Donald Kinder explicate how agenda-setting theory and priming theory play a role in affecting how and why the public responds to some issues as opposed to others.²³

There is a great deal written about the impact that stems from the misrepresentation of Black bodies by a variety of media outlets. Besides several theories, such as framing, agenda-setting, and priming, there are conceptual frameworks that have been created and utilized as a text that leads to a larger conversation about how Black bodies can suffer because of the way their bodies are marked. Ron Jackson describes the body as empty canvas and media producers as inscribers who script the body, which ultimately provides meaning for an audience. Jackson argues that the Black masculine body is continuously scripted and presented to the public as enraged, villainous, and half-witted.²⁴ He indicates that since the public is inundated with these negative images of the Black body and there is no equity in Black masculine body representation, it is not implausible for the public to associate the Black masculine body as a miscreant.²⁵ With Jackson's assertion about the projection of the Black body leading to the perception of Black identity, one can conclude that the role of the producer of culture is significant. Literature informs us that most information we ascertain derives from media, and it has been established that mass media plays a significant role in shaping people's thoughts.²⁶ If you are an avid movie watcher, if you binge-watch television shows on streaming networks, or if you are an ardent reader of the news, you are bombarded with narratives and images. The public digests the never-ending flow of images, and the public tries to make sense of what they are taken in. Robert Entman and Andrew Rojecki explore racial

depictions of Black bodies and how these portrayals help construct the way the dominant culture thinks about Black people.²⁷

Black and brown bodies are burdened with the task of having to separate themselves from the fictional mostly negative characters that are viewed by the broader public. Mark Anthony Neal asserts that due to a lack of Black bodies in decision-making positions, Black bodies are poorly represented. Neal also argues that the broader public does not care to see positive portrayals of Black bodies. He labels positive portrayals as illegible Black masculinity, meaning since the public is not used to seeing positive portrayals of Black masculine bodies, they are hard to read; hence, rendering these bodies as illegible.²⁸ Neal declares that in the media, the legible Black masculine body is criminalized, and when Black bodies are depicted in this fashion, Neal proclaims that it provides a level of comfort and relief to a particular viewing audience.²⁹ Neal is essentially saying that audiences are disinterested or incapable of reading positive portrayals of Black masculine bodies. These paralyzed perceptions of Black bodies keep specific segments of society from revering the intellectual Black body.

Besides media and communication scholars, there are a variety of academics from multiple disciplines who engage in research on the representations of the Black masculine body. Daily interactions between the dominant culture and marginalized groups have been examined by scholars such as George Yancy, who theorizes the way whiteness constructs and represents Blackness. Yancy demonstrates the ways the history of the Black body is directly connected to whiteness. Through what Yancy terms the “white gaze,” he illustrates how white people comprehend Black bodies they encounter,

and the ways whiteness decodes these Black bodies as antithetical to white normativity. He explains that white folks see “the black body as criminality itself. It is the monstrous; it is that which is to be feared and yet desired, sought out in forbidden white sexual adventures and fantasies; it is constructed as a source of white despair and anguish, an anomaly of nature, the essence of vulgarity and immorality.”³⁰ Yancy joins media and communication scholars when he explicates the paradoxical marking of Black men by white voyeurism. The duality that Black men encounter is incomprehensible for others who do not have to deal with the daily conundrum.

In popular culture, the white gaze, highlights the physicality of the Black body over its intellectual capabilities. The admiration of physicality is entangled with Black criminality to engender praise and fear. Hill Collins articulates how Black bodies were valued for their muscularity and their eroticism when she states, “the physical strength, aggressiveness, and sexuality thought to reside in Black men’s bodies generate admiration, whereas in others, these qualities garner fear.”³¹ She also contends that white bodies take voyeuristic pleasure in the exhibition of the strength and talent of Black men but display an aura of trepidation when they encounter Black men in public.

Indeed, the medias role in the portrayal of Black bodies is critical to everyday existence for Black men. If media producers made an effort to create more positive Black characters, the perception of Black bodies might be reacted to favorably through counternarrative techniques. Academics who inform us on counternarratives are in direct conversation with scholars like Neal, who believes the decisions to depict Black men as immutable characters to the broader public can engender non-Black bodies to conjure up

unfavorable images of Black men. These negative representations can be socially detrimental to Black men. Inversely, Srividya Ramasubramanian argues that favorable narratives of people of color can determine different outcomes. She states, “potentially, media stereotypes can shape real-world beliefs, intergroup emotions, casual interpretations, and supportive responses toward out-groups.”³² Ramasubramanian is informing us that viewing positive images of people of color can lead viewers to have a positive perception of Black bodies. More positive roles for Black bodies in media sheds the myopic negative view of Black male bodies in primetime television. Neal would concur with Ramasubramanian that positive portrayals influence perceptions towards Black bodies. Without more advantageous parts, Neal argues that Black male characters will remain distorted in the media and seldom shown in positive roles.³³ Neal claims that “such general framing of Black men leads to causal links in the public imagination that create antagonisms toward Black males, largely instigated by the belief that Black men are criminally and violently inclined.”³⁴ Neal contends that white producers who greenlight shows and movies that habitually use these imagined characters that misrepresent the Black bodies are knowingly or unknowingly complicit in the public treatment of Black males. Ronald Jackson and Mark Hopson indict content creators of films, television, video games, and the Internet for their monolithic depiction of Black men.³⁵ Jackson and Hopson essentially state that media producers are not keen on successful Black bodies as characters because it is not exciting content, nor do they visualize these roles of successful Black men as normal. In their words, “regardless of one’s academic credentials, professional achievement, class positions, or social status,

none of this will save him from being marginalized, closely scrutinized, and unfairly treated.”³⁶ Producers of media who are mandated to deliver good content and refuse to present a variety of characters that represent Black bodies from all walks of life are irresponsible, and they play a crucial role in shaping how the public defines Black men. Their unfair biases and characterizations of Black bodies potentially lead to white gazes of discontent and resentment when they encounter Black men.

The representation of the Black masculine body by the media is critical to my study. Understanding how the misrepresentation and underrepresentation of Black masculinity impact the public perception of Black men may provide reasoning to the inimical treatment of Black bodies. These understandings are a necessary backdrop for my exploration into Black athletic bodies, but a deeper understanding of the historical context of Blackness and sport is also needed.

History of Blackness and Sport

In the Winter of 2018, almost two years after the media lionized LeBron James for winning a NBA championship against the team with the best record in NBA history, James made political comments in an interview shortly after a racial epithet was spray-painted across his family’s Los Angeles home. Responding to inquiries by ESPN’s broadcaster Cari Champion, James elucidated about the challenges of being a Black athlete in America. James also commented about President Donald Trump’s commentary calling them “laughable and scary.”³⁷ James, using incendiary language, said that the president did not care about the American people.³⁸ After hearing these comments, Fox News’ Laura Ingraham took exception with James’ account of the presidents’ feelings

about the American people. She responded by proclaiming that James' statements were "barely intelligible and ungrammatical."³⁹ Ingraham says that James should keep the politics to the educated, she informs her audience they should not listen to people who make 100 million dollars to bounce a ball, and then she goes on to tell James to "shut up and dribble."⁴⁰ When one juxtaposes these two narratives—one of athletic dominance and another of intellectual insult—one sees the dual constructions of the Black athletic body. On the one hand, the Black athletic body is revered and praised for its physical prowess on the playing field, and on the other hand, the Black athletic body is maligned and denigrated when they endeavor to speak about political issues concerning communities they are culturally affiliated. Ingraham's depiction of James is a contemporary example of this long-standing paradox.

From *Plessy vs. Ferguson* to the end of World War II, Black athletes had proven they could do more than hold their own against white athletes, but segregation still prevailed in the United States. As late as 1944, most leagues still had a Jim Crow Clause or a Caucasian clause prohibiting Black men from participating in professional sports against white players. The professional leagues mirrored what was going on in the country. America was in the throes of Jim Crow Segregation, with no ending in sight. Except for boxing, if Black athletes wanted to compete in professional sports, it could only be in all-Black leagues. Black players knew they possessed the talent to succeed if they were given the opportunity. White baseball players who played exhibition games against players in the Negro Leagues knew that Black athletes would excel in MLB. Howard Bryant informs us that the MLB could not use meritocracy as an argument to

keep Black bodies out of baseball, so “a different, more debilitating measure was required: Blacks were unsavory, inherently unfit, regardless of equal or superior ability.”⁴¹ Again, perpetual stereotypes are employed to prevent Black bodies from competing at the highest level. Black men were emasculated to sustain the myth of white superiority.

In 1945, the Montreal Expos, a team in Canada, signed the first Black player to a major league contract. Baseball was officially integrated. It would take two more years for the integration to come to fruition, and Jackie Robinson would sign and play for the Brooklyn Dodgers. Robinson was not solely selected for his talent; other players in the Negro Leagues were far more talented. Robinson was hand-picked because it was believed that he was least likely to get into a physical altercation if he would be treated harshly by fans, opposing teams, and his teammates. Robinson was expected to turn the proverbial cheek no matter what he faced. Robinson had to comport his Black body in ways not expected of white ballplayers. Robinson had to prove that he was competent, not violent nor dangerous. He had to play better and conduct himself better than his white counterparts. After two years of being on his best behavior, Robinson would use his platform and speak out against injustices that Black folks faced in the country, and Robinson was critical of MLB for not placing Black men in managerial positions. After he retired from baseball, he tried to influence other players to do the same; however, Black ballplayers were leery of becoming the voice of opposition because the country was still adjusting to integration. Ballplayers did not have the financial stability that ballplayers have today, and they could not afford to walk away from the sport. Although

some white fans admired Robinson, there were still several fans who grew tired of his incessant lobbying for MLB and other professional sports organizations to be more racially inclusive.

Robinson was well respected by MLB and members of the Black community for integrating baseball. However, he was also labeled an “Oreo” and an “Uncle Tom” because he (regretfully) testified in opposition to Paul Robeson,⁴² and he was a conservative who supported Richard Nixon. Athletes who came along during the turbulent 60s and 70s thought Robinson had passed his time. The Black athletes during this era took a more radical approach and attitude that reflected the climate of the country. Mohammad Ali, Tommie Smith and John Carlos, and Curt Flood are all celebrated today in the media for their courageous stances against a variety of injustices.

Ali stood against the military and America’s decision to go to war against Vietnam. He was a member of the Nation of Islam and was often seen in the company Malcolm X. Ali refused to enlist in the draft, declaring himself a conscientious objector. Although the war was viewed as an unpopular war by a diverse group of people, Ali was vilified in the media, berated in public, and ostracized by the boxing commission. Ali was called a draft dodger, a traitor, unAmerican, and unpatriotic. Dahleen Glanton explains that during Ali’s exile from boxing, he spent the majority of his time in Chicago. When he was out of boxing, Mayor Richard Daley refused to call him by his Muslim name, and Illinois Governor, Ott Kerner called him unpatriotic.⁴³ Krishandev Calamur reported that television host David Susskind stated, “I find nothing amusing or interesting or tolerable about this man. He is a disgrace to his country, his race, and what

he laughingly describes as his profession... he is a simplistic fool and pawn.”⁴⁴ Because of his unpopular stance, the boxing commission took his license, and he did not fight for close to four years. Ali returned to the ring with mixed reviews from the public. Internationally, he was a hero for giving up his livelihood and not participating in what was conveyed as an unjust war, others still saw Ali as an unpatriotic loudmouth and wanted to see him demolished inside the ring. Decades after the Vietnam war and years after Ali retired, he was stricken with Parkinson's disease, which took away his ability to talk fluidly. Then the media glorified a Parkinson-stricken Ali, and he became a worldwide hero. To this day, he is remembered as one of the most celebrated athletes. Ali is a perfect example of how the Black athletic body is publicly disciplined when speaking truth to power. When the vociferous Ali endeavored to flex his masculinity by speaking up for people of color, he was emasculated by having his livelihood taken away from him. Other athletes noticed how Ali was treated and knew the ramifications for speaking against a white power structure that controlled professional sports. Because of the probable consequence of being emasculated, most Black athletes remained silent on issues that affected communities of color.

The media also condemned Tommie Smith and John Carlos because of their demonstration in the 1968 Olympics in Mexico City. Smith and Carlos raised their fists, which were adorned in black leather gloves, on the podium during the medal ceremony and playing of the national anthem. Immediately after their display of solidarity, they were ushered out of the Olympic Village. The press rebuked them, and they received several death threats. The sports establishment also mistreated Smith and Carlos. Smith

and Carlos had to give their medals back, they had to turnover their visas, and their families were threatened. Smith was ban from competing in the U.S. and abroad.⁴⁵ Today, Smith and Carlos are celebrated for their demonstration during the Olympics, and their photograph is one of the most iconic sports photos in American history.

Not too many Americans know the name Curt Flood, but he was a trailblazer in the world of sports. Flood was a Black baseball player who sued MLB for his freedom. Before Flood's willingness to stand up against the MLB, professional players did not have a say where they played or whom they played for; they had little agency over their professional careers. Before Flood sued MLB, when players were traded to another team, they had to either play for their new team or retire. Flood's lawsuit against MLB was taken to the supreme court. The Supreme Court ultimately decided against Flood and for MLB, but eventually, MLB would allow players to become free agents when their contract was up, and they could have agency over where they played and how much money they would make. Like Ali, Smith and Carlos, Flood was also denounced by the media and the public for speaking on behalf of all baseball players regardless of their race. His decision to take on the MLB fractured his career and according to Abraham Khan, "Flood is seen variously as free agency's 'pioneer,' a courageous martyr, a lonely rebel, and in at least one case, a self-destructive alcoholic."⁴⁶ Khan is explaining that Flood was praised after he retired and passed away not while he was using his Black body to speak truth to power.

These narratives exemplify how Black athletic bodies were/are treated when they politicize(d) their bodies to speak about apparent injustices.⁴⁷ These professional Black

athletes seen as physically dominant and once feared and viewed as a challenge to white male supremacy are often rendered impotent when they endeavor to speak truth to power. The visual of these professional Black athletes are compelling; their physical makeup, their virility, their competitive drive, their wealth, and their international audience should make them a powerful entity. These attributes are very masculine, but history has shown us that the power positions in the world of sports are occupied by white bodies who frequently emasculate Black bodies' perceived power. Ben Carrington explains that masculinity was taken as a threat against the white rule because these professional Black athletes had physical prowess, but they were denied the social and political power that usually accompanied this apparent physical power. Carrington states, "Black masculinity finds itself in the position of being culturally 'hyper-masculine' yet socially 'powerless.'"⁴⁸ Once again, we Black athletes praised on the field of play, but excoriated away from the field.

This project will examine this hypermasculinity and powerlessness through a closer look at various new media depicts of Black male athletes. Although there are many instances of disciplining the Black protesting athlete, closer analysis will reveal that such scripting and disciplining cuts across representations of Black male athletes. In short, the emasculation of the Black male athlete is not confined to those who protest. Racial rhetorical analysis will bear out this finding.

Rhetorical Criticism

I engage in rhetorical criticism because I am interested in the language of domination and oppression and how it is manifested in mediated text. In Raymie

McKerrow's *Critical Rhetoric: Theory and Praxis*, he introduces the concept of critical rhetoric to expose the discourse of power. McKerrow believes the primary goal of the critic is to uncover how discourse is used by the dominant to rule over the dominated.⁴⁹ Moreover, McKerrow believes that the rhetorical critic should strive to perform discursive practices to produce change in power relationships. McKerrow articulates that “the critique of domination has an emancipatory purpose.”⁵⁰ McKerrow explicates that domination and power structures reveal themselves in many different ways. While McKerrow sees these as important issues that need addressing, he believes that the critical rhetorician's main concern should be on “the discourse of power which creates and sustains social practices which control the dominated.”⁵¹

Rhetorical scholars offer a few definitions that clearly explain rhetorical criticism. Karlyn Kohrs Campbell and Thomas Burkholder state that “rhetorical criticism involves the description, analysis, interpretation, and evaluation of persuasive use of language.”⁵² Sonja Foss writes rhetoric “is a qualitative research method that is designed for the systematic investigation and explanation of symbolic acts and artifacts to understand the rhetorical process.”⁵³ To understand the rhetorical process, according to Herbert Wichelns, is to be concerned with effect. Wichelns felt that critics should not be dumbfounded by the display of verbal gymnastics written or vocalized by the author; instead, the critic should be invested in how influential are the sentiments coming from the author. Additionally, the critic should be concerned with the notions that affected the audience and not bombastic prose written to entertain.

In Bonnie Dow's seminal article *Criticism and Authority in the Artistic Mode*, she argues that rhetorical critics believe that they are the unforgotten stepchild of the academy who needs to kowtow to other disciplines to be taken seriously. Dow insists that those who do the work of rhetorical criticism should not so readily capitulate to science by believing that without utilizing methods or theories that one's work will not be validated. Dow goes a step further by suggesting that rhetorical critics need to rid themselves from "the vocabulary of discovery and science still present in several of the essays, and embrace the vocabulary of creation and art, that we think of ourselves not as investigators of rhetoric but as creators of it."⁵⁴ To illustrate the contrast between science and art, Dow lays out an argument that includes three propositions. Her first proposition is "text and contexts are created, not discovered."⁵⁵ The essence of Dow's argument is that when rhetorical critics decide upon a text, we immediately make it our creation. The text is shaped and molded and sent back into the public as a new creation. Dow juxtaposes the science and art interpretation of this transformation when she states, "the vocabulary of the science intrudes. We become examiners of the thing outside ourselves. Instead, I suggest, we are the creators, and the inhabitants, of the relationship. It does not exist without us"⁵⁶ In making this comment, Dow is urging critics to use art as an alternative to science.

Dow's second proposition is "there is no such thing as the actual audience."⁵⁷ By making this claim, Dow is telling us that the critics are responsible for all serious dimensions. She further explains that the role of the critic is to see their vision through and if the audience adopts the critic's view, right, if not then so be it. Her last proposition

is “the critic gives authority to method, not the reverse.”⁵⁸ She is reminding rhetorical critics of an earlier statement on being dependent on elite theories and methods to lend credence to one's work. Dow believes “in doing so, we give up the comfort of reliability and predictability and accept that whatever our tools, our criticism is a product of our creativity not out following rules.”⁵⁹ Once again, Dow is imploring us to step away from the familiarity of science and trust in our creative artistic vision. As a rhetorical scholar, I pull from McKerrow and Dow. Like McKerrow and Dow, I understand that a rhetorical critic should critique power and be creative in doing so

Racial Rhetorical Criticism

In this dissertation, I take the notion of rhetorical criticism in a decidedly political direction by moving toward what Lisa Flores describes as racial rhetorical criticism. Racial rhetorical criticism is a type of analysis that consistently addresses racial oppressions, logics, voices, and bodies and views the production of race as rhetorical. Flores informs us that when we engage in racial rhetorical criticism, we engender people to act, whether it is political, intellectual, or social.⁶⁰ The aim of the rhetorician should be to convince people to act for wrongdoings against people of color. Like Flores, my research “is deeply invested in the cultural, social, and the political significance of race. The race of the bodies I examine is imperative because compared with other racialized bodies in similar situations, Black bodies are treated and reacted to differently. I also concur with Flores’ take that as rhetoricians, “we seek through our work to bring both insight and judgment.”⁶¹ By analyzing the artifacts in the following case studies, I aim to bring forth awareness that may bring about change.

Relatedly, the absence of scholarship dealing with race is another rationale for racial rhetorical criticism. Flores clarifies how race is usually eliminated and deflated in text and analyses. Michelle Colpean and Rebecca Dingo term this underrepresentation of academic study drive-by race scholarship, which is “a flattened articulation of race that is not sharply attuned to the nuances and/or the complex economic and geopolitical processes of racialization.”⁶² Colpean and Dingo sermonized that the research by Black and brown scholars are not just underrepresented, but they are also undervalued. This lack of inclusion leads budding scholars to think people of color have no say on an array of topics. Other scholars who support the idea that it is crucial that bodies of color be cited in more scholarly work also have additional suggestions. Sara Bough-Harris and Darrel Wanzer-Serrano support Flores’ call for greater representation for scholars of color and agree with the notion that this will lead to defeating the institution of white normalization. However, Bough-Harris and Wanzer-Serrano believe that challenging the institution of white normativity is not enough; there also needs to be a change in method.⁶³ Bough-Harris and Wanzer-Serrano are stating that although it is essential to respect and utilize research from scholars of color, it is more significant to use a method that engenders folks to make use of race. Last, Martin Law and Lisa Corrigan introduce the term white-speak, which endeavors to “silencing, disciplining, disrupting, and regulating nonwhite and/or non-normative bodies, practices, and forms of knowledge.”⁶⁴ While some emerging scholars feel pressured to engage in white-speak in order to please the gatekeepers as a new professor or as a graduate school student, I am unshakeable and

relentless in my effort to use scholars of color or scholars whose research is centered on race.

Perhaps the paucity of racial rhetorical analyses is most apparent when we consider how Black masculinity is rarely the focus of rhetorical analyses. A few scholars explore the representation of Black masculinity and how Black men are depicted negatively in the media, but far fewer look at the positive representations of Black masculinity. Jackson and Hopson argue that we have to readjust our thinking about Black masculinity and take control of how Black masculinity is defined and portrayed to the broader public.⁶⁵ Jackson and Hopson believe it is up to Black scholars to change the narrative of the Black masculine body and not let the dominant culture be the only fiction or nonfiction creators of Black men or the only purveyors of the Black masculine body. Jackson contends that academics cannot use “the same cultural, social, and political agendas as traditional White masculinist scholarship.”⁶⁶ Jackson calls for a new model of Black masculinity that will encompass Black culture and inculcate positive Black male representation.

Using sport as a site of racial rhetorical inquiry, I am able to examine gender, race, and media. Historically athletes have used their rhetorical power to challenge issues dealing with racial discrimination, gender equity, and media representation. Daniel Grano and Michael Butterworth state that “rhetoric and sport scholarship has focused consistently on problems surrounding power and social change and, as such, it has performed a mission that is recognizably ‘critical’ within the discipline.”⁶⁷ When examining the sports industry with attention to the Black athlete, you see a strong

display of Black masculinity engaging hegemonic masculinity *via* rhetorical body performance and the rhetoric of speech. Athletic performances by Jack Johnson, Jesse Owens, and Joe Louis showcased their rhetorical performances by disposing of the myth of white superiority. Jackie Robinson, Muhammad Ali, and Curt Flood use their rhetoric to challenge white supremacy. These Black athletes use the platform they gained in the sports world to speak out against injustices. Carrington echoes this point when he explains that “a reading of the race and sport conjuncture can produce important insights into both the (changing) meaning and structure of ‘race’ as well as the importance and place of sport within western society.”⁶⁸ In John Bloom and Michael Willard’s words, “sports have been a complex and critical part of twentieth-century social and cultural history, playing a vital role in the creation of nation, community, and racial/ethnic identity.”⁶⁹

Understanding my social location as a Black male, I recognize my ties to the African American community and Black men. As my critical research serves the African American community, I hope my scholarship also speaks to non-Black people of color and white folks. As critics like William Nothstine, Carole Blair, and Gary Copeland, I hope to “address others, for the primary purpose of having an effect on the thinking or acting of an audience.”⁷⁰ Like Tasha Dubriwny, I “understand my criticism to be a form of advocacy, as one of the underlying purposes in critiquing representations”⁷¹ of Black men and Black masculinity.

Chapter Organization

To better understand representations of Black athletes in mainstream new media, this dissertation is organized around three case studies. Each case study begins with the well-founded assertion that media representations are themselves rhetoricians of power and as such shed light on current racial dynamics.

The first case study examines the digital journalistic press coverage of the Rooney Rule (RR) to engage questions around the representation of Black and white male leadership in the NFL. The NFL's RR was enacted in 2003 and has been revisited a few times to become more inclusive. The RR was first put into place to give members of minority groups a better opportunity to become a head coach in the NFL. The addendum to the RR included upper management positions within an NFL organization, such as general manager and the president of player personnel. In 2016, the NFL took the RR one step further by making it mandatory for women to be considered for executive front office positions. By investigating articles written about the RR, I explore how the Black body is represented for being placed in a position that calls for Black men to utilize their intellectual acuity and not their athletic talent. In chapter two, I discuss sports journalist's articles about the RR published on three digital media platforms, and I find that white team owners are rendered as hegemonic masculine men.

In the second case study, I seek to better understand the characteristics of the public critiques of Colin Kaepernick's protest. To do so, I examine the social media response to the protest through visual Internet memes. Kaepernick took a bold stance on behalf of Black and brown bodies brutalized and killed by law enforcement. He refused

to stand during the playing of the national anthem to bring attention to police brutality, and he (arguably) lost his job because of his stance. In chapter three, I argue that the Kaepernick protest memes use visual and sarcastic discourse to shape a construction of Kaepernick as unworthy and dangerous. As memes are devices that help reproduce anti-Black stereotypical tropes, it is not surprising that white supremacist ideas framed the representation of Kaepernick in these memes. Moreover, by looking at the circulation of Kaepernick memes, I investigate the figure of the Black male resistor. This chapter will scrutinize the ways masculine Black athletic bodies are disciplined when they endeavor to assert themselves as agents of change.

For the final case study I take a look at two Nike commercial ads circulated on YouTube. In Nike's "Equality" and "Humble Beginnings," commercials, I investigate the ways Nike promotes its commitment to racial social justice to think critically about the continued commodification of Black masculinized bodies. Understanding today's consumers are looking to connect themselves with brands that are concerned about social issues. Nike has connected themselves with social issues through their commercials. After last summer, companies across the countries used their ads to address different issues dealing with race. In Nike's endeavor to broach corporate responsibility with commercial ad campaigns, they perpetuated a few stereotypical tropes when representing Black males.

In sum, a rhetorical critique of the media's coverage of the NFL's RR will broaden our understanding of the policies put in place to aid marginalized groups to obtain positions of power within a white infrastructure. By exploring visual memes

posted on social media, we can understand better of how the broader public responds to the Black athletic bodies that speak out against racial injustices. Finally, by investigating the Nike Ad Campaign, we can critically interrogate the monetization of racial social justice through the commercial exploitation of Black athletic bodies. Taken together these case studies enable a final reflection on the central concern of this project: the relationships between new media representations of Black masculine athletic bodies.

CHAPTER II

A LOOK AT THE ROONEY RULE AND THE REPRESENTATION OF BLACK COACHES: WHITE MALE HEGEMONY AND BLACK MALE EMASCULATION

At the end of the 2001 NFL season, the Tampa Bay Buccaneers decided to fire their head coach Tony Dungy. Dungy, who is Black, rescued the floundering Buccaneers and turned them into a formidable franchise during his six years as head coach.⁷² Two weeks prior to Dungy's firing, the Minnesota Vikings let go of their head coach Dennis Green. Green, who is also Black, led the Vikings to eight winning seasons and eight playoff appearances in his ten years as head coach of the franchise.⁷³ These two firings were the sparks that led attorneys Cyrus Mehri and Johnnie Cochran Jr. to threaten the NFL with a racial hiring lawsuit. To get in front of this potential lawsuit about discriminatory practices, in 2003, the NFL constructed the Rooney Rule (RR) named after former Pittsburgh Steeler owner Dan Rooney.

The 2003 iteration of the RR required NFL teams to interview a racial minority candidate whenever a head coaching position becomes available. In 2009 the rule was amended to include all senior football operation positions with the NFL. Changes to the RR came again in 2016 when commissioner Roger Goodell said that women would have to be interviewed for executive positions. The latest changes to the rule came in 2020. NFL teams are now required to interview two minority candidates for head coaching positions, one minority candidate for offense or defensive coordinator positions, and one minority for general manager position. A critical question for the NFL is will this change lead to more coaching positions for Black people?

Initially, the NFL was receptive to Black coaches. Fritz Pollard became the first African-American coach for the Akron Pros. Pollard joined the Pros in 1919 and played two seasons before he was named head coach. Jeremi Duru writes about how the hiring of Black coaches came to an end after the hiring of Pollard, years later it was decided that all jobs in professional sports will be employed by whites.⁷⁴ Pollard's last year of coaching professional football was in 1925, and it would be another 64 years before an NFL team would hire a Black head coach. Historically, the NFL has had an abysmal track record with hiring Black coaches and with treatment of Black coaches that have been hired. These unfair hiring practices have unduly impacted the careers of Black football coaches. Although this sour treatment from the NFL has been documented, the media coverage of the conduct toward Black coaches has been craven and inadequate.

Throughout the history of professional sports the Black body has been admired and glorified for the athletic ability they display on the field and court. Black bodies in collegiate and pro sports have been canonized by sports journalists in digital media. This admiration and praise for the physical performing Black athletic body from digital media is contrasting with the coverage of Black men who endeavor to become head NFL coaches, general managers, or acquire high-ranking front office positions. The difference in the coverage is an important aspect of Black masculinity and white hegemonic masculinity. White owners being presented as white hegemonic males and Black coaches having their masculinity undermined contributes to a broader discussion surrounding anti-Blackness. I contend that the debate about the efficacy of Black

coaches in the NFL is cloaked in negative Black male representation which lends itself to an anti-Black rhetoric within new media coverage.

In this chapter I discuss and examine coverage of the RR, which comes from three digital media platforms: *Sports Illustrated* (SI.com), *The Entertainment Sports Network* (ESPN.com), and *The Undefeated* (TheUndefeated.com).⁷⁵ Although the RR has been around since 2003, I limited my examination to articles from 2020 because five Black head coaches were fired after the 2019 NFL season. Hue Jackson from the Cleveland Browns, Todd Bowles from the New York jets, Marvin Lewis from the Cincinnati Bengals, Vance Joseph from the Denver Broncos, and Steve Wilks from the Arizona Cardinals were all fired and replaced by white head coaches. There were also three white coaches fired (Mike McCarthy, Dirk Koetter, Adam Case) and one of those positions was filled by an African American – Brian Flores. So out of eight openings only one was filled by a minority head coach. Using “Rooney Rule” and “2020” as search terms to compose my sample, my search generated a total of 44 texts to examine—14 articles from ESPN.com, 12 articles from TheUndefeated.com, and 18 articles from SI.com.

Although the reports from the articles I scrutinized does little to accelerate equal footing for Black coaches in the NFL, the coverage from the articles do a great job in critiquing the NFL. While the coverage from these specific articles evaluates the NFL, they also replicate problematic characterizations of Black coaches in the NFL. The journalists who produced these articles paint white and Black bodies differently and they avoid placing owners in a bad light. Through an examination of these articles, I assert

that white team owners are represented as hegemonic masculine men, I argue that sports journalists present an emasculated Black masculine body, while normalizing the white masculine body, and I contend that the commentary in these sports articles avoid any discussion about racism.

The Rhetorical Impact of Digital Sports Journalism

A great deal of individuals receive their news from the Internet. According to Yi Xu *et al.* “More than 85% of U. S. adults report that they spend more time reading news on mobile devices than through conventional print media.”⁷⁶ Alison Head *et al.*, the producers of *The News Report: How Students Engage With News*, join the discussion as they write, “like so many other young news consumers today, almost all of the students in this study (89%) had picked up news during last week from social media. About three-quarters (72%) had gotten news from their accounts at least one day.”⁷⁷ Due to the advent of digital journalism news is being produced quicker and more news is being consumed.

Digital journalism, according to Keven Kawamoto can be defined as “the use of digital technologies to research, produce, and deliver (or make accessible) news information to an increasingly computer-literate audience.”⁷⁸ Also, digital journalism has provided a platform for a variety of voices to be heard. Journalists who post articles they write *via* social media allows readers to respond and produce immediate feedback for journalists. Soumya Dutta and Saswati Ganopadhyia explain the paradigm shift due to the participatory nature when they state, “options opened for directly getting feedback from the audience on a report. Platforms like Facebook, Twitter, and weblogs have

provided the opportunity to the journalists to share news on their accounts and understand the audience response.”⁷⁹ This type of feedback has impacted the way sports journalists operate and deliver articles to their audience.

The new mediums of sports journalism is far removed from the traditional ways it was delivered to the public. Since the advent of digital journalism, sports articles have been distributed to audiences in a variety of ways. Also, sports content is now delivered more expeditiously. According to Mark Lowes and Christopher Robillard “The Internet and the proliferation of smart portable devices mean that all sorts of sports content can be produced, shared, and consumed on a variety of platforms at instantaneous speeds.” Lowes and Robillard are explicating that due to digital platforms sports journalism content is more prolific and more accessible to the broader public.

Not only has the accessibility changed so has the rate in which sports content is provided. The traditional deadlines for stories that are created, edited, and published no longer exist. Digital technology has made it possible for sports journalists to work on stories at any time. Brian Moritz explains that “digital media have accelerated sports journalism... reporters are doing more work than before and they are required to do it faster.” Moritz is alluding that because sports content is more attainable, consumers want more material, and the demand for more content means extended work hours for sports reporters. Gone are the days when stories from the sports reporters get cut from the paper because of a lack of space. Digital media platforms allow for an unlimited amount of content. Sam Duncan writes “newspapers... now create a range of media that's housed on digital and social platforms consumed in both traditional and electronic ways.”⁸⁰

Duncan explicates how traditional newspapers have also developed digital platforms for their readers to obtain the information on the go. Furthermore, the advent of digital media has brought a more interactive relationship with sports reporters and the specific outlets. Readers now have the capability to add comments and additional information to the text that is posted. Since readers are also consumers of the product they have an impact on articles that are produced. For example, conversations or posts about a specific topic can generate a large number of responders which can trigger content for sports journalists. News media mogul, Rupert Murdoch, comments about the role of the consumers when he states, “consumers like you are determining what content you want, when you want it and how you want it. The choices in the future are going to be made from the bottom up and not the top down.”⁸¹ Murdoch is explicating the direction digital media platforms are heading. He also is insinuating that consumers are going to play a role in produced content.

According to Duncan, Murdoch is not alone in his assessment of how consumers have played a role in digital media. Lowes and Robillard join the conversation about the way digital journalism is trending as they state, digital journalism “enable fans to be involved in the news-formation process; that is to say, in forming opinions, producing content, and ‘talking back’ in a conversation rather than just passively consuming news reported by journalists.”⁸² The interaction between the audience existed with traditional media, but it was limited and not always shown to the public. With digital media any reader of content can add a comment to what is reported or written about. Duncan comments on the direction journalism is going when he writes

“this change has had a significant impact on old conventions of sports-media relations, as well as altering consumer trends, habits and preferences.”⁸³ This statement by Duncan points to a new rhetorical element to sports journalism production.

With traditional media, sports journalist did not appear to be overly concerned about the feedback they would receive from their audience. Sports journalists could write their articles without any consternation or trepidation. However, the articles written on digital platforms allows audiences to respond to the commentary posted by journalists. The audience honest feedback has the potential to keep journalists more aware about how their readers think and feel about the information they consume. It can also force journalists to not have such a myopic point of view when it comes to dealing with controversial issues. This is significant when it comes to writing articles about the RR because it allows the journalist to broach different discussion points about the paucity of Black coaches in the NFL.

For a long time, the media has vilified the NFL for their racial hiring practices. The NFL, which consists of over 70% of Black players at this writing, currently only have three Black men who are head coaches out of 32 positions.⁸⁴ Every year head coaching positions become available and for unexplained reasons Black coaches are rarely hired. I assert that the way the Black masculine body is communicated by sports’ journalists in the digital articles play a role in the way Black coaches are viewed by white NFL team owners. I contend that these articles that cover the NFL’s RR emasculate Black head coaches. I claim that Black coaches are painted as ones in need of assistance, depicted as apprehensive of speaking out or against white NFL owners,

characterized as looking aggressive, and portrayed as not being capable or prepared to be a head coach. In these ways, Black coaches are portrayed as needing a white savior to speak up for them against apparent white authority figures. I also assert that the sports journalists avoid representing team owners as racist or employing racialized hiring practices. Taking all these themes together, I argue, digital sports journalist coverage of the RR is an example of an anti-Blackness rhetoric.

Black & White Masculinity and The NFL

To construct a plausible argument about the emasculation of Black head coaches and representation of white NFL team owners as white hegemonic males, I first must define and explain both Black masculinity and hegemonic masculinity. There are various scholars who have written their version of the definition of Black masculinity. In this chapter, I use Athena Mutua's definition of progressive Black masculinity which is a "unique and innovative masculine self actively engaged in struggles to transform social structures of domination."⁸⁵ She goes on to write that "these structures and relations of domination constrain, restrict and suppress the full development of the human personality."⁸⁶ Mutua is explaining that Black men are in a constant struggle against institutions that engage in systemic racism. Serie McDougal III states, "Black masculinity lends itself more easily to the study of performances or behaviors and other material manifestations of manhood."⁸⁷ Robert Staples believes that to prove your masculinity, one must have a certain autonomy over their environment and he thinks Black men are incapable of achieving such goal.⁸⁸ Staples assertion is interesting because it mirrors the Black coaches situation in the NFL. Steve Estes writes that

manhood is determined by the economic, social and political status that was attainable by all men.⁸⁹ Because of the amount of money Black coaches reap, by Estes' definition, Black coaches in the NFL meet the standard of manhood, but they still serve in a subservient role in relation to white owners who demonstrate white hegemonic masculinity.

According to R. W. Connell hegemonic masculinity is the highest form of masculinity. Hegemonic masculinity is also not a kind or an individual it is a situation. Connell explains "hegemonic masculinity is not a fixed character type, always and everywhere the same. It is, rather, the masculinity that occupies the hegemonic position in a given pattern of gender relations, a position always contestable."⁹⁰ Connell is informing us that the position of hegemonic masculinity can be occupied by anyone who is in power. James Messerschmidt explores the relationship between domination and hegemonic masculinity, and he defines hegemonic masculinities "as those masculinities constructed locally, regionally, and globally that legitimate an unequal relationship between men and women, masculinity and femininity, and among masculinities."

For certain, white men have been recognized as hegemonic males. Black coaches do not have the power to make themselves coaches; it is up to the white team owners and in some cases the general managers to hire Black coaches. Gaining the hegemonic location for Black men has always been impossible in the United States because Black men have been severely disadvantaged since they were forced to this country. White men have obtained and held on to the hegemonic position. It is almost a certainty that Black men will never hold the hegemonic position because of the

enormous amount of power that white men wield in America and Black men make up a low percentage of citizens in the United States. Hill Collins seems to concur that “race is an important benchmark in constructing hegemonic masculinity in the United States. Within American society, black men as a group, by definition are denied the full entitlements of hegemonic white masculinity because they are black.”⁹¹ Connell and Hill Collins express that Black men and other men of color occupy a subordinate and/or marginalized masculinity *vis-à-vis* white men. In spite of the positionality that Black men held in relation to white men there was a brief period where race did not play a strong factor.

When the NFL first started there were a few African Americans who played in the league, but from 1934 to 1946 Blacks were eliminated from the league for no apparent reason. Fred Bowen writes “there wasn't an official rule against them, but there was an unwritten understanding among the teams. The teams would not allow African Americans into the league. Some owners and coaches claimed that African Americans were not good enough.”⁹² When Black players were finally reinstated back into the NFL they had to deal with the stereotypical tropes that prevented them from playing certain positions. Jason Reid and Jane McManus inform us that Blacks were deterred from and not selected to play the thinking positions, which are down the middle - quarterback, center, or inside linebacker. White coaches thought that Black players were not astute enough to play these positions.⁹³ Black players who played the quarterback position in college knew they would be assigned to another position if they wanted to play when they were drafted into the NFL. White owners and coaches believed that African

Americans did not possess the leadership qualities to play these positions. Since the NFL did not believe that Black players were capable of leading on the field, they certainly did not believe that Black coaches were capable of leading and making strategic decisions off the field.

To say that Black coaches were not afforded the same opportunities as their white counterparts is an understatement. After Black players were allowed back in the league in 1946, it took over four decades for a Black coach to be chosen as head coach. White male owners did not feel comfortable with a Black coach at the helm. Jemele Hill argues that “most NFL owners have been white men, and they seldom been willing to let African Americans or Latinos call plays -- either on the field or from the sidelines.”⁹⁴ When one imagines what took so long for a Black man to be named head coach a variety of reasons come to mind for this malfeasance. One argument for not deciding to choose Black coaches is white owners’ belief that Black men are not capable of leading men, white team owners not having the confidence in Black men’s ability to coach, and white team owners just not wanting to hire Black men because of their race.

When Black men finally entered the small fraternity of head coaches in the NFL, there were disparities between the treatment of Black coaches and white coaches. For instance since the RR was implemented in 2003, when head coaching positions opened up Black coaches were more likely chosen to lead a team with a lack of talent and had suffered from years of losing. Luke Knox explains that Black coaches more than white coaches are landing the least viable jobs. Knox lays out the figures to back his statement: 3 of 21 which is 14.3% of Black coaches are hired by less viable teams compared to

white coaches which is 7 of 87 (8%).⁹⁵ Also, Black coaches are not given the same amount of time as white coaches to turn a team around from a losing team to winning team. Knox explains that the percentages of white and Black coaches staying four years or more is unequal. Only 4 of 21 (19%) Black coaches have coached more than four years while 11 of 21 (24.7%) white coaches have stayed longer than four years.⁹⁶ Furthermore, Black coaches are landing on the hot seat more often than white coaches. The hot seat refers to a coach that is put on notice that he will be replaced if the team's performance is not stellar. Black coaches have been on the hot seat 11 of 21 (52.4%) times while white coaches have faced the hot seat 25 of 87 (28.7%) times.⁹⁷ These disparities show that Black coaches are not receiving the same opportunities as white coaches. It is my contention that a significant reason for the low hiring of Black coaches has a great deal to do with white hegemonic masculinity. In the articles under examination, NFL team owners are represented as white hegemonic males, with the sole power to change the landscape of the coaches in the NFL

Sports journalist who cover professional football are well aware that there are 32 teams in the NFL and out of those teams there is only one minority owner. Sports journalist also have knowledge of the four front office executives of color in the league. Journalists also comprehend how decisions are made and whom they are made by. Sports journalists understand who holds the power in the NFL. Sports journalists also knows who has very little decision-making power within the NFL. Sports journalists are not blind to the optics of the racial power structure of the NFL, although they may be scared to spell it out for their readers.

NFL Owners As White Hegemonic Men

In the sports articles that I analyzed it is clear that sports journalists depict owners and general managers as dominant gatekeepers as it pertains to hiring or not hiring Black head coaches. By portraying white NFL team owners as the controlling authority, sports journalists are positioning NFL team owners as white hegemonic males. Hill Collins writes, “hegemonic white masculinity is fundamentally a relational construct with boundaries defined through a series of oppositional relationships whereby normal masculinity becomes defined in opposition to women, gay men, poor and working-class men, boys, and black men.” Hill Collins explicates that white men hold the power over these other social constructs which includes Black men.

Leadership from the NFL front office is clearly aware that the league has a problem when it comes to hiring minority head coaches. In a league where the players on the field are overwhelmingly Black men, there is such a low percentage of head coaches that mirror the image of the players on the field. The player coach optic in the NFL continues to perpetuate the stereotypical trope that Black bodies are only good as field hands and white folks are the power brokers who set the standards and the guidelines in the league. Currently there are five minority coaches (15.63%) and out of those five coaches there are three Black head coaches (9.38%). Goodell, who is the commissioner of the NFL is mindful that the league is made of 70% Black players. Jason Reid a columnist for *The Undeclared* is cognizant that “Goodell understands why many believe it’s unacceptable that so few black leaders have reached the top rung of the ladder in coaching football operations and business operations.”⁹⁸ Although Goodell is

represented as being aware, he has no control over who teams choose to hire as their head coach and sports journalist who cover the NFL comprehend the power that NFL team owners have and how they decide to use it.

Jeremy Fowler and Jason Hirschhorn depict owners as the ones who hold the power to make the final decisions on all personnel decisions and there is no one who can overrule their authority. At the end of the 2020 NFL season there were seven head coaching position openings and the addendum to the RR requires teams to interview two minority coaches, and only two out of seven minorities were hired. Fowler explicates the power white team owners have when he writes that “owners have the final say over decisions.”⁹⁹ Fowler is explaining that regardless of the RR and Roger Goodell NFL owners do what they want to do. The outrage that Black coaches, NFL pundits, and journalists exhibit about the lack of minority hiring often leads to nowhere. White NFL owners are not oblivious to the noise that is made about the lack of Black head coaches in the NFL, but they appear not to be affected. Hirschhorn responds to the notion of NFL owners not caring about the RR as he portrays Anthony Lynn as one who concedes to white hegemonic masculinity. Lynn a Black head coach who was just released by the Los Angeles Chargers explains that “you can’t make people hire someone they don’t want to hire for whatever reason.”¹⁰⁰ Lynn believes that people tend to hire people they have something in common with or someone that looks like them.¹⁰¹ This idea makes it difficult for Black coaches to get hired. Therefore, Fowler and Hirschhorn represent white NFL owners as holding the hegemonic position. Connell informs us that to recognize hegemony we need to understand relationships, “relationships of alliance,

dominance, and subordination. These relationships are constructed through practice that exclude and include, that intimidate, exploit, and so on.”¹⁰² Connell’s statement can be seen as one group dominating another by excluding them and exploiting them at the same time.

The players and Black coaches in the NFL have no power or say over who gets hired. Reid asserts that Black coaches should not waste their time vying for head coaching jobs because white NFL team owners do not fully consider Black coaches for head coaching vacancies. Reid writes “coaches of color will rarely receive serious consideration for head coaching positions.”¹⁰³ Reid is communicating to his readers that owners overlook Black coaches and do not see Black coaches as legitimate head coaching candidates. Reid informs us who is in charge when he writes “the billionaires for whom Goodell works determine who will be hired as team presidents, head coaches and executives in football and business operations.”¹⁰⁴ Reid is talking about the white team owners who are Goodell’s bosses. He also posits that white NFL team owners as ones who occupy the dominant position and have the power to make change but seem reluctant to do so. Reid goes onto explicate how there are several Black coaches who are indeed qualified to be head coaches, but they keep being overlooked. Reid points out that the owners are not under any real pressure to make minorities head coaches as he writes “there’s nothing to hold owners accountable if little changes, either in the front office or at the highest rungs of the coaching ladder, in a league with an on-field workforce that’s nearly 70% black.”¹⁰⁵ Reid’s writings places white owners in the hegemonic position. Anthony Lemelle Jr. ties white hegemony with European cultural

hegemony, which brings about cultural authority. Lemelle believes that cultural authority is based largely on race that is institutionalized. He further explains that Eurocentric cultural authority aids in Black male domination.¹⁰⁶ Lemelle states, “Such predominance constitutes a social formation. U.S. dominance assures that a social formation of stable and self-reproducing racial and hierarchal order based on capital relations is realizable.”¹⁰⁷ Lemelle is not surprised that white men are in control in professional sports because professional sports is ran like any other institution in America which are dominated by white men and men of color and women serving as subordinates.

In Dan Graziano’s article he interviews current NFL player Richard Sherman who firmly believes that team owners are in control in the NFL. Sherman puts the onus on the media to make assertions about white NFL owners. Graziano writes that Sherman “challenged the media to hold the people who make the hiring decisions – in this case NFL owners, team presidents and general managers – more accountable for a lack of minority candidates getting interviews and jobs.”¹⁰⁸ Sherman understands that NFL owners are the decision makers. Graziano again quotes Sherman as Sherman states, “we literally have no say in who gets hired, who gets fired. We have no say in whether we get hired or fired.”¹⁰⁹ Sherman explains that players do not even have control over their own employment, so why would players have control over Black coaches getting hired. Sherman is expressing to the media that they are asking the questions about the paucity of Black head coaches in the NFL to the wrong people. By letting the media know that the players have no power Sherman is strongly indicating that the NFL owners are the

power brokers. The power that the white NFL owner have renders Black coaches and players marginalized. Connell illuminates this dominance when he writes, “marginalization is always relative to the authorization of the hegemonic masculinity of the dominant group. Thus, in the United States, particular Black athletes may be exemplary for hegemonic masculinity. But the fame in the wealth of individual stars has no trickle-down effect.”¹¹⁰

Vaughn McClure interviewed Cyrus Mehri the creator of the RR, and Mehri contends there are more than enough qualified minority head coaching candidates. McClure presents Mehri as one who believes that it is up to the owners to take a chance on Black coaches. Mehri goes on to state, “the decisions-makers have to think it through a little more differently than they have. It’s on the decision-makers side. It’s on ownership side. It’s not the rule. It’s not the talent. We’ve got that. It’s on the owners.”¹¹¹ McClure paints Mehri as one who is convinced that the NFL owners can make a big difference because they have the power to do so.

When talking about white hegemonic masculinity we must understand that race plays a vital role. We also must understand that white men that hold the hegemonic position dominate over subordinate groups which includes Black men. Jenny Vrentas, a writer for *Sports Illustrated* discusses this racial dominance that white hegemonic males display when she states, “ultimately fixing the NFL's diversity problem is up to owners and high-ranking club executives confronting their own implicit and unconscious biases.”¹¹² When Vrentas writes about implicit and unconscious biases she essentially expressing that NFL team owners have a problem with the ethnicity or race of minority

coaches. Hill Collins informs us that hegemonic masculinity “refers to the dominant form of masculinity in any given society, as well as marginalized and subordinated masculinities that characterize the experiences of men whose race, class, religion, ethnicity, age, sexuality, or citizenship category place them within subordinated groups.”¹¹³ Hill Collins explanation of hegemonic masculinity supports Vrentas indication of the implicit and unconscious biases she feels NFL team owners exhibit. Vrentas writes “To move forward the onus needs to be on team owners to educate themselves and be willing to acknowledge their own biases, and then work to correct them.”¹¹⁴ Again, Vrentas portrays the white NFL owners as exhibiting racial dominance.

Unfortunately, the RR which is needed to assist Black coaches with job opportunities can arguably have an adverse effect on Black coaches who receive head coaching positions. This is because the RR carries a negative stigma comparable to affirmative action policies. This reputation can hinder the legitimacy of Black coaches who get the opportunity to lead an NFL team. This can possibly undermine Black head coaches and leave them marked as not really deserving of the job.

Black Male Emasculation

In the coverage on the dearth of Black coaches in the NFL and the RR, Black coaches are emasculated in a few ways. I maintain that the reporting on Black coaches and the RR perpetuates Black men as ones who need assistance or help to obtain a head coaching position in the NFL. It is also common for journalists to insinuate that Black coaches are lacking the necessary football acumen to be head coaches in the NFL. Next, I argue that journalists present Black coaches as petrified of team owners’ reprisal.

Then, I contend that commissioner Goodell is represented as a white savior to speak on behalf of Black coaches. Last, I argue that the journalists who produced these 44 articles avoid naming racism as a problem in their coverage of the RR.

There is a history of poor representation of Black men in the United States. Black men have been characterized negatively in the media. Jackson explicates that “because mass media and popular culture are predominantly littered with these negative images, it appears they are unwilling to see Black bodies positively, and this affects every day-looking relations.”¹¹⁵ In the articles that I examined Black coaches are presented as men who need assistance to achieve the goal of becoming a head coach in the NFL. This representation of Black men can imply that Black coaches are incapable of attaining a head coaching position on their own merit, and they need some type of rule to aid them. The RR which was put in place to deal with the NFL’s racial hiring practices has been viewed differently by some white coaches. Hirschhorn’s reporting produces the same of-need-of-assistance sentiment when he writes “changes might arrive this offseason as the league plans to propose significant draft incentives to clubs that hire minority head coaches along with removing barriers for coordinator positions.”¹¹⁶ These proposed draft incentives for teams to hire Black coaches may suggest that teams who decide to hire Black coaches are only doing so to move their teams up in the draft. This could also indicate that teams may choose not to hire a Black coach if they do not receive draft incentives.

Despite the fact that sports journalist sidesteps discussion about structural racism when it comes to hiring practices in the NFL, sports reporters coverage of the suggested

draft incentives and draft compensation for hiring minority coaches does indicate that there is systemic problem of the hiring of Black head coaches in the NFL.

Although the RR was put in place to make the playing field more equitable for Black coaches to get hired, I contend that the way journalists present the RR stigmatizes Black coaches as less than their counterparts in the NFL. This stigmatization emasculate Black coaches rendering them weak. Since 2003, if a Black coach was hired as a head coach he was marked as having the assistance of the RR. For example, Noah Strackbein explains how the RR benefits Black men as he writes “the Rooney Rule require teams to interview at least two external minority candidates for head coaching positions.”¹¹⁷ Even though the addendum to the RR is much needed endeavor to address the paucity of Black head coaches in the NFL, the addition to the RR can be seen as Black coaches relying on a policy that benefits them because of their race or ethnicity and not their football acumen. The RR used to require teams to interview one minority candidate now Strackbein reports the RR now requires teams to interview two minority candidates for head coaching positions, which some might say the assistance of the RR places Black coaches in a very advantageous position over white NFL coaches. The way Strackbein conveys the RR perpetuates the stigma that Black men do not make it on their own merit and need some sort of assistance. Again, in Strackbein reporting of the RR he emasculates Black coaches by conveying that Black coaches need the help of a white hegemonic male to secure a head coaching position in the NFL. McClure has Mehri backing this claim when as reports Mehri explaining that the onus is on team owners to

hire minority coaches.¹¹⁸ Vrentas also backs the claim when she writes “ultimately fixing the NFL’s diversity problem is up to owners and high-ranking club executives.”¹¹⁹

The RR is not the only help the NFL extends to minority coaches; there are other requirements that NFL teams must adhere to, to help minority coaches. Brooke Pryor reports about one of the programs when she writes “to help strengthen the pool of candidates for minority head coaching positions, every team is also required to establish a minority coaching fellowship program to “provide NFL legends, minority and female participants with hands-on training in NFL coaching.”¹²⁰ Pryor’s report implies that Black coaches are not ready to take the head coach position or they do not have the prerequisite experience it takes to become a head coach in the NFL. Graziano adds to Pryor’s conversation when he writes “the coaching fellowships are full-time positions one or two years in length... the idea is to establish a larger pool of qualified candidates in the pipeline from which head-coaching candidates are ultimately drawn.”¹²¹ Graziano reporting is similar to Pryor’s as his writing insinuates that white coaches do are not in need of such a fellowship, and it also hints that there is not enough qualified Black coaches in the NFL prepared to be head coaches.

In Adam Teicher’s interview with Ron Rivera, the head coach of The Washington Football Team, Teicher points out that Rivera believes that a valuable asset for future young minority coaches is the NFL’s annual career development symposium.¹²² Teicher also reports that Rivera would love to see the league put together some sort of program where experienced minority coaches mentor younger minority assistances. Rivera also addressed the need for young minority coaches to have an

advocate putting their names out there.¹²³ Teicher's interview with Rivera, who is a minority head coach himself, indicates that young Black coaches need more guidance and more programs to reach the position of head coach. Nowhere in Teicher's interview with Rivera that Rivera points out that white coaches need guidance or mentorship.

Another way Black coaches were emasculated in the articles is through journalist portrayals of Black coaches as afraid of owners reprisal. In Graziano's article that covers Sherman, Graziano quotes Sherman saying "the people who have say, we don't pressure. The owners, we don't call ... nobody asked him the hard question because you don't want to rub them the wrong way, you don't want to get on their bad side."¹²⁴ Graziano uses Sherman's quote to indicate that Black coaches are unwilling to challenge the owners because of possible repercussions. Any rage or anger that Black coaches are feelings toward owners are never exhibited because they are fearful of losing their jobs and being discarded. Noted scholar bell hooks provides an explanation for Graziano's reporting when she argues that "many of us were taught that repression of our rage was necessary to stay alive in the days before racial integration, we know that one can be exiled forever from the promise of economic well-being if that rage is not permanently silent."¹²⁵ I contend that Graziano presenting Black coaches as fearful can be viewed as emasculating Black coaches.

In one of Reid's article for *The Undefeated*, he is explaining that Black coaches have a viable class action suit against the NFL. However, Reid's writing infers that Black coaches would not pursue such action because of possible push back. Reid again represents Black coaches as trepid, when he writes, "there will be major risks for any

coaches who join forces in suing the league. As one NFL assistant told me recently, we have families to feed. We can't afford for our careers to end."¹²⁶ The feeling of being powerless is another form of emasculation and hooks provides some clarity to the overall condition of Black coaches when she writes "fear of white scorn and retaliation makes it impossible for many black folks to speak freely to white folks."¹²⁷ In another article that Reid produced he reporting on the different ways that the NFL hiring mess can be improve. One of the ways was through Black coaches protesting. Reid again portrays Black coaches as afraid when he writes "the reality is, it's highly unlikely that executives and coaches would protest in some public form, either individually or *en masse*. There is just too much for them to risk in angering their employers."¹²⁸ Once again hooks lends reason as she writes "for most black folks the inherited legacy of simulating submission and never showing feelings, especially to white folks, was not unlearned."¹²⁹ In the same article Reid represents Black coaches as fearful when he explicates Black coaches reluctance to sue the league by writing "just look what happened to Colin Kaepernick's career after he filed a collusion grievance against the NFL."¹³⁰ Like Kaepernick, Black coaches get the sense that they will be exiled from the league if they dear to speak out against white owners.

In Need of A White Savior

Roger Goodell appears to be the man that Black coaches are looking for. He is the commissioner of the NFL and he is a white male that is employed by the team owners. I argue that Goodell is depicted as a white savior and Back coaches are described as expecting a white savior to rescue them from their paralyzed locations as

eternal assistant coaches in the NFL. According to the coverage, Black coaches believe that Goodell is the only one that possesses the power and the wherewithal to articulate their situation to team owners with the possibility of persuading them to hire more minority coaches. Black coaches are posited as voiceless and not equipped to convey their issues with the racial hiring practices that take place in the NFL. By believing they need Goodell – a white savior – to help them achieve their goal to be head coaches, Black coaches are positioned as Black men who are craven and lacking masculinity.

The white savior is a narrative often used in blockbuster films like *Freedom Writers* (2007), *The Blind Side* (2009), and *The Help* (2011). Rachel Griffin informs us that a white savior “occurs when a white person guides people of color from the margins to the mainstream with his or her own initiative and benevolence.”¹³¹ Mollie Murphy and Tina Harris add to the explanation of the white savior when they state, “typically, the relationship involves a White savior and a seemingly subordinate black person... the white hero is portrayed as generous, whereas the people of color are grateful for the white person’s generosity.”¹³² When this narrative trope is applied it situates the Black characters as inferior and the white character as civil and superior.

These articles portray Black coaches as seeing Goodell as one in a superior position and this makes him savior-like to them. Reid tells us that “black NFL employees are counting on commissioner Roger Goodell to do the right thing.”¹³³ Reid explains that Black coaches know that Goodell is aware and sympathetic to the plight they are facing and they realize that Goodell implores team owners that they need to fix the deplorable record of hiring minority coaches. Goodell also is responsible for the new

addendum to the RR that necessitates that teams now interview two minority coaches outside of their organization when a head coaching position is available. Reid explicates that Black coaches owe a debt of gratitude to Goodell for revamping the RR when he writes “if the expanded rule produces the positive change that frustrated black executive and coaches desires, they will have Goodell to thank for standing on a table and exhorting his billionaire bosses to step up.”¹³⁴ According to this coverage, current Black coaches are letting Goodell fight their battles and they have not contributed anything in the way of rules and regulations. Current Black coaches have nothing to do with the implementation of the RR, according to Reid, they are just spectators on the proverbial sideline while Goodell acts as their mouthpiece.

Moreover, Goodell is portrayed as leading the charge for Black coaches; Reid explains that Goodell is “aware that executives and coaches of color are frustrated about the lack of opportunity for advancement compared with their white colleagues.”¹³⁵ Goodell is viewed as the one who is most capable of telling Black coaches stories better than they can themselves. The reliability that Black coaches have for Goodell is astonishing. Black coaches have essentially entrusted Goodell to be their voice and to express their pain and struggle. Reid explains that “Goodell understands why many believe it’s unacceptable that so few Black leaders have reached the top rung of the ladder in coaching football operations and business operations.”¹³⁶ Reid is letting us know that Goodell is suited to provide the owners with persuasive language they need to make changes in their hiring practices. Goodell is admired and trusted by Black coaches because of his commitment to social justice in the Black community. Goodell is

presented as one who champions causes for the African American community. Reid explains that Goodell “drove the bus on the NFL historic partnership with the Player Coalition and has continued to push to expand the league’s funding of grassroots organizations doing significant work in criminal justice reform and other areas to benefit victims of systemic racism.”¹³⁷ Goodell is represented as being for diversity and making things more equitable for Black coaches and Black players. Reid also explains that “Goodell is an ally in the fight to improve diversity from the front office to the field.”¹³⁸ These efforts by Goodell make him more endearing to Black coaches and this is why he is represented as a white savior. All of the themes are working together and cause harm to Black coaches. When you juxtapose these different construction of Black coaches with the white savior narrative it is emasculating to Black coaches.

Steering Clear of The “Racist” Label

The 22 journalists who produced the 44 articles that I examined have one thing in common: they all managed not to label the team owners in the NFL as racists or say that the NFL is practicing racism. Hence, I argue that the journalist who constructed these articles circumvented identifying the team owners as racists and avoided vilifying the league for its racism. Before I continue my critique of the articles, I want to define systemic racism, and colorblind racism. Michael Omi and Howard Winant define racism as “ideologies, policies, and practices in a variety of institutional arenas that normalize and reproduce racial inequality and domination.”¹³⁹ Feagin articulates that systemic racism is more than racial prejudice as he defines as “a material, social, and ideological reality that is well-embedded in major U.S. institutions.”¹⁴⁰ In a world where racism

exists, but so many white people feel they are not, Eduardo Bonilla-Silva presents colorblind racism as “whites rationalize[zing] minorities’ contemporary status as the product of market dynamics, naturally occurring phenomena, and blacks imputed cultural limitations.”¹⁴¹ Most of the team owners actions or inactions fit the descriptions of these definitions although the authors of these articles failed to convey this message.

As mentioned earlier, several Black coaches are portrayed as being afraid to speak out publicly against obvious unjust racial hiring practices. And, even when they speak anonymously, they are careful about what they say. Jairo Alvarado quotes an anonymous black coach who states, “I don’t believe it’s about racism, at least from a hatred of people of color. It might have been in the past; I don’t know, I am speaking of now.”¹⁴² This coach goes on to state that the lack of hiring black coaches is about relationships.¹⁴³ Racism does not have to be based on hate it can be based on one race believing their race is superior and more dominate than another race, and decisions and choices can be made based on these beliefs. However, Alvarado’s sentiments emulates the anonymous coach’s position; he writes that black coaches just need to get to know team owners. With this thought Alvarado implies that team owners have relationships with white coaches before they hire them and this is not the case. Hill informs us that Judge had a good relationship with head coach Belichick, but his presentation impressed the Giants’ general manger, Dave Gettleman and owner and John Mara. Judge did not have a relationship with team owner John Mara.¹⁴⁴ Moreover, Alvarado asserts that it is not about racism, but more about Black coaches forming relationships with team owners. Alvarado’s theory about Black coaches needing to build better connections with team

owners fits Bonilla-Silva's colorblind racism. I infer that it can be inferred that Alvarado views building relationships with team owners is a natural occurrence in the NFL, and that Black coaches may have cultural limitations when it comes to social networking.

In John McMullen's article, he supports the same message Alvarado spouts when he writes "the NFL is also a lot like other industries and life in general in that often it's no[t] what you know, it's who you know. Networking is more important than any other aspect of job hiring process."¹⁴⁵ McMullen like Alvarado infers that white coaches get hired more frequently than Black coaches because of assumed connections white coaches have with owners. McMullen's article presumes that racism does not play a role in the lack of hiring Black coaches, and Black coaches also need to find a way to network so they can increase their chances of being chosen to be a head coach. McMullen believes the NFL has a problem with hiring minority coaches, but he does not communicate that it has anything to do with racism. He states, "in the case of minority candidates in the NFL the league hasn't been able to fix the problem because it can't even identify the crux of it."¹⁴⁶ It is absurd that the NFL cannot find the problem with the lack of hiring when it is apparent that it has to deal with the race of the head coach. White owners are not comfortable with Black men at the helm. Klemko who interviewed Ray Horton an assistant coach with Washington explains that that he was a final candidate with a white counterpart and they chose the white counterpart. When Horton asked the team owner why did they choose his counterpart, the owner said he felt more comfortable with the other guy. Horton was left shaking his head and asking the question how does one quantify that response.¹⁴⁷

Jenny Ventras was bold enough to place the onus for the lack of diversity in head coaching on the owners. She states, “ultimately fixing the NFL’s diversity problem is up to owners and high-ranking club executives confronting their own implicit and unconscious biases.”¹⁴⁸ Her choice to use implicit and unconscious instead of racists biases could be because she does not want the attention that labeling someone a racist brings. In her article, Ventras urges owners to better understand and acknowledge their own biases and work to fix them and until this happens the NFL will still suffer from a lack of diversity at the head coaching position.¹⁴⁹ Ventras message is congruent with Feagin’s white racial frame. The owners’ biases produce “operational norms that determine an array of individual actions in the NFL.”¹⁵⁰ The question for Ventras would be what other biases is she talking about when the NFL admittedly has an issue with hiring minority candidates? She is implying racial biases, but she does a great job using more innocuous terms as not to offend any team owners.

Reid, who is African American, and who authored 13 of the 44 articles navigates around calling the owners racists as well. Reid wrote “across the NFL, signs should be posted at team headquarters that read, ‘coaches of color will rarely receive serious consideration for head coaching positions.’”¹⁵¹ This passage written by Reid broaches systemic racism because it is an ideological reality well-embedded in the NFL.¹⁵² Reid does an excellent job articulating the thoughts of Black coaches, but he is unsuccessful in labeling the owners racists or calling their non-action with minorities racists. Reid informs us that most Black coaches “are trying to maintain hope that owners will someday change their wrongheaded thinking and judge them on the content of their

coaching, rather the color of their skin.”¹⁵³ Reid brands the owners as wronghead thinkers, which exposes the owners as having something against coaches of color. This term is just a euphemism which gets Reid around not labeling the owners as racist thinkers. Reid understands that the burden is on team owners to make things right or more diverse in the league. He comprehends what power the owners possess and he is not apprehensive about calling out owners as he writes “the billionaires for whom Goodell works determine who will be hired as team presidents, head coaches and executives in football and business operations.” Reid does a good job reminding us about how the owners think by implying that they have racist thoughts, but he is cautious about using the word “racists.” A reason that Reid may have not called the owners racists is because ESPN who owns the *The Undeclared* has a television contract with the NFL.

Conclusion

Tommy Curry states, “ the idea of the all-powerful white male figure to achieve cultural institutionalization and buy-in from the masses, ‘the dominant culture needs its ‘nigger boys,’ its ugly inferior, it's ‘other’ in order to construct itself as superior and beautiful men.”¹⁵⁴ George Yancy substantiates Curry’s statement as he writes, “This is the twisted fate of the Black body vis-à-vis white forms of disciplinary control, process of white races embodied habituation, in epistemic white-world making.”¹⁵⁵ These two statements describe the relationship between the white team owners and the Black coaches in the NFL. One of my arguments was that a sports journalist depicts team owners as white hegemonic males while portraying Black coaches as emasculated Black

men. This relationship is a reason why the RR became a policy in the NFL. However, Black coaches are kept silent on speaking out about their treatment when it comes to head coaching opportunities. Black men are still being represented in conventional ways as they are characterized as fearful of white men.

Sports journalists who wrote about the RR in their articles seldom mention that the relationship between white men and Black men is not new. White men in this country have always been in the position of power and ownership, and Black men have usually served as their minions. Journalists who depict team owners as hegemonic males and Black coaches as emasculated males somehow failed to speak about the power dynamic between white men and Black men. White team owners are responsible for making the RR a policy in the NFL, yet few of them have given Black coaches to lead their teams. The irony of this situation further proves that white team owners have the ultimate power over Black coaches in the NFL because they created and put into practice a policy they hardly ever followed.

CHAPTER III

VISUAL INTERNET MEMES AND THE COLIN KAEPERNICK PROTEST

In 2016 San Francisco quarterback Colin Kaepernick refused to stand during the national anthem in protest of police brutality. To the chagrin of team owners in the National Football League (NFL), Kaepernick's protest eventually captured the public's attention and became fodder for the national media. During the first two weeks of the 49ers' preseason games played in Houston and Denver, Kaepernick sat quietly on the bench during the singing of the national anthem: no one took notice. However, during the third game of the preseason, a media member circulated a photo of Kaepernick sitting on the bench through social media that garnered attention. When Kaepernick was asked why he was not standing for the national anthem, his response was, "I'm not going to stand up and show pride in a flag for a country that oppresses Black people and people of color."¹⁵⁶ Kaepernick was probed furthered by reporters, and then Kaepernick explained, "this is bigger than football and 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."¹⁵⁷ Kaepernick was talking about Black males – Trayvon Martin, Michael Brown, Eric Garner, Tamir Rice – who had their lives terminated by law enforcement and neighborhood watchmen. His protest generated several discussions surrounding the Black activist athlete, American military, law-enforcement, nationalism, and patriotism.

Kaepernick's responses engendered polarizing discourse that played out through various media outlets – digital, print, podcasts, television talk shows, radio talk shows, and different social media platforms. I am particularly interested in the use of memes as

a mode of communication to opine on the topic in Kaepernick's protest. Memes are a visual and verbal form of communication that has been replicated and spread throughout the Internet. Ryan Milner helps with the understanding of memes when he lays out the variations of memes and the variety of usages. Memes "can be widely shared catchphrases, auto-tuned songs, manipulated stock photos, or recordings of physical performances. They are used to make jokes, argue points, and connect friends."¹⁵⁸ Visual Internet memes are becoming a less distinct way to correspond and interconnect; memes are an accepted form of communication and a prolific way to communicate.

In this chapter, I analyze the memes that critique Kaepernick and his protest. I argue that the Kaepernick protest memes use visual and sarcastic discourse to shape how the public comprehends the Black activist athlete. More precisely, memes are devices that help reproduce anti-Black stereotypical tropes about Black athletes, and white national ideologies. To further examine the Black athlete protest, we can look at new forms of public spheres. According to Jürgen Habermas, "citizens behave as a public body when they confer in an unrestricted fashion – that is, with a guaranteed of freedom of assembly and association and freedom to express in public their opinions – about matters of general interest."¹⁵⁹ Memes circulate in largely unrestricted media where opinions about several issues are expressed and discussed. Memes have become sites where civil and uncivil engagement take place. Heather Woods and Leslie Hahner maintain that "memes are a part of an overarching shift in public culture that requires scholarly consideration."¹⁶⁰ Woods and Hahner are articulating how seriously we should be looking at memes as an earnest way for the public to communicate. However, since

any member of the public can arbitrarily create memes, critics cannot point to or blame a single media conglomerate for the production of memes. An accumulation of views populates memes, and this allows critics to scrutinize the public.

These whimsical creations that are at times blatantly racialized are formulated with complete anonymity that clearly opposes the notion that we reside in a post racial society. The post-racial society is spelled out by Derald Wing Sue when he explains, “the racial reality of most white Americans is of a nation that has conquered racism, that we now live in a post-racial error, that racism is a thing of the past, that equal access and opportunity are available to everyone.”¹⁶¹ Sue articulates that whites believe that racism is not an albatross around the necks of Black people and that racism no longer prohibits Black people from being successful in America. Progressive scholars, like David Hollinger, believe there is quite a bit of merit to the post-ethnic and post-racial society. Hollinger asserts that race-mixing relationships and the influx dark skin immigrants in America warrant the notion of a post-racial society existing.¹⁶² Scholars such as Hollinger will admit that racism is not eradicated from systems in America, but they believe racism has been substantially mitigated. However, by examining the Kaepernick protest memes, one would attest that a multitude of producers of these memes lends credence to the scholarship of Eduardo Bonilla-Silva, who illustrates that racist messages or behaviors have not been eradicated, they are now just expressed more covertly.¹⁶³ I align myself with Bonilla-Silva’s argument. Moreover, I declare that memes provide enough anonymity to embolden authors/creators to germinate racial epithets that promote white supremacist ideologies.¹⁶⁴

I use Lisa Flores' racial rhetorical criticism to comprehend the ways memes contributed to the discourse surrounding the Kaepernick protest. As I indicated in the introduction, Flores states racial rhetorical criticism "is reflective about and engages the persistence of racial oppression, logics, voices, and bodies and that theorizes the very production of race as rhetorical."¹⁶⁵ This chapter coincides with Flores' point.

Kaepernick is a Black body and Black voice that addresses oppressive racial systems that significantly impact people of color in the United States. For being outspoken about racial and social injustices inflicted on Black bodies, Black men, in particular, Kaepernick's body was disparaged with the use of memes. My critical analysis of these memes points out the prominent racial components and uncovers the latent racial characterizations of Kaepernick. More specifically, this racial rhetorical analysis exposes the suatory tactics used by anti-Kaepernick-meme-inventors who seek to garner the attention of the populace and dictate public discourse.

The Rhetorical Power of Memes

Traditional media outlets – television, radio, newspaper – are sites where rhetorical performances occur, and communication scholars can say the same about new media outlets – online ads, streaming video, podcasts, social media. I see memes as a site where rhetorical performances occur. Since more and more people use memes to communicate, critics should note how they induce publics and influence culture. In the past, rhetoricians have usually focused their attention on the way individuals and organizations have communicated with the general public or institutions. For example, when rhetorical scholars researched, Black public figures, Black culture, or Black

organizations as artifacts to analyze, they often looked at speeches from great orators like Frederick Douglass, Dr. Martin Luther King Jr., and Malcolm X to better determine how rhetoric was able to persuade an audience.¹⁶⁶ Scholars also study Black music genres – Gospel, Rhythm & Blues, and Hip Hop – to better understand how the meaningful lyrics led Black bodies to flee slavery, champion protest, and challenge structural racism.¹⁶⁷ Rhetoricians also investigated organizations—NAACP, U.N.I.A., Black Panther Party—to see how specific literature and messages helped capture individuals’ minds and inspired them to join their organizations and perpetuate the organization’s messages.¹⁶⁸ With the advent of new modes of communication, rhetorical scholarship expanded to include other forms of “public address.” According to Woods and Hahner, “today, the study of rhetoric also examines how forms of address shape public culture. In this way, rhetoric shapes both specific audience response and the larger culture in which audiences are immersed.”¹⁶⁹ Creative memes play a vital role in molding the way audiences are convinced.

More specifically, academics have argued that memes are a powerful way to communicate with the public. Grant Kien calls this new form of communication “memetic communication.”¹⁷⁰ Kien goes on to proclaim that the “creation and use of memetic communication is already bringing dramatic changes in our everyday world at a historically alarming pace, and will continue to bring about civilizational impacts that we have yet to understand and experience.”¹⁷¹ Milner uses the term “memetic media” and focuses on the public conversation and how members of the general public participate in these open discussions.¹⁷² Milner concentrates on memes, which he defines as “the

linguistic, image audio, and video text created, circulated, and transformed by countless cultural participants across vast networks and collectives.”¹⁷³

Indeed, internet memes have increasingly become a new popular way to communicate one-on-one and to a broader audience. In their discussion on Internet memes as image-language-texts, Michael Johann and Lars Bülow explain, “Internet memes... consists of images of pop culture, politics, or everyday life, which are often but not necessarily recontextualized by users. These language-image-texts usually follow a prototypical composition: the basis is the image, which is mostly recontextualized by language.”¹⁷⁴ New technology makes it possible for citizens to become larger participants in social, political, and religious discussions. The meme serves as a well-suited conduit for the public to add their commentary to broader discourse with some certainty of anonymity.

Richard Dawkins, the author of *The Selfish Gene*, coined the term “meme” and was the first to conduct a gene-meme analogy. Robert Aunger advises us that Dawkins informed specific publics that the gene and the meme were not identical, but Aunger does tell us that Dawkins was sure that memes are passed among people through imitation while evolving in the process.”¹⁷⁵ There are several different definitions of memes. In their article that explicates the diffusion of memes, Johann and Bülow simply state that “memes ideally combine image-based and linguistic communication.”¹⁷⁶ In their text they provide readers with a few scholars who have written extensively about memes. Patrick Davidson, who writes about the language of Internet memes, defines memes “as a piece of culture, typically a joke, which gains influence through

transmission.”¹⁷⁷ One of the more prolific writers on memes Limor Shifman defines “an Internet meme as: (a) a group of digital items sharing common characteristics of content, form, and/ or stance, which were created with awareness of each other, and were circulated, imitated, and/ or transformed via the Internet by many users.”¹⁷⁸ These scholars illustrate that the meme is a growing way individuals and communities connect and commune.

Memes are now a part of our social fabric, and they play a role in how society socially communicates. The Internet and social media provide a plethora of locations and spaces for people to speak about civic activities and hobbies that interest them, politics that they identify with, and topics in which are intriguing. Memes provide users with a communication tool that allows them to express their opinions and feelings to publics that agree, disagree, or are indifferent to various notions that users espouse. Shifman explains that “meme genres play an important role in the construction of group identity and social boundaries.”¹⁷⁹ In our everyday lives, we usually connect ourselves with organizations, companies, communities who share common interests. In other words, we look for identifiable groups in the “meme sphere,” the same way we look for groups that share our common identities.

Memes have become sites of public discourse. Depending on one’s interests, one can spark discussions or add to discourses by using memes. The use of images combined with text allows users to punctuate their opinions around specific issues. For example, Veronica Scott and Timothy Bill state, “visual images can reflect and perpetuate cultural biases.”¹⁸⁰ One can argue that visual images are the base or salient component of the

meme. The text is usually created by what the image triggers inside of the mind of a user. Although the images precipitate the text, the text brings a different or new meaning to the image. Johann and Bülow explained that “texts are principally all emblematic vocalizations and their communicative function and performance, regardless of their medial provenance.”¹⁸¹ Johann and Bülow assert that regardless of how public opinions are conveyed, messages comprehended and digested by the public play a role in shaping minds. Messages are no longer transmitted in traditional ways; new media has provided people with more options to communicate their way of thinking to a broader audience. Asaf Nissenbaum and Shifman articulate a similar point when they write “memes that function as a part of a culture contributing to a set of ideas around which communities gather an act.”¹⁸² Discourses that once only took place in the public sphere has now infiltrated digital technical spaces, which has the opportunity to be more impactful and widespread due to the reach that digital technology provides. Conversations around pop culture, politics, music, science, and sports are no longer confine to small spaces such as bars, coffee shops, houses, and classrooms. With the advent of social media and the Internet, discussions about various issues can become global conversations.

As a rhetorical scholar, I understand the use of language as a persuasive tool that has the power to shape public opinion, convince the public to unite and take action for a cause, and mold the minds of great thinkers. My goal in investigating the Kaepernick protest memes is to see how they work to persuade publics. Furthermore, this chapter explores the ways memes represented Kaepernick Black athletic body. Since this chapter

focuses on how memes represent the Kaepernick protest and the Black activist athlete, I provide the relevant historical background on Black protests in America.

Black Body, Sport, and White Fear

To better understand the Kaepernick protest, we must understand why Black people protest, boycott, and demonstrate to communicate and fight against injustices they encountered. Furthermore, to comprehend the Black activist athletes, one should examine the pressures they were/are under to utilize their popularity to advocate issues concerning the Black community. Moreover, one needs to explore what the Black activist athlete risks by using their enormous platform to speak about matters on behalf of the Black community.

The Black body has always been devalued in the United States. Black people have had to contend with negative information disseminated to the public. Resistance against racist ideologies, unfair treatment, governmental policies that thwarted the progress of Black bodies has been a mainstay in the lives of Black people. Protests, boycotts, demonstrations, speeches, riots, and violence are various ways in which Black folks endeavored to fight against injustices and unfair treatment. Resistance against white supremacy, anti-Blackness, and hegemonic whiteness in America has been a part of Black folks' DNA. During slavery, Black abolitionists, some of whom lost their lives, spoke out against the physical and economic injustices. George Fredrickson informs us of the great abolitionist Frederick Douglass, an excellent orator whose "favorite rhetorical strategy was to explore hypocrisy of those who professed adherence to the Declaration of Independence, democracy, and equality of opportunity but also condone

slavery and racial discrimination.”¹⁸³ During Jim Crow segregation, race men wrote and spoke about the racist laws that positioned Black folks as inferior and encouraged Black people to stick together to fight against inequalities. In his speech, *A Separate Nation*, Marcus Garvey states, “we represent a new line of thought among Negroes. If it is reactionary for people to see independence in government, then we are reactionary. If it is advanced thought for people to seek liberty and freedom, then we represent an advance school of thought among Negroes of this country.”¹⁸⁴ Throughout the Civil Rights Movement, Black pastors used their voices to speak truth to power so that Black folks would be recognized as equals in the United States. In his Montgomery Boycott Speech, Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. states, “we, the disinherited of this land, we who have been oppressed so long, are tired of going through the night of captivity. And now we are reaching out for the daybreak of freedom and justice and equality.”¹⁸⁵ Black folks were always standing up for what was fair and right.

In the United States, whites and people of color have viewed the Black masculine body with contempt.¹⁸⁶ Because of the disdain of the Black male body, Black men have been the recipient of uninhibited ridicule and lethal harm. Often these behaviors toward the Black body go unpunished. This manner of conduct is so evident that there is little to no concern for the Black masculine body. Curry argues, “despite seeing Black men’s demise daily, Americans do not find it shocking. Mainstream media, social media, and daily conversations routinely accept Black males dying as somewhat inevitable. Pictures, videos, and caricatures of black male death are passed around with little regard for the expired lives.”¹⁸⁷ I contend that if the public views the killing of Black bodies as

ubiquitous, it is not hard to comprehend why the populace does not decry the Black masculine body's castigation.

Whiteness is dependent on the Black body to be viewed as the superior race. For this superior positionality, the white gaze posits the Black body as less than. Yancy elucidates his assertion about the white gaze when he states, "the Black body is constructed as antithetical within a binary logic that points to the white body's own signifying [and material] forces to call attention to itself as normative."¹⁸⁸ This white gaze that Yancy writes about has an enormous reach, which goes far beyond individual human encounters in specific locations. The white gaze is played out in traditional media and new media and has the persuasive power consumed by various audiences.

The hatred and trepidation for the Black body spurred by the white gaze originated during the antebellum. The visual image of the Black body conjured up contrasting thoughts in the minds of whites. The corporeal contours of Black males concurrently evoked notions of physical pulchritude and physical dominance. The latter idea spurred white men to produce and circulate mythical rhetoric about the Black body to keep Black men under surveillance and sanction white males to dole out punishment with little penalty. The inhumane approach regarding the Black body has been reproduced and consistently enacted on Black people for centuries. The recent and recurrent argument that civil rights and legal rights were granted to Black people significantly mitigates oppressive forces that once impeded Black people's progress can be aptly rationalized with the attitude of white supremacy and white hegemonic masculinity. Linsay Cramer states, "controlling images... have been a communicative

strategy used by whiteness and white masculinity to justify racial and gendered domination and oppression and continued to be used today in a variety of cultural spaces including sport.”¹⁸⁹ Ron Jackson chimes in when he writes, it was during the period of enslavement that whites developed many of their greatest fears and anxieties toward Blacks, particularly Black males and established safeguards for rationalizing their vulnerability and unacceptable activities as slaveowners.”¹⁹⁰ Both scholars understand that creating and controlling the narrative and framing the Black masculine body as a violent ignoramus helped ingrain the white public’s minds that the Black body should be viewed as incompetent and treated as savage.

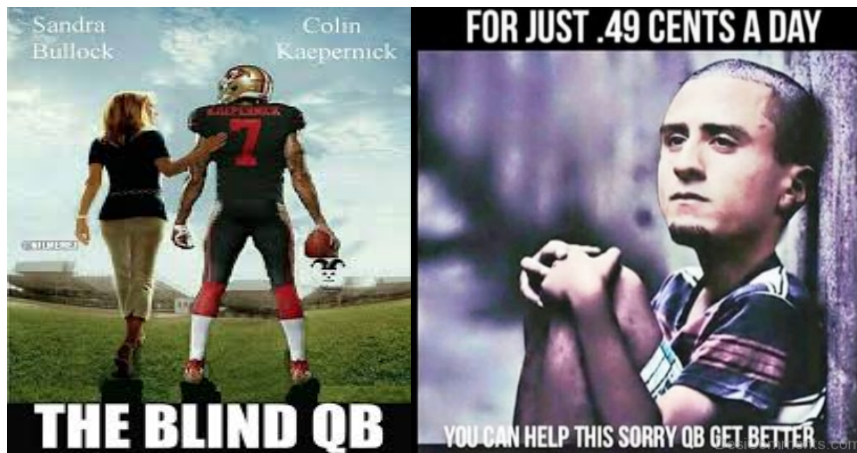
Black athletes were never immune from the excoriation of the press. Although the traditional media praised the Black athletic body they also chastised the Black athletic body when it stepped out of line. The examination of the internet memes allows us to see if new media platforms change the way Black athletes are portrayed when they challenge social issues that impact Black communities.

Kaepernick Memes

Approximately six weeks after Nike released its ad supporting Kaepernick, a google search using the phrase “Kaepernick’s memes” produced 595 memes. Of the memes, 261 were deleted because they had nothing to do with the Kaepernick protest. Of the 334 left, I deleted 14 because they focused on supporting Kaepernick. Left with 320 memes, I found the following: Memes challenged his position in the NFL, his ability to speak on behalf of oppressed Black people, and his standard as an American. These matters yielded an unworthy theme. The unworthy theme emerges by depicting

Kaepernick as (1) a lousy quarterback, (2) an ungrateful wealthy athlete, and (3) unpatriotic. More investigation of the memes revealed Kaepernick as villainous and menacing. These labels gave birth to a dangerous theme. The dangerous theme appears through Kaepernick's equation with (1) evil and (2) a threat to American values.

Unworthy Memes



1.

2.

Figure 1: Lousy Quarterback Play

The unworthy meme emerges in three ways: Kaepernick is seen as a lousy quarterback, an ungrateful wealthy athlete, and unpatriotic. Labeling Kaepernick as an inferior quarterback conjures up racist tropes about Black athletic bodies as not having the intellectual efficacy to play the NFL's quarterback position. White owners, general managers, and coaches felt Black athletic bodies did not possess the necessary characteristics to be leaders of men. William C. Rhoden makes this point clear when he states, "somehow, all the leadership traits embodied by a great quarterback are perceived to be beyond the reach of a quarterback with a black face."¹⁹¹ In making this comment, Rhoden enlightens us that until recently, the NFL owners viewed Black

athletic bodies as physically gifted but not mentally astute. The owners' view reifies the notion that strong physical Black bodies are incapable of comprehending intricate details about the game, and they as such need to be managed and controlled. These memes critique Kaepernick's play on the field to communicate that Kaepernick is unworthy of public support. For example, figure 1 meme 1 is a mimicked movie poster ad from the film *The Blind Side* starring Quinton Aaron and Sandra Bullock. The difference between the poster and the meme is Aaron's body is replaced with Kaepernick's body, and the caption of the meme reads *The Blind QB*. There are several stereotypical tropes displayed in this visual Internet meme. Kaepernick's ability to play quarterback in the NFL is challenged, Kaepernick's cognitive capabilities are questioned, his physical body is portrayed as a villainous brute, and he is situated like he needs a white savior.

More specifically, the caption of the meme reads *The Blind QB*. I can make two incontestable points: 1) it is imperative that an NFL quarterback have good eyesight, and 2) a blind person could not play in the NFL because he would not know who he is throwing the ball to. Therefore, I argue that this meme suggests that Kaepernick's level of play is equivalent to a vision-impaired person. Being that Kaepernick's vision is intact, this meme is implying that Kaepernick throws the football with reckless abandon and does not make the right decisions. By attacking Kaepernick's skills, the meme is indicating that Kaepernick does not deserve to be an NFL quarterback.

An additional innuendo one can infer from studying the caption is that Kaepernick cannot read or understand an NFL defense. Most NFL pundits and scouts

will attest that a quarterback is heavily evaluated on his ability to read and process defenses as they attack the offense. Well-known pro football scout Chris Landry states on his website that a quarterback should possess a mental awareness which he says is “intelligence, field vision—seeing the field, understanding of coverage, reading defenses, judgment in decision making and avoidance of forcing the ball, poise under game and rush pressure, anticipation of when receivers will come open, locating secondary and tertiary receivers,”¹⁹² are critical factors when it comes to scouting an NFL quarterback. Landry’s scouting objectives leads to the next point about Black athletes having the football acumen to play the quarterback position.

The unfair labeling of Black athletes only possessing the physical prowess to play sports and not the intellectual acuity is mentioned most in football. The quarterback is considered one of the most challenging positions in all of professional sports. There was a time when Black athletes were never considered for the position and often persuaded to play other positions. Patrick Hruby does a great job explaining that “down-the-middle positions of center, inside linebacker, and quarterback were considered ‘thinking’ spots. As such, they were seen as too cerebral for Black athletes, who additionally were thought to lack the leadership and grit to lead other players.”¹⁹³ After this close examination of the caption, I surmise that the meme depicts Kaepernick as one who lacks the mental efficacy to play the quarterback position.

There are several other memes that represent Kaepernick as a lousy quarterback. One of those memes is a picture of Kaepernick working at a McDonalds drive through with a part of the caption reading “would you like some fries with those turnovers.”¹⁹⁴

Indicating that Kaepernick turns the football a great deal. Another meme displays Kaepernick at a press conference with the caption reading “if you ask Colin what his favorite number is, he’d probably pick 6.”¹⁹⁵ A pick 6 is when a quarterback mistakenly throws the ball to the opposing team and they return it for a touchdown. The meme insinuates that Kaepernick throws a lot of interceptions. Another meme states, “I’m Colin ‘sackorpick’ and I approve this message.”¹⁹⁶ This meme is also telling us about Kaepernick’s lousy play.

Additionally, when examining the meme’s images, I contend that Kaepernick’s body is viewed as vile and brutal. When juxtaposing Kaepernick’s body with Bullock’s body, there are clear distinctions between the two. Kaepernick is towering over Bullock. He is dressed in his full football uniform, ready to battle or go to war. In this meme, Kaepernick is likened to a Roman gladiator approaching the coliseum as we see the stadium in the near distance. Kaepernick is wearing the black uniform in this image, which depicts him as ominous. The uniform’s color is significant because the San Francisco 49ers have two other jerseys, one which is white and the other red. White can be symbolic of innocence, purity, and peace, and red can symbolize love. Black bodies are rarely depicted as loving, innocent, or pure in the media. Black bodies are usually criminalized and shown as nefarious. Kaepernick’s arms are covered in tattoos, connoting a bad boy image.

Bullock is portrayed as soft and feminine, walking next to Kaepernick. She is shown as alluring in her Capri pants and her flowing shirt that gives off a hint of professionalism and elitism, while also depicting a woman in charge; Bullock is in no

way depicted as salacious or imprudent. Her face is showing, and her hair is flowing, which allows her beauty to be showcased, while Kaepernick's face is caged in a helmet, not exposing his aesthetics or his freeness. Bullock's hand is slightly pressed against Kaepernick's back, showing that she has the upper hand in the relationship. I argue that the two of them together resemble the beauty and the beast. Bullock can also be seen as the white savior in this photo. Julio Cammarota informs us that "the white savior syndrome has the tendency to render people of color incapable of helping themselves—infantile or hapless/helpless victims who survive by instinct."¹⁹⁷ Those familiar with the film *The Blind Side* know that is precisely the role that Bullock plays in which she received an academy award.

Another representative example of the unworthy theme can be in figure 1, meme 2, Kaepernick is depicted as a displaced pauper in need of assistance. The caption on the meme reads, "*For Just .49 Cents A Day You Can Help This Sorry QB Get Better.*"

Addressing meme 2, there are a few issues that one may consider. Examining the verbal caption, it can be argued that the meme is labeling Kaepernick as helpless/hopeless, a deficient quarterback, and financially ill-advised. When reviewing the visual text in the meme, I contest that Kaepernick's masculinity is being challenged as Kaepernick is represented as a child who has lost his way.

Referencing Kaepernick as one who is dependent on others for assistance reiterates the narrative of Black men not providing for themselves and dependent on others' support to maintain their livelihood. The meme positions Kaepernick as demoralized with no self-determination to pull himself out of a rut. Kaepernick's

account situates him as lacking the mental fortitude and grit to pull himself up by his bootstraps and take ownership of his own life. Moreover, it implies that Black men cannot lead, take on responsibilities, or be in a position of authority. There have been a variety of viewpoints when it comes to the notion of Black male irresponsibility. Curry contends that “racist accounts of Black males depict them as lesser males who are lazy, unintelligent, aggressive, and violent toward women and children and who abandon their families physically and cannot provide for them economically.”¹⁹⁸ Estes assigns fault to an unfair capitalist economy. He asserts Black men “found it nearly impossible to live up to a standard of manhood that required them to earn enough money to support their families.”¹⁹⁹ Jackson, whose research is centered around how the Black masculine body is represented insists “because mass media and popular culture are predominantly littered with these negative images, it appears they are unwilling to see black bodies positively, and this affects every day looking relations.”²⁰⁰ Curry and Estes point to structural racism as the culprit which hinders the advancement of Black men. Simultaneously, Jackson explains how the media fails or refuses to balance the representation of Black men they showcase.²⁰¹

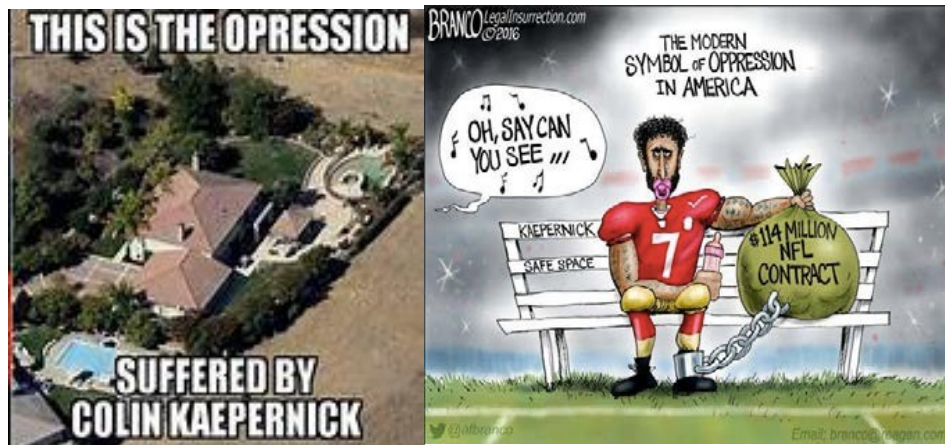
This meme is trying to communicate that Kaepernick, who once signed a contract with the San Francisco 49ers worth \$126 million, is now only worth .49 a day, which equals \$178.85 per year. There is historical significance when we examine the worth of the Black masculine body. Whites have always valued the physical strength of Black males and have exploited their labor. Looking at the economy of chattel slavery, Hill-Collins writes, “under chattel slavery, people of African descent occupied a particular

place in class relations-their bodies and all that was contained in those bodies (labor, sexuality, and reproduction) were objectified and turned into commodities that were traded in the marketplace.”²⁰² Amy Bride who writes about slavery and capitalism informs us about the value of the Black body when she explains “the slave body is conceptualized by white owners and traders as akin to farm machinery or a working animal.”²⁰³ Hill-Collins and Bride point out that white owners only saw the Black body’s production value and were apathetic about Black bodies as human. By decreasing Kaepernick’s worth, the meme is perpetuating the myth of the Black body being worthless if he is not producing revenue for white owners.

After taking a close look at the visual of meme 2, I argue that the meme is attacking Kaepernick’s masculinity and manhood. The image shows a young-looking Kaepernick with his baby face and an ounce of peach fuzz on his chin. His eyes portray sadness, he is sitting in a fetal position with his back up against the wall, and he is dressed in shabby clothing. Representing Kaepernick as a child signifies that he is not man/tough enough to play football, and it indicates that he is infantile, which renders him incapable of leading men. Football is a brutal sport that is physically punishable, and some players have suffered some catastrophic injuries. Therefore, the meme implies that Kaepernick does not have the tenacity to play the quarterback position, and he is fragile and effeminate. By challenging Kaepernick’s manhood, the meme is reiterating past tropes about how Black bodies are underserving to be considered real men. Curry informs us about the struggle for power that Black bodies face when they endeavor to be men. Curry writes, “because maleness has come to be understood as synonymous with

power and patriarchy, and racially codified as white, it has no similar existential content for the Black male, who in an anti-Black world is denied maleness and is ascribed as feminine in relation to white masculinity.”²⁰⁴ Robert Staples joins the conversation by stating “after placing these obstacles to manhood in the black man’s way, white America then has its ideological bearers, the social scientists, falsely indict him for his lack of manhood.”²⁰⁵ Curry and Staples argue that structural racism plays a salient role in prohibiting Black male bodies from being viewed and respected as men. In the case of Kaepernick, the NFL is the institutional structure that banned Kaepernick from ever playing quarterback in the league again.

Ungrateful Wealthy Athlete



1.

2.

Figure 2 Ungrateful Wealthy Athlete

The second way the unworthy commodity meme emerges is as the ungrateful wealthy athlete. Sports fans grow impatient with athletes who bring politics into the arena of sports. As mentioned above, African American athletes receive a great deal of backlash and risk hurting their professional career and their public image by

speaking out against racial injustices in America. Brad Snyder explains how Curt Flood's stance against Major League Baseball torpedoed his career. Snyder states, "the public's distaste for the perceived excesses of the civil rights and antiwar movements seemed to come to a head over a rich black athlete portraying himself as a slave. Flood's 'well-paid slave' remark turned America against him."²⁰⁶ Rhoden attests to Snyder's account of the tremendous amount of pressure Curt Flood felt from making his decision and Rhoden explains how this type of pressure spawned "the emergence of the apolitical black athlete, who had to be careful what he or she stood for, so as not to offend white paymasters."²⁰⁷ Snyder and Rhoden inform us that though professional Black athletes are well compensated, they are not in control of their respective pro leagues' infrastructure. Therefore, they cannot shield themselves against white authority figures who set the rules and dole out the punishment. Quite simply, most Black athletic bodies are seldom in control of their professional fate.

These memes communicate to the public that wealthy Black athletes have a limited amount of ethos to opine about marginalized groups' oppression and mistreatment. I maintain that the more money and notoriety that Black athletic bodies receive, the greater the abuse they face when they speak out on political and racial issues that speak against oppressive systems that hamper people of color. Many fans feel that the lofty financial contracts that Black athletes earn insulate them from any type of systemic racism. Karen Hartman exposes this revelation when she explains, "seeing highly paid athletes taking a political stand in a

perceived entertainment venue creates a dissonance that, for many, is too big to reconcile. Athletes who expose national anxieties become powerful subjects for national dialogue due to the level of discomfort they offer when rupturing rituals.”²⁰⁸ Hill Collins is in sync with Hartman as she expresses, “Black men who earn large salaries but who are differential and appear to uphold American values are acceptable. The problems arise when players realize their value, their significance to the game and try to capitalize on their accomplishments. Then they are often held in the highest contempt.”²⁰⁹ Hartman and Hill Collins articulate that despite the wealth that the Black activist athletes obtain, they can find themselves in a dystopian state. The history of the Black activist athlete has taught us that when they venture to voice their viewpoints about racial conditions, they are penalized, and their earning potential can be siphoned away. Staying quiet on hot topics almost ensures an athlete that he/she is safeguarded from public scrutiny and their earning potential being snatched away.

In figure 2 meme 1, we see what we perceived to be a photograph of Kaepernick’s house. The caption reads: “*This is the oppression suffered by Colin Kaepernick.*” This meme is insinuating that Kaepernick is blessed/lucky/fortunate, and he is in no position to talk about any political issues. The fans feel that athletes have acquired enormous fame and fortune, which should render them silent and apolitical. When Black athletes venture to articulate their feelings and opinions about a controversial topic, they are often subjected to the fans’ fury. Hartman expounds on this sentiment by stating, “when athletes are politically vocal they become complex symbols

that media outlets and national publics are unable to package or understand neatly. This complexity leads to a level of discomfort not necessarily felt in other arenas of protest.”²¹⁰ The caption in this meme is aligned with what scholars have mentioned. The meme depicts money as the elixir for the Black athlete that cancels any inequality they have to face due to race or racism. Moreover, the meme insinuates that wealthy Black athletes have little compassion for Black folks who earn a substantially lower income. The meme also suggests that since Black athletes are held in such high esteem, it is inconceivable that Black athletes encounter racism.

One can also deduct from the caption that Black athletes should not concern themselves with Black men who are continuously mistreated by law enforcement and who are not wealthy. Instead, they should be focused on their craft and entertaining spectators. The meme illustrates that obtaining luxury trinkets disconnects Black athletes from their community origins, and it somehow revokes their blackness, rendering them unsympathetic toward issues concerning less celebrated Black bodies. In doing so, the meme also connotes that Black men are incapable of loving one another, perpetuating the myth that Black men are violent and compassionately bankrupt.

Figure 2, meme 2, is an additional way the ungrateful athlete is portrayed. In the meme, there is a character sketch of Kaepernick sitting on the bench. On the bench, it reads “Kaepernick safe space.” Viewers can associate Kaepernick’s safe space as an area where he retreats to after his act of resistance during the playing of the national anthem. The term “safe space” is often associated with feminist and

LGBTQ movements and practices. According to Karin Flensner and Marie Von der Lippe, “in recent years, the term has primarily been used in higher education, and ‘safe-space-policies’ have been adopted at many universities in order to prevent discrimination, harassment, hatred and threats.”²¹¹ By proclaiming that the bench is a safe space for Kaepernick, the meme suggests that wealthy athletes have no business being front and center for addressing oppressive issues.

I understand the meme showing Kaepernick holding a pink baby’s bottle and sucking on a pacifier as an attack on Kaepernick’s masculinity and manhood. The pink can be seen as a symbol of traditional female gender norms. In a hyper-masculine sport such as football, men continuously berate each other by spewing sexist names like “soft,” “pussy,” “wuss,” “bitch,” or “fag.” These remarks are hurled at a player when they are exhibiting fearful behavior. Traditionally, masculine men are not supposed to show any type of weakness. The pacifier and the bottle insinuate that Kaepernick has not fully reached manhood, and he does not know what it means to be a man. Both of these items symbolize infancy and a lack of maturity. Kimmel expresses that “manhood had been understood to define an inner quality, the capacity for autonomy and responsibility, and had historically been seen as the opposite of childhood.”²¹² The meme’s indictment of Kaepernick is emasculating. Kimmel goes further when he quotes Robert Brannon's four basic rules of masculinity, “No Sissy Stuff!” being a man means not being a sissy, not being perceived as weak, effeminate, or gay. Masculinity is the relentless repudiation of the feminine”²¹³ Brannon indicates that there is only one type of real

man and that is one who is heterosexual and dominant.

In addition to the critiques of masculinity, this meme also lambasts Kaepernick's authenticity by pointing to his wealth. Kaepernick is also chained to a bag of money that he is holding, which reads: "\$114 Million NFL Contract." At the very top of the meme reads, "The modern symbol of oppression in America." In a white thought balloon are musical notes and the beginning of the words of the national anthem: "Oh say can you see..." This meme suggests that Kaepernick has nothing to complain about because he has a tremendous amount of wealth earned the American way. Lastly, on Kaepernick's left shoulder pad there is a check mark, which is supposed to be the Nike swoosh logo. The check mark is a symbol of approval or being correct. Because Nike supports Kaepernick's stance, which is evident by the Nike ad, this can easily be seen as Nike approving Kaepernick's act of resistance. Nike has taken a calculated risk in endorsing Kaepernick believing that supporting Kaepernick will pay off in the long run when fans begin to celebrate him as a true patriot.

There are other memes that represent Kaepernick as an ungrateful wealthy athlete. One example is a photo of Kaepernick with the caption stating, "has a 10 million dollars net worth refuses to stand for national anthem because he is 'oppressed.'"²¹⁴ The next example is a photo of Kaepernick at a press conference with a caption that reads "makes 19 million a year playing American football – protests America."²¹⁵ Another example of the ungrateful wealthy athlete meme is a photo of Kaepernick with a caption that states, "sits out national anthem before football games in protest of racial

oppression – but I don't think he'd miss pay day in protest when he has a contract worth \$114,000,000. Cash them checks CK.”²¹⁶

Unpatriotic



1.

2.

Figure 3: Unpatriotic

The third way the unworthy meme emerged was in the marking of Kaepernick as unpatriotic. The New Oxford American Dictionary defines patriotic as “having or expressing devotion to and vigorous support for one’s country.” Some see Kaepernick’s act of protest in direct confrontation with being a patriot. Moreover, they interpret his gesture of resistance as being unworthy of being an American. Marking Kaepernick as unpatriotic and un-American suggests that Kaepernick is no longer on board with the social mores of the United States. Since Black bodies, particularly Black men, are criminalized and marked as dangerous, audiences were incapable of reading Kaepernick’s kneeling as justice, righteous, noble, or patriotic. The author of the meme is communicating that unarmed Black men dying at the hands of law enforcement does not merit sympathy or empathy; it is viewed as justifiable. Jackson explains that “the black body has become a text in which all

behaviors are visual and discursive representations to be read as alien unless those bodies are complicit in almost every sense with the dominant cultural norms.”²¹⁷ Jackson advises us that when Black bodies step out of line, they are scripted as problems and they are quickly dealt with. Kaepernick, who was exercising his constitutional rights, was not lionized for what he perceived to be a peaceful protest. Instead, he was defamed for his action that were framed as unpatriotic. Jackson explicates how Black bodies are interpreted when they strive to uphold what they perceive to be patriotic values when he states, “local differences are mapped out and deconstructed to mean backlash or rebellion, rather than defense or strength.”²¹⁸ In other words, Jackson argues that Black bodies do not receive the benefit of the doubt when they stand up on behalf of other Black and brown bodies. When Black bodies engage in protest, they are marked as problematic and they are punished. From this, we learn that even today when Black bodies step out of line, old tactics reconstructed are relied upon to reroute Black bodies back in line. In this section, we see that some memes use comparisons between Black men and white men to communicate the importance of patriotic ideals.

In Figure 3, meme 1, we see a military picture of former NFL player and fallen soldier Pat Tilman juxtaposed with a photo of Kaepernick. The caption on the Tilman photo reads “*He sacrificed everything.*” The Kaepernick photo reads, “*He sacrificed nothing.*” This meme is clearly comparing Pat Tilman’s actions against Kaepernick’s actions. Tilman, who gave up his NFL career and enlisted in the army shortly after the 9/11 attacks, is being praised because of his patriotic duties, and

Kaepernick, who took a knee to bring awareness to police brutality against Black men, is being maligned for what is deemed as unpatriotic behavior. To be a patriot is to exemplify manhood, masculinity, and strength and to perform the opposite is to be less than a man, a coward or a weakling. Nagel states, “patriotism is a siren call that few men can resist, particularly in the midst of a ‘political crisis’; and if they do, they risk the disdain or worse from their communities and families, sometimes including their mothers.”²¹⁹ Plainly, this meme’s message is in opposition to Kaepernick’s protest and believes his actions are not what real men do. Therefore, Kaepernick is not worthy of the same praise that is heaped on Pat Tillman.

Kaepernick’s stance against police brutality inflicted upon Black bodies is viewed as unpatriotic because Black bodies are devalued in America. To have an undying devotion for America is a difficult task for Black people due to racial hierarchies that have been established in America. By opposing law enforcement, Kaepernick is speaking out against a structure that plays a significant role in maintaining a racial formation that benefits whites over Blacks. Omi and Winant further elaborate when they state, “race is a fundamental organizing principle of social stratification. It has influenced the definition of the rights and privileges, the distribution of resources, the ideologies and practices of subordination and oppression.”²²⁰ In essence, Omi and Winant are explaining that race is an overwhelming factor in America that plays out in so many ways. The verbal attacks that classify Kaepernick as unpatriotic are due to the racial formation that is set in place in America. When Kaepernick, who is perceived as a Black man, speaks against white power structures, they label him as unpatriotic and he is

discipline because of his act of resistance. When observing the memes that communicate Kaepernick as unpatriotic, we can see the purpose of this line of support is an attempt to suppress Kaepernick's voice from speaking truth to power. This need to discipline Black bodies for having a voice reifies the need to control Black bodies.

In Figure 3 meme 2 we see another way the unpatriotic theme emerges. A photo of Kaepernick is juxtaposed with the Houston Texans defensive lineman J.J. Watt. Over the Kaepernick photo reads: "Colin Kaepernick refused to stand for the anthem and flag." Over Watt's photo it reads: "JJ Watt: raises \$4 Million for Hurricane Harvey victims. At the bottom there is a third photo of a lady with a perplexed look on her face. Over her photo reads: "Guess which one is idolized by the left." This meme is an attack on the liberal left political ideology. The meme paints Watt as the protagonist and Kaepernick as an anti-hero. Watt's act is depicted as a noble patriot while Kaepernick is portrayed as undignified, selfish, and unpatriotic. The meme views Kaepernick's kneeling as insignificant and unpatriotic. This author has no compassion for Black bodies who suffer brutality at the hands of law enforcement. The author's inability to see police brutality afflicted upon Black bodies as a cause for concern indicates how the meme values Black bodies. To view Kaepernick's kneeling as a sign of being unpatriotic suggests that this meme equates American ideals with white ideals. Moreover, the meme's incapability to see Kaepernick's act of resistance as a stand for justice leads me to believe that the meme represents Black bodies as only good for athletic performances and that Black athletes should remain apolitical.

J.J. Watt's act of giving is viewed as patriotic because he is not speaking out

against a structural societal issue and his giving does not take place during the singing of the national anthem. Watt's donation of money to help those in need is also seen as worthy cause and act of benevolence, which symbolizes Watt as a great guy with a charitable heart. The juxtaposition of Watt with Kaepernick, views Kaepernick's kneeling as the antitheses of Watt's behavior. The meme does not view Kaepernick's stance against police brutality as a worthy cause or helping those in need. The meme fails to realize that the acts of the two football players are similar. Watt is donating to those who were a victim of Hurricane Harvey and Kaepernick is drawing attention to those who are victimized by police brutality. Kaepernick does not receive the adulation that is showered upon Watt because Kaepernick's act of kneeling is viewed as disrupting a ritual that takes place during pre-game. Hartman explains how rupturing a ritual such as the national anthem can place an athlete in exile from the collective.²²¹ Hartman informs us that athletes who step out of line are often punished in unfair ways. Kaepernick choosing to peacefully protest during the playing of the national anthem did not sit well with some NFL pundits and some fans.

There are a few other memes which represent Kaepernick as unpatriotic. For example there is a meme with the photo of a military man who lost his limbs in service to his country. The caption reads, "Kaepernick refuses to stand for the national anthem because he's oppressed – meanwhile real men who gave their legs in service to this country be like, sit your candy ass down. I got this."²²² Another unpatriotic meme shows a photo of Kaepernick juxtaposed with Glen Coffee a military man who also played for the San Francisco 49ers. Under their photos are comparison statements that

presents Glen as a Black man as patriotic and Kaepernick as unpatriotic.²²³

Dangerous



1.

2.

Figure 4: Comparison to Evil.

The dangerous commodity meme manifests in two ways: comparing Kaepernick to evil and marking him as a threat to American values. Essentially, identifying Kaepernick as evil, calls to mind when traditional media outlets blatantly portrayed Black bodies as unfavorable. New media and technology are often equated with neoliberalism and post-racial society jargon.²²⁴ However, the vitriol spewed about Black bodies are littered all over new media outlets. Jackson explains how Black bodies became a problem when he states, “the social assignment of black bodies to an underclass is a historical conundrum that has multiple origins, two of which are the institutions of slavery and the mass media.”²²⁵ Jackson is illustrating that the mass media is following a blueprint that was set in motion by those in power during the antebellum. This blueprint normalized Black bodies as dangerous in hopes that the populace would digest these inscriptions of Black bodies and act accordingly. These

comparisons to evil memes script Kaepernick's body as nefarious to communicate to the public that he deserves to be reprimanded.

For example, figure 4 meme 1 has a photo of Thanos, who is a fictional character that has an infatuation with death, wears a glove that gives him the power to kill and control people, and he can rearrange history and stop time. The caption is a similar slogan from the Nike ad, which reads: "Believe in something, even if it means sacrificing half of everything." White superheroes who have American ideals can only stop Thanos. The labeling of Kaepernick as savage has a negative impact because throughout history most people who were marked as evil were criminalized, surveilled, captured, caged, isolated, or killed. Moreover, young Black bodies, who applaud Kaepernick for taking a stance against a social injustice that affects Black and brown bodies, are disconcerted by the treatment Kaepernick has received from the NFL. The message that people of color receive is that people who attempt to speak up for Black and brown bodies are destined to be punished.²²⁶

Figure 4 meme 2 is another way the comparison to evil theme transpires. A photo of a Middle Eastern Man with a turban on his head appears in what seems to be a broadcast journalism show. The chyron across the photo reads: "U.S. drone kills Al Qaeda's most dangerous man." At the top of the meme the letters WTF, which is an abbreviation for "what the fuck" and at the bottom of the meme reads: "Is that Colin Kaepernick?" This meme goes beyond stereotyping Middle Eastern men as terrorist. This is an actual terrorist according to the news station. He is presumably responsible for some nefarious acts. Comparing Kaepernick to a terrorist is not just racial

grouping it plays into the stereotypical trope that men of color resemble each other. The memes see Kaepernick and his act of resistance as evil. They insinuate that when Black athletic bodies turn into the Black activist athlete, they become a danger to society.

Threatens American Values



1.

2.

Figure 5: Threatens American Values

The second way that the dangerous meme surfaces is as a threat to American values, such as white hegemonic masculinity, white Judeo Christianity, and neoliberalism. By Kaepernick using his platform to stand up for marginalized communities he is viewed as a dangerous commodity that is bad for football. NFL owners grew very concerned when their players were taking a knee during the playing of the national anthem. The fans were aggravated by what they perceived as a showing of disrespect toward the flag and the American military.

The American flag has long been a symbol of American values, and the American military has always been honored as the institution which serves to protect

these very values. When Kaepernick decided to take a knee during the playing of the national anthem, he was publicly denounced. Also, sponsors were threatening to disassociate themselves from the NFL if the protest continued. Historically, whenever Black bodies challenged American ideals, they were quickly chastised. Even when Black bodies used the constitution to strengthen their arguments and hold white men accountable to the same American values they crafted and advocated, Black bodies were still castigated. There has never been a time when Black bodies spoke about against American injustices that affected marginalized communities that they were not subjected to some form of discipline. During the antebellum, if an enslaved Black body dared to stand up against a white person, they were dealt with immediately. Winthrop Jordan elucidates about the retribution enslaved Black bodies would face when they dared to resist against any form of oppression, “the bodies of the offenders were sometimes hanged in chains, or the severed head impaled upon a pole in some public space as a gruesome reminder to all passers-by that black hands must never be raised against white.”²²⁷ The violence inflicted served two purposes: first, it was to punish disobedient Black bodies and second was to provide an example for Black bodies to conduct themselves by the rules and structures that were implemented by the dominant white culture.

These memes communicate that Kaepernick is a threat to American values. For example, in figure 5 meme 1 there is a photo of Kaepernick and at the top of the caption reads: “Hi I’m Colin Kaepernick. I was adopted by a nice white couple, given a life I wouldn’t have had otherwise, have a career that most people only dream

about.” At the Bottom of the photo reads: “But I won’t stand for the national anthem because racial injustice and oppression. Oh and I recently converted to Islam and support black lives matter.” These memes encourage viewers to see Kaepernick as a renegade that threatens American values. They endeavor to excoriate his character in effort to prevent his message, about racial inequities, from permeating the minds of those who would agree with his sentiments. These memes also imply Kaepernick, who was raised in a privileged household, was a starting quarterback in the NFL, and then joins a radical group and religion should be marked as dangerous. When scrutinizing these memes, we are shown how Black athletic bodies are scripted, disciplined, and controlled. When Black athletic bodies seek to exert their voices by using their platform, they are negatively marked in an effort to silence their voice while portraying them as detrimental. Jackson explains that “there is a hyperawareness, for example, of the negative inscriptions associated with the black masculine body as criminal, angry, and incapacitated.”²²⁸ Jackson is arguing that the dominant culture paints Black bodies and these inscriptions are broadcasted and accepted as common traits that Black bodies possess. Instead of seeing Kaepernick’s kneeling as being a crusader for justice and equality, they see him kneeling as someone who disfavors American ideologies.

These memes maintain the idea that Black bodies are evil or dangerous to themselves and others. These antiquated notions of blackness have long been used in the United States. The revelations of these memes reminds us that these same attitudes about Black bodies still exist. This way of thinking does nothing to oppose current

racial hierarchies that are in place; instead these beliefs continue to fester and go unchallenged by the dominant culture. Curry states it best when he asserts, “the Negrophobia that drove white America to endorse lynching as a technology of murder is the same anxiety and fear that now allow white people to endorse the murder of Black men and boys as justifiable homicide.”²²⁹ These threats to American values memes are in direct confrontation with racial structures by impugning the policies and formation that are set in place.

The threat-to-American-values theme emerges in a different way when we examine figure 5, meme 2. This meme has a photo of Colin Kaepernick and his then teammate Eric Reid kneeling during the national anthem juxtaposed with a Black man staging a sit in at a lunch counter during the Civil Rights era. Under the photos reads: “What kind of protest has ever been acceptable.” During this era Black folks were not allowed to eat in white establishments. Black students risk their bodies to resist the status quo, which was segregation. At the time, their protest method was scrutinized and characterized as disruptive to white businesses. Segregation was an operational system that perpetuated white racial values. Students, particularly Black students, were a threat to the racial structure that was put into place by Southern states. Drawing upon this historical movement, viewers are encouraged to see the similarities between the students who sat in and Kaepernick who took a knee. Kaepernick’s stance against police brutality can be viewed as a threat against a structure whose policies and procedure are racialized.²³⁰ Other dangerous memes found was a picture of a known terrorist with a statement that Colin Kaepernick decides on Al-Qaeda over Broncos.

Another dangerous meme is a photo of a riot taking place in the streets while buildings are burning and the caption reads, I may be an unpatriotic, anti-American 3rd string has been NFL quarterback, but at least I'm warming up the bench while I'm sitting down what I believe in.

Conclusion

In my investigation of memes I find that stereotypical rhetoric about the Black athletic body/Black activist athlete still exists today. Moreover, given the anonymity the creators of these memes enjoy, they are more emboldened with their vitriol. The messages that are created through memes are produced, reproduce, and circulated. These representations of Kaepernick through the memes were not favorable and they seem to persuade different audiences.

I contend that the unfavorable Kaepernick memes are coming from a perspective that views the Black athletes' challenge of white supremacy as problematic. Yancy explains the function of the white gaze is "to objectify the black body as an entity that is to be feared, disciplined and relegated to these marginalized, imprisoned, and segregated spaces that restrict black bodies from disturbing the tranquility of white life, white comfort, white embodiment, and white being."²³¹ All of the themes that generated from the numerous memes examined can be viewed as coming from a white gaze perspective because they interpret Kaepernick as troublesome and contemptuous. By situating Kaepernick through the white gaze these memes are rendering him invisible and his stance against police brutality insignificant.

More specifically, I determined that when Black men endeavored to fulfill a

position of power or authority, they are heavily scrutinized by publics about having the requisite ethos to hold such a role. Kaepernick positioned himself as a leader of men when he decided to take a knee to bring awareness to the brutality that Black men and people of color had to face at the hands of law enforcement. His effort was met with a great deal of castigation by fans and NFL pundits. These sentiments were parroted by memes that labeled Kaepernick as an ungrateful athlete. The memes represented Kaepernick as disruptive, a complainer, disrespectful to the military, and upsetting the status quo. Kaepernick was never seen as a hero speaking up for the voiceless and the unheard, and he was demonized for his act of resistance. These memes failed to see Kaepernick outside of his uniform performing a civic duty. Their inability to see Kaepernick as a man apart from a football player, showed a lack of concern about him and his cause.

The dominant culture (whiteness) has never been a fan of the outspoken Black body. White men have always viewed forthright Black bodies as a threat to racial hierarchies. White men could ill afford to allow straightforward thinking Black bodies to disrupt the racial structures that were put in place that benefited the dominant culture. To prevent these Black bodies from rebelling against racial structures that benefited the dominant culture, white men responded by inscribing Black bodies as dangerous and unworthy. These pseudo descriptions of Black bodies lessen the repercussion white men had to face after they inflicted physical punishment on the Black body. History has taught us that Black bodies who spoke in opposition of racial structure were instantly stifled. Black athletic bodies face(d) similar circumstances

when they use(d) their fame to resist. They too face(d) unfair retribution by the hands of white men.

The discourse around Kaepernick reminds us of the ways Black bodies are still chastised, silenced, and controlled. The memes examined here reflect a racialization process that started during slavery, extended through the Jim Crow Era, was present throughout the Civil Rights Movement, and rears its head today. These memes project, perpetuate, and reproduce racial order demonstrating that structural racism has not been eradicated but reinvented. Before Kaepernick took a knee, he was revered as a Black athletic body who played the position of quarterback in the NFL. Fans and the media admired him, but as soon as he exhibited his act of resistance to bring attention to racial inequalities, he was scripted as dangerous and unworthy and needed to be controlled. He was both praised and feared. Until this day, he finds himself out of the NFL.

The memes examined in this chapter speak out against Kaepernick and the Black athletic body. It positions the Black athlete in multiple ways that communicate and ant-Black rhetoric. The Black athletic body has historically endeavored to speak out against social issues that impact communities of color is met with the same types of oppositions. Preceding new media arguments were made that those who control the media controls the message and corporations like news stations, newspapers, radio stations, and magazines were the ones in control of the anti-Black rhetoric. However, this is not the case with visual Internet memes. Visual Internet memes can be created by random people who have access to a computer and the Internet. You can no longer

argue that big media alone is the only one in charge of disseminating anti-Black rhetoric. With new media the one who is controlling the message has somewhat changed. Individuals are quickly developing a more powerful voice and it appears that a large audience in favor of anti-Black rhetoric. Yancy explains that “white gazes have attempted to define Black bodies as problem bodies, dangerous and unwanted bodies, desired and hyper-sexualized bodies, strange bodies, curious bodies, always already bodies, violable bodies, freakish bodies, nigger bodies, and dark mysterious bodies.”²³² No matter the medium we examine when it comes to Black bodies who speak out against cruelty inflicted on other Black bodies they will always be scorned by the white gaze.

CHAPTER IV

NIKE'S EXPLOITATION OF THE BLACK MASCULINE ATHLETE

The Black athletic body is frequently used to move corporate products to consumers. Since O.J. Simpson was captured running through the airport for Hertz Rent-A-Car in the 1970s, the Black athletic body has been a part of corporate commercial advertisement, and these Black bodies have been instrumental in helping companies increase sales.²³³ Scholars have argued that the Black athletic body has been exploited for their celebrity status, their physical prowess, and their sexual appeal.²³⁴ Apparel, automobile, food, beverage, insurance, and technology companies have all invested in the Black athletic body for its ability to increase corporation's bottom line.²³⁵ The use of the physical Black body seemed to be the way corporations exploited the Black athletes, but in recent years it has been more common for corporations to attach themselves to a cause that could be connected to the Black athletic body. In this chapter, I conduct a racial rhetorical analysis of two Nike commercials that address social issues that have been propagated through the digital platform YouTube to see how Nike represents and exploits Black bodies in their commercials.

Using social issues to brand their products is nothing new for Nike as they have built a reputation as being a leader when it comes to producing social justice commercials. In August 1995 Nike produced a commercial entitled "*If You Let Me Play*," which confronts gender equality issues in sports. The award-winning ad addresses

all the benefits that women receive by participating in athletics. In July of 1988 Nike launched a commercial campaign which tackled agism, and in June 1993 they featured NBA Hall of Famer Charles Barkley to deal with the problems associated with celebrities as role models. In December of 2007 Nike took on disabilities and once again in June of 2012 Nike attended to gender equality with their "*Voices Campaign*." After each one of these campaigns Nike is lauded for their advertising. People also praise Nike for not being afraid to take on social justice issues that impacts the greater public.

This chapter covers two Nike commercials and the way in which Nike positions itself as an involved participant in current social issues concerning Black bodies and racial and economic equality. In Nike's advertising campaigns addressing the plight of Black male bodies, they have endeavored to acknowledge racial problems that have significantly impacted Black males. This endeavor is a component of a corporate social responsibility (CSR) messaging campaign. Like other CSR initiatives, Nike uses these ads to promote itself as a champion of racial equality in order to sell more of their products. According to Timothy Coombs and Sherry Holladay, Essentially, corporate advocacy is a means for firms to influence public opinion in order to create favorable operating environment."²³⁶ More specifically, in the "Equality" and "Humble Beginnings," commercials, Nike positions itself as a voice of reason trying to bring about equality and economic opportunities to Black communities. However, I argue that Nike construction of equality views racism more as an individual problem and not as a systemic one, it narrows Black males pathways to success, it misrepresents who sets the boundaries in society, and paints Black males as ones who only migrate from poverty.

Furthermore, I argue that while Nike engages in corporate responsibility to race with their commercials campaigns, Nike exploits Black male bodies, they monetize social justice, which questions the corporation's sincerity with social issues, and they help mythologize the circumstances of Black bodies in their commercials.

The Digital Platform YouTube

YouTube has the ability to reach billions of people globally. Commercials posted on YouTube have the potential to spread virally throughout the Internet. For example, according to an article written about Nike advertisement, Nike produced an ad entitled "Write The Future," and the ad went viral receiving 12 million views a day, eventually being viewed more than 40 million times. At the same time Nike's Facebook fans increased from one 1.1 million to 4.8 million and Nike saw its orders increased by 7% globally.²³⁷ With the exception of the Super Bowl, traditional media never had this type of powerful impact as such media lacked the ability to reach this broad audience on a daily basis.

Also, YouTube can be accessed from laptops, tablets, and cell phones and once a video is viewed on YouTube it can be viewed over and over again and shared with countless of other individuals. Mary Stuckey discusses the spreading of text in her article on the rhetorical circulation as she writes "circulation can be wielded to help understand audiences and the ways in which circulation of a text can alter an audience's understanding of the text." According to Diana-Maria Buf and Oana ȘtefĂNiPĂ, "For several years now, YouTube has been the most used video content platform in the world, which is accessed monthly by over 1.9 billion users. It is the second most popular

website behind Google.”²³⁸ YouTube is not only used by individuals; companies have utilized YouTube to circulate their messages and push their products. According to Mehak Rehman and Haroon Iqbal Maseeh “YouTube is a well-regarded social media platform which enables its users to post, watch, like or dislike and comment on shared content (*i.e.* videos).”²³⁹ This type of interactive communication is what corporations love because the site enables faster circulation of corporate content.

More and more people are receiving their content via technical devices and companies like Netflix and YouTube are benefiting from the usage. Using the YouTube platform makes it more convenient for consumers. With traditional media, consumers are not in control of choosing what they want to view. They cannot dial up a commercial ad whenever they want to view the commercial. They do not hold that power at their fingertips. However, content platforms like YouTube, viewers are more in control with what they want to watch. Furthermore, if consumers like what they see, they have the power to pass it on. So, when they hear about a new product that hits the market they can do a search on YouTube and find someone either reviewing the product, wearing the product, or advertising the product. Jean Burgess and Joshua Green write “the YouTube platform has not only reinforced the importance of popularity, it has also shaped popularity through its design its interface, and its rhetorical address to users.”²⁴⁰ Companies such as Nike clearly understand the impact YouTube has on consumers. Also, Nike comprehends that YouTube can help sell their products. According to Rodney Graeme Duffet, Iliuta Costel Negricea, and Tudor Edu, “YouTube is considered to be an effective communication tool, providing a wealth of information through the use

of rational constructs and feelings thus providing itself to be an adequate medium for advertising.”²⁴¹ YouTube has become one of the most expedient ways to communicate messages to the general public and consumers are making their decisions based on the advertisement they see via YouTube. Duffet, Negricea, and Edu attest to this statement when they write “online video-sharing platforms (e.g. YouTube, Vine) have an estimated advertising value of \$37 billion by 2022 and have become popular among young customers across the globe and to marketers. Many consider YouTube as an alternative to traditional TV.”²⁴² YouTube has become a new way of obtaining information.

Since YouTube has the ability to substantially multiply ones message it makes companies like Nike more powerful. Nike messages in the commercials they produce reaches millions of potential customers. Because of YouTube these messages are seen around the world and this increases Nike’s capabilities to influence a larger public – a public that may or may not have first-hand knowledge on how Black males live and exist in America. For this reason, a closer look at the commercials Nike produces is crucial.

Corporate Visual Rhetoric

Lester Olson, Cara Finnegan, and Diane Hope explain “visual rhetoric invites complex responses from viewers, often spontaneous and immediate, but just as frequently, of lingering and reflective consideration. Audience engagement with visual rhetoric may reinforce, challenge, or restructure commonly held assumptions and values and may guide individual choices and collective actions.”²⁴³ Olson, Finnegan, and Hope go on to state, “because rhetorical critique is concerned with how symbolic actions

influence and construct “reality” for diverse publics, it is past time that we acknowledge fully the pervasive presence of visual actions in rhetorical studies, research, and curricula.”²⁴⁴ Images are a powerful way to impact the public. When someone from a specific cultural group has very little interaction with people from a different cultural group the images that they see in film, television, and print can play a significant role in how they inscribe meaning to another cultural group. Olson, Finnegan, and Hope supports this claim when they write, “Technologies including photography, television, film, and digital media are used to produce, reproduce, and circulate visual images in order to influence public's.” Let us not be mistaken about the power of images that are constantly thrust in front of the public. Corporations have been effectively utilizing images to capture the attention of viewers to persuade them to accept a message, use a service, or purchase a product. A plethora of images reaches a wide range of audiences. Olson, Finnegan, and Hope explicate that “visual rhetoric addresses diverse public audience through the process of production, circulation, apprehension, reception, and consumption. Visual rhetoric seeks and produces communities of viewers, spectators, witnesses, and participants through actions visualized in various forms.”²⁴⁵ One-way people understand others is through the viewing of images.

The advent of the Internet, cell phones, tablets, and laptops have increased the ways in which visual images are broadcasted. Eva Brumberger informs us that “the modern world of high technology, global business, and telecommunications has brought together a group of influences that is driving the increased use of visual language.”²⁴⁶ Karen Ye *et al* joins the conversation as they state, “Targeted campaigns to change

public opinions on matters with economic and social impact have been effective. Well created ads gain great popularity and are seen by many, thus entering our common consciousness.”²⁴⁷ Nike attempts to kill two birds with one stone by creating commercials that speak to social issues and at the same time introduce new products to sell to its audience. Nike understands how important the visual medium is to potential customers. Brumberger states, “Communication in the business world is turning to the visual and, in doing so, is keeping up with the needs of clients, customers, and colleagues, people who still use documents but do not necessarily read them in the traditional sense.”²⁴⁸ And the use of images is increasingly important for organizations as they seek to their corporate social responsibility profile.

According to W. Timothy Coombs and Sherry J. Holiday “CSR is the voluntary actions that a corporation implements as it pursues its mission and fulfills its perceived obligations to stakeholders, including employees, communities, the environment, and society as a whole.”²⁴⁹ Consumers are far more concerned about social issues that plague society. Buyers are now tying themselves to a brand that is attached to a social issue. According to Nic Mackay, “more than ever people are choosing to spend their money with companies and brands that actively engage in positive social change.”²⁵⁰ Mackay is articulating that the product that these corporations invent and put out is not the only thing that is making patrons make their decision to purchase the product. There are consumers who feel that corporations that are generating billions of dollars have an obligation to use their platforms to speak truth to power. Omar Rodriguez Vilá and Sundar Bharadwaj join the conversation as

they write “consumers increasingly expect brands to have not just functional benefits but a social purpose. As a result, companies are taking social stands in very visible ways.”²⁵¹ Vilá and Bharadwaj research leads them to believe that corporations that are invested in social responsibility are making some consumers more attracted to their merchandise. Bassant Eyada chimes in with, “Brands are adding the influential ingredient to their advertising by being associated with social causes to show the consumers that they can resolve their problems.”²⁵²

Since the death of George Floyd, corporations increasingly turned their corporate social responsibility to matters of race and race relations in the United States. Floyd’s death was another examples of how the Black body is treated and discounted by law enforcement. His death led to civil and uncivil unrest and discussions ensued about how the Black body is racialized in the United States. Corporations began to address racial matters and they saw an opportunity to address matters of race because the entire world was discussing the issue. Nneka Logan expands upon CSR with Corporate Responsibility to Race (CRR). Logan states that CRR “focuses on exploring how corporations communicate to improve race relations and support racial justice.”²⁵³ Logan feels that it is only right that corporations enact CRR because they have benefitted off the backs of Black folks. Logan states, “because the institution of corporate America has capitalized on racial discrimination and perpetuated racial oppression, the institution as well as the organization that compromise it have a responsibility to work toward achieving a more racially just and harmonious society.”²⁵⁴ Logan’s is of the opinion that corporations should be duty-

bound to advocate for causes that support racial equality and speaks out against racial oppression that people of color face in the United States and worldwide.

The question remains, however: are companies invested in CSR or CRR because of a genuine commitment to social justice and change, or is CSR and CRR simply tools to produce profit. Although, it is very difficult to judge the intent of companies aspirations with society issues a closer examination of these Nike ads as a CRR strategy will shed light as to whether or not corporate messaging is offering a socially just (re)vision of the Black body. In the case of Nike ads, I contend that Nike's (re)vision fails in this endeavor as they paint Black male bodies as in need of assistance, deriving from poor communities, and Black bodies inability to direct their own path.

Equality

Nike's "Equality" opens with a voice over of Michael B. Jordan stating, "*is this the land history promised?*" During this initial statement there is a birds-eye-view of 34 housing project buildings followed by a top-down camera angle view of the basketball court located in the middle of the housing projects. Jordan's voice over continues. "*Here within these lines.*" The camera shot switches to a young man catching an alley-oop pass and slam dunking. Soft piano keys start to play Sam Cooke's instrumental of *A Change Is Gonna Come*. Jordan's voice over proceeds, "*on this concrete court.*" Then there is a birds-eye-view of four tennis courts followed by a close-up head shot of Serena Williams' face. Jordan's voice is still heard, "*this patch of turf. Here, you're defined by your actions.*" After a shot of Abby Wombach,

we see a young boy and girl playing a game of one-on-one basketball in front of the Everlasting Truevine Missionary Baptist Church. When the camera pulls back we see a police squad car driving down the street next to the church. Jordan goes on to say “*Not your looks or beliefs.*” The camera then shows a close face shot of the young girl that was just engaged in the one-on-one game of basketball. Jordan persist, “*Equality should have no boundaries.*” The next few shots are of Kevin Durant followed by young boy and girl spray painting white boundary lines. Jordan’s voice proceeds, “*The bonds we find here should run past these lines.*” At this point, more lines are being spray painted and then we see close ups of Serena Williams and Michael B. Jordan both walking separately. We hear Alicia Keys singing “It’s been a long, long time coming.” Cars whose tires are filled with white paint are outlining racing lanes for sprinters. Jordan’s voice over states, “*Opportunity should not discriminate. The ball should bounce the same for everyone.*” Alicia Keys is now standing at a big white grand piano playing *A Change Is Gonna Come* while a young Black male stairs at a painting that reads Equals Everywhere. Jordan finishes with “*Work should outshine color. There is birds-eye-view of a basketball court with a crowd gathered around. If we can be equals here we can be equals everywhere.*” In Nike's quest to address issues of race with their “Equality” commercial they fail to address the overall culprit of inequality, which I contend is white supremacist ideologies made manifest in structural and racism. They do so through verbal/textual and visual means.

More specifically, although Jordan’s opening words “*is this the land history promised?*” may indicate that this country, in its current state is not the best condition

when it comes equality, it fails to acknowledge that racial inequalities are the historical (not just contemporary) realities in the United States existed since before Nike became a company. Moreover, when Jordan continues, *“here within these lines, on this concrete court, this patch of turf. Here you’re defined by your actions. Not your looks or belief.”* Nike implies that race does not matter in between the lines. Nike fails to understand that life does not exist inside of the boundaries. Job opportunities are not inside the boundaries, law enforcement does not exist within the boundaries, housing doesn't exist inside the boundaries, bank loans do not exist inside the boundaries, and the health care industry also does not exist within the boundaries. To imply that race does not exist within the playing boundaries is an oversimplification because no industry exists inside the boundaries of professional sports fields or courts.

Later, Jordan states, *“equality should have no boundaries, the bonds we find here should run past these lines. Opportunity should not discriminate.”* Nike is imagining an ideal place, a utopian perspective knowing that in a capitalist society some people are going to receive the short end of the stick or some group of people will receive the short end of the stick. To put forth this utopian view without mentioning race or racism is irresponsible and misleading. Africans and African Americans toiled this land for centuries without any pay. When Black folks were set free they were placed in a system that was unfair and remains so because of one's racial makeup. Unfortunately the bond built on the basketball court does not run past the boundary lines and opportunities do discriminate. African American earn consistently less than white men.²⁵⁵ Police treat Black and Hispanic males with more

force than they do white males.²⁵⁶ African Americans are still mistreated when it comes to housing and small business loans.²⁵⁷ African Americans are grossly mistreated in the health industry.²⁵⁸ Jordan continues with *“the ball should bounce the same for everyone. Work should outshine color. If we can be equals here we can be equals everywhere.”*

Although the commercial had a great deal of success it did not get into what is behind unfair treatment in this country and around the world. Stating work should outshine color is a clear indication that it doesn't. Nike understands that a great deal of Black professional athletes were reared in urban in rural ghettos. Nike also understands that a great deal of Black men see athletics as a viable way out of their impoverished situation. Nike is also astute enough to know that there are way more Black men who do not make it out of these ghettos with their athletic prowess. There are 3639 pro athletes in the four major sports - baseball, basketball, football and hockey – while Nike has more than 50,000 employees, but Nike does not inform these communities that have a better chance working for their company that being a professional athlete. By failing to mention the true culprit behind inequality shows Nike panders to its audience to sentiments but offers substantive statement on racial inequality. Until Nike addresses race and racism their commercial might as well be entitled inequality.

Nike's failure to address racism verbally is buttressed through its visual representations of racial inequality Nike opens the video of the “Equality” commercial with a bird's-eye-view of 34 housing projects with an asphalt basketball court located in

the center of the projects. Housing projects represents a lower socioeconomic status of the people who reside there. There are a great deal of negative tropes associated with project living. Drug dealing, drug using, robbery, theft, domestic abuse, alcoholism, molestation, rape, poor education, ex-convicts, welfare, food stamps, prostitution, absence fathers are all linked with project living. It can be argued that Nike opens up with this view to let its audience know that everyone is not born on equal footing. However, it can also be argued that Nike feels this is where Black boys and men dwell. I maintain that the basketball courts represent a rest haven for Black males from all the stress and trauma that may come from growing up in housing projects. I also attest that Nike is representing the basketball court as a pathway out of the Black ghetto.

The commercial moves onto young men playing basketball and we see a young man catch an alley-oop pass which shows off his athletic prowess. This dexterity that is exhibited by this young man is what Nike depicts as a physical quality that can bring about economic equality. In so doing, Nike promotes the idea that the athletic feels that the athletic ability is what will save Black men from this tough environment. Such a view is common, as Martellus Bennett argues that we often teach little Black boys that the only way they can make it out of the hood and become something is through athletics.²⁵⁹ Next the camera zooms in on LeBron James standing on the basketball court dressed in all black behind a fence with an expressionless face. I believe the fence represents a cage, which a great deal of Black males find themselves behind if they are not fortunate enough to make it out their poor environment. Black males are also often depicted as savage beings that need to be

confined. So the fence also represents a boundary they are restricted to. The emotionless face that James exhibits represents the despair that Black male residents of ghetto metropolises go through.

After the birds-eye view of a soccer field with the quick closeup of Abby Wombach, the camera cuts to a young Black boy and girl engaged in a one-on-one game of basketball in the street in front of the Everlasting Truevine Missionary Baptist Church. The church represents hope and salvation from the impoverished situation these young Black boys and girls find themselves. Next, a cop car rolls down the street near the two kids playing basketball. The cop car represents the over policing that takes place in these Black communities. The next three shots are of Kevin Durant walking down the street with a can of white spray paint, a young Black girl shaking a can of white spray paint followed by a young Black boy spraying a white line from the projects' basketball court out of the gate up the stairs. As with the critique of the "Equality" verbal/textual dimensions, the premise of the commercial ad is the existing equality that takes place within the boundaries of playing fields and courts should take place outside the boundaries of the playing fields and courts. I assert that the Black boy spraying a line beyond the basketball court is Nike asserting that the Black boy is extending the equality that takes place on the court into society. The next two shots has Durant followed by the young Black girl spray painting white boundary lines on the basketball court and the tennis court. I contend that having these different Black bodies spraying the white boundary lines is a misrepresentation of who it is that sets the boundaries in this country. Black bodies have never been the ones to set

boundaries in this country. Black folks always had to worry about which boundaries they could cross and how they had to conduct themselves when they were permitted to cross the white boundary lines.

The next three camera shots are of a cheer team, a high school football team, and a group of guys surrounded by former New York Giant Victor Cruz. Next, the cheer team is spray painting lines on an empty field. After we see Serena Williams walking, we see a shot of Michael B. Jordan walking out of a gym and down an alley where see ten people painting white lines in the alley. This shot is followed by three cars painting white running lanes with their tires for the sprinters to run in. Again, Nike is attempting to describe how the rules are different between the lines. However, they fail because they are not showing correct faces of who are drawers of the lines white males. By saying that the lines outside of the courts and fields are not equal to the lines inside the fields and courts Nike is admitting that society needs to work on treating all people of color equal. Yet they fail to say that it is difficult for Black folks to get ahead in a society where you are at times judged by the color of your skin. Indeed, the construction of the boundaried court as the place where racial equality resides, is visually articulated by Kevin Durant. After showing a young Black boy spray painting the wall, Durant is seen dropping the basketball and walking off the court. I attest that Nike represents Durant's departure from the basketball court as him leaving a space of equality to enter back into a world where inequality exists.

Humble Beginnings

“Humble Beginnings” opens with (keyboard playing in the background) camera

shots of tenement buildings followed by a close up of a pair of sneakers hanging on telephone wires. The camera cuts to a shot of the sun peeking through leaves hanging off tree branches and then we what appears to be a sister and brother run into their house. The next shot we see the young brother and sister sitting in their living room watching LeBron Jameson rising up to dunk the ball in his high school basketball game. The boy gives a gesture of approval. There is a cut to James' mother cheering him on and then James beating his chest. Then we hear James' narration, "*We always hear about an athlete's humble beginnings.*" The video shows a little boy emulating James' dunk. The camera cuts to a shot of another tenement building with a close-up of a basketball hoop. Then we see a little Black girl walk inside a corner bodega placing a bag of potato chips and a quarter water on the counter. James proceeds, "*How they emerged from poverty or tragedy to beat the odds.*" The grocer behind the counter is looking at James' draft night when he was selected by the Cleveland Cavaliers. The plexiglass barrier is shown on the countertop. Next, the camera switches to young boy and girl watching James play an NBA game. The camera pulls out and we see more folks looking at the same television. James continues as he states, "*they ae supposed to be stories of determination that capture the American dream.*" James is shown throwing chalk up in the air in front of a crowd which is majority white. Then we hear James' voice continue when he says, "*They're supposed to be the stories to let you know these people are special.*" Next, the video shows footage of James' famous block in the 2016 NBA finals followed by tears of joy, and then a montage of James' footage from a young child to his current position. Then we hear James state, "*But you know what would be really special?*" Next we see

James in an empty arena come and sit on the bench as the camera shows a close up saying, *“If there were no more humbled beginnings.”* In this commercial, Nike endeavors to address economic inequality. However, I assert that Nike dances around the issues of economic inequality and instead they provide their audience with empathetic words that placates the bodies that are situated in these poor conditions.

Clearly, LeBron James is showcased in the advertisement. James very first phrase is *“we always hear about an athlete's humble beginnings.”* Although James does not indicate race in this statement, one can infer that Nike is drawing on the fact that a great deal of Black professional athletes were a product of impoverished environments. Earl Hutchinson paraphrases some sports writers and executives when he writes, “if it wasn't for sports these guys would be selling hot clothes in Harlem, pedaling dope in Watts, or carjacking on Chicago's West side.”²⁶⁰ Also, with this first phrase Nike is painting a picture of where professional Black athletic bodies migrate from. It is fair to deduce that the word humble can be interpreted as low class, poor, or underprivileged.

In the next expression James states, *“how they emerged from poverty or tragedy to beat the odds.”* With Nike depicting Black males as products of ghetto environments, it is not a reach to label absent fathers, murderous fathers, killed fathers and incarcerated fathers as tragic situations. One can also interpret the tragedy to mean neighborhood and gang violence, Black males using narcotics or being arrested for selling illegal narcotics or being caught and arrested for gun possession. Nike can also be alluding to excessive domestic violence, drug abuse, or alcoholism in the home. Any of these circumstances can be deemed as tragic. Again, Nike is representing

Black males as a product of poverty-stricken communities or catastrophic upbringings.

James continues when he proclaims, “*they’re supposed to be the stories of determination that capture the American dream.*” The saying “to pull oneself up by ones bootstraps” comes to mind when reading this construction of words. With this statement, Nike is only focusing on the Black males who have been blessed with DNA that makes them tall, strong, and fast. Nike concentrates on these individuals with physical athletic prowess as one ones who need to be determined to make it out of their horrid conditions. Nike is not concerned with the other millions of Black boys who purchase their products. Nike does not have an incentive to be concerned with these other Black males because they are not going to help them sell their products and help them generate revenue. Nike is a corporation that is concerned with selling their products first and foremost. A young Black male who does not have great athletic ability will not grow up to be a big-time athlete that Nike can get them to advertise their products to the greater public. When Nike speaks of the American dream it appears that they are representing the dreams of young Black athletes who grow up in poverty. Nike feels that the only way young Black males can make it out of these poor communities is through athletics. Nike does not express the way other young males can achieve the American dream. Nike also does not endeavor to tell the truth about systemic racism that plays a great part when it comes to job opportunities. Nike does not inform its audience about job opportunities for Black males compared with job opportunities for white males.²⁶¹ The ideal of the American dream is not the same for young Black men compared to young white men.

Next, James expresses “*they’re supposed to be stories to let you know these people are special.*” Nike implies that Black males who escape their impoverished conditions to become pro athletes are special because they beat the odds. Being special to Nike means avoiding obstacles that are put into place that prevent young Black males from making it out of their low-income neighborhoods. Avoiding the selling or using of narcotics is special, avoiding dropping out of high school or to graduate from high school is special. Avoiding killing another person or being killed is special. Lastly, avoiding not going to prison is special. Avoiding all of these pitfalls while focusing on becoming a great athlete is special. Nike is praising these individuals by centering them as special, but failed to discuss the causes of these pitfalls. Nike also fails to talk about rundown schools and poor education, they fail to discuss the lack of jobs and the over policing that takes place in these communities. These problems are not mentioned. Lastly, James states, “*but you know what would be really special? If there were no more humble beginnings.*” Like in the previous commercial ad, Nike presents the hope of a utopian world where there are no poor people. Nike fails to present a commercial which discusses possible solutions or a way to end poverty. Nike does not even direct those who are living in these conditions to an organization they can reach out to, to help them rectify their situation.

Not surprisingly, “Humble Beginnings” also uses many images to represent the socioeconomic location of Black bodies. The housing projects were created to locate poor people of color. Terry Gross concurs with this notion when she reports how Richard Rothstein explicates how the federal government played a role in segregated

housing in America by pushing African Americans into urban housing projects.²⁶² Housing projects were erected in large urban cities across the country. Black folks who resided in these buildings were either unemployed or under employed. Once again Nike represents the urban ghetto as the Black male athletic body's origin. Although Nike may want its audience to know the adversity these Black athletic bodies had to overcome, they are also positing in the minds of several audience members that this is a place most Black folks particularly Black male athletes come from. There are several Black professional athletes that grew up in middle class neighborhoods. However, to show middle class Black athletes does not make for good television. Mark Anthony Neal would state the middle class Black athletic body would be marked illegible in the minds of the viewing white middle class customers.²⁶³

Nike double downs on constructing the impoverished Black athlete through a closeup shot of a pair of sneakers hanging from a cable wire or telephone wire. Anyone who comes from an urban or suburban ghetto know that one of the main reason why sneakers are thrown on telephone wire is symbolic of the death of someone in the community.²⁶⁴ Nike understands the symbolism behind the sneakers hanging from the telephone line, and this is more symbolism Nike incorporates in the life of young Black men. Nike is symbolically informing its audience what it takes for Black athletes to make it out of their communities. This can be interpreted that Black male bodies have to overcome death to make it to a better place.

Nike also uses other visual metaphors to connote the dire situation of Black bodies. In one shot, viewers see the sun trying to peak through numerous trees. Here,

Nike is telling us that these neighborhoods are full of darkness and rarely does the sun make the darkness dissipate, however, once in a while there is a ray of hope that make life under impoverished conditions tolerable. From this darkness, we see a brother and sister racing to the front door, we then in the living room intently watching LeBron James play a high school basketball game that was nationally televised on ESPN. After James makes a basket, the young man gives a satisfying gesture with his arms. We next see a shot of James' mother cheering in the stand while wearing her son's basketball jersey. James beats his chest to flex the athletic move he just showcased. These visuals clearly posit that ray of hope is sports.

Indeed, as the commercial continues we see a young Black kid dunking a miniature basketball on a small hoop that is fastened to a room door. The kid is doing his best to emulate James' dunk. The past sequence of footage represent the hoop dreams that young Black boys hang on to. James is providing them with a blueprint on how to hone their skills so they can escape their impoverished environment. I argue that Nike uses James to not only sell sneakers but to sell a dream to young Black males that the only way to make it out of their conditions is through hooping. Nike clearly understands that LeBron James is 6'9" with gifted athletic ability. James won the genetic lottery and therefore the odds for him making a professional team is substantially greater than most. Reuben May informs us that "athletic scholarships and even professional careers in the NBA were deeply sought-after goals. Despite the grim reality, these beliefs are supported by the very coaches, . . . parents and community members who push the young men to work harder on the court."²⁶⁵ May reveals that

the people who surround these kids are guilty of allowing some of these kids to pursue dreams that are way out of their reach regardless of the amount of work they put in.

When James starts the narration there is another shot of a tenement building in the distance with a close up shot of a basketball hoop with a torn net. Again, Nike is reinforcing the importance of basketball as the way out of projecting living. Nike is guilty of not letting kids know that the odds are greater when they pursue something other than professional sports. Nike is a giant conglomerate which has several employees and Nike is not telling these Black males that if they major in business, they could come work for Nike. They want to kids to purchase LeBron James basketball shoes that range from \$160 to \$225 a pair. The video goes on to display visual symbols that represent low-income neighborhoods. For example there is a young black girl that walks in what appears to be a corner store bodega which has the bullet proof plexiglass on the counter. She purchases a “quarter water” and a bag of potato chips. People who grew up in housing projects or subsidized housing understand that this is popular snack combination when you have minimal funds in your pocket. The young lady behind the counter is watching a small television that shows the night James was drafted in the NBA. The camera switches to a close up of a young boy sitting and then the camera pans out to show him sitting next to a young girl and then the camera pans out once more to see several folks all focused on a television that is showing LeBron James on the Cleveland Cavaliers. Next we see James throwing white chalk in the air while a sea of fans who are mostly white look on. Then the camera cuts to a giant poster of James with his arm stretched out with a

statement that reads “We are all Witnesses.” The poster depicts James as a deliverer of hope and prosperity, and as someone to emulate surely knowing that is almost impossible.

The camera cuts to two young boys playing a game of one-on-one in the park and then they are shown watching James play a game on a cell phone. We see the famous block shot that James makes against Andre Iguodala in game seven of the NBA finals. The camera then shows James shedding tears while he is on the floor and then while holding the Larry O’Brian Trophy. After we see a montage of photos of James from the time he was a kid up until his first year with the Lakers. Then we see James take a seat in an empty arena and the camera zoom in on him. Then the scene goes black and we see Nike slogan “Just Do It” followed by the Nike logo. Nike treats James as a deity. Something to strive for. They use him to sell product and present what will be pseudo narrative for most kids who come from humble beginnings, instead of offering something more attainable

The Exploitation of Black Bodies by Nike

In consideration of both these ads together, we cannot ignore the importance of using images of athletic stars like LeBron James and Serena Williams in this ad. Corporations have capitalized off of using a variety of celebrities to market their product and to create brand loyalty. Amanda Spry, Ravi Pappu, and T. Bettina Cornwell explain, “celebrity endorsement influences advertising effectiveness, brand recognition, brand recall, purchase intentions and even purchase *behaviour*.”²⁶⁶ What can be inferred from Spry, Pappu, and Cornwell is that it is prudent for companies to employ celebrities to

champion their products if their goal is to generate more revenue and attract more brand loyal consumers. Nike has been at the forefront when it comes to the utilization of celebrities to endorse their products. Since the signing of Michael Jordan in 1984, Nike has deployed professional athletes in their commercial ads to appeal to potential buyers. Fei Zhou *et al*, state that “companies have turned to the world’s top sports stars (such as Cristiano Ronaldo and Kobe Bryant) for product endorsements to capture the attention of consumers across borders.”²⁶⁷ The use of these athletes of color has been a big reason why Nike is number one in the world in athletic shoes and apparel.

Professional athletes have been romanticized by society for quite some time and advertising companies are most certainly aware of the attractions that pro athletes garner. Ad companies have done their due diligence and found that it was sensible to convince superstar athletes to synergize their name with a particular brand. Ad companies induce these athletes by paying them an ample amount of money and letting them know that their Q-rating would improve and thereby making their personal brand more attractive to other companies. Webster dictionary defines Q-rating as a scale measuring the popularity of a person or thing typically based on dividing an assessment of familiarity by an assessment of favorable opinion. C.L. Knott and M. St. James coincide with the terminology as they define Q-Rating as “the percentage of those familiar with a personality who rate that personality as ‘one of my favorites (on the questionnaire).’”²⁶⁸

It appears that Nike sees Black athletes such as LeBron James and Serena Williams as paragon marketing models, and Nike exploits these two athletes for the economic gain of (white) shareholders. Nike is conscious of the fact that consumers like

to be associated with greatness. They are well aware that customers like to see themselves as competitive, powerful, and dominant. They comprehend the psychological affects that champion professional athletes have on potential buyers this is why they made a well-judged decision in aligning themselves with James and Williams. Nike exploits of James and Williams along with other Black athletes are not just monetarily they are also physical in two ways. By showcasing athletic performances of these Black athletes Nike is banking on consumers being of the belief that if they adorn the attire that these Black bodies are draped in then they too can perform similar athletic feats. Also, the majority of these Black bodies that Nike tie themselves to are a pillar of health and they are attractive physical specimen that are appealing to consumers. Nike also knows that beauty and aesthetics are captivating and people like to be associated with both.

All of these variables factor into why it was a prudent decision to use James and Williams; Nike also knew that there was a certain coolness that connected to these bodies. The cool factor is the blackness that both James and Williams permeate. James' athleticism is unmatched; his ability to elevate and defy gravity is special and fans gravitate towards him. His Blackness is associated with his physical prowess. In other words, athletics, hip-hop, and dancing are all associated with Blackness which is often emulated by white folks that are attracted to Blackness. Hill Collins explains "that black culture was a marketable commodity, they put up for sale, selling an essentialized black culture that white youth could emulate yet never own."²⁶⁹ Williams is known for dramatic flair and the strength and power she brings to the game of tennis. Williams also has agility and speed that is often broadcasted as electrifying. Moreover, Williams

makes huge fashion statements, which at times have been seen as controversial, but mostly adored. Williams also exudes the type of Blackness that James does. Williams and James come from humble beginnings and have skyrocketed to the top of their respected professions and they are treated as such. Kurt Badenhausen informs us that James' sneakers are the top selling basketball shoe in the world and this has helped Nike capture 73.5% of the \$1 billion performance basketball market.²⁷⁰ Nike always comes out on top economically.

The problem of exploitation, however, is worsened by the fact that Nike's racial justice commercials exploit famous Black athletic bodies to funnel money from impoverished ones. Young Black boys see NBA, NFL, and MLB athletes as roles models, so they attempt to emulate them. With Black professional athletes setting fashion trends, young consumers, particularly poor Black kids, endeavor to purchase the athletic clothing and sneakers that the Black professional athlete endorses. Kids and young adults want to be popular and fit in with the in crowd, so some kids do what is necessary to purchase the "Air Jordan's," LeBron James' shoes, or Kevin Durant's shoes. This may mean the young kids will turn to selling illegal narcotics or robbing someone who owns a pair.²⁷¹ After these tragedies take place, Nike does not try to lower the prices on their products Nike simply offers little more than hope for a better future.

Nike may feel like they are providing a valuable product to their consumers and at the same time letting Black athletes address social issues in their commercials. However, Black athletes that are seen in Nike commercials rarely if ever mention

anything about systemic racism or white supremacy. The force of Black athletic protest is, in this way, silenced by Nike.

Conclusion

In Nike's attempt to address their CRR with the Equality and Humble Beginnings commercials, they use an anti-Blackness rhetoric to represent Black bodies. Nike represents Blackness as impoverished and they represent Black boys as ones who need athletics to make out of their poor environment. In showing Black males in poor neighborhood only interested in basketball is perpetuating a stereotype about Black males. In the "Equality" commercial, which juxtaposed what goes inside of the playing field and courts to what goes on outside of the playing fields and courts, Nike has the posits that the bond within professional sports is equal. However, the majority of owners and front office personnel are white while the ones on the playing fields and courts are Black. Nike is hoping that its audience will read between the lines and decipher that they are talking about racial inequities. Nike's unwillingness to mention race in their commercials proves that they do not want to upset their paying white customers who do not like to be accused of racism. Eduardo Bonilla-Silva writes, "how is it possible to have this tremendous degree of racial inequality in a country where most whites claim that race is no longer relevant?"²⁷² For Nike to put Black faces in their commercial, but fail to indicate race, racism, and white supremacy demonstrates a reluctance to produce or air a serious commercial that embraces the true culprit of equality and economic inequities.

Nike use of Black bodies to sell sneakers is nothing new as they have been

doing it since they signed Michael Jordan to a shoe contract back in 1984. To situate Black males as ones who only grow up in impoverished conditions where the crime rate is high, the drug use and drug selling is rampant is a gross misrepresentation that contributes to anti-Black rhetoric. It is true that plenty of Black ball players were products of an urban ghetto, but there are plenty of Black males who play sports that grew up in a middleclass environment. For Nike to present Black to the public this way is irresponsible. Nike not having a commercials where Black boys are great students are great student athletes is contributing the perception that Black boys care nothing about education or gaining a trade that will catapult them out from their financial woes furthers an anti-Black rhetoric that paints a picture to the public that Black males are only good for one thing. Moreover it sends a message that Black males are only put here to entertain predominately white crowds who attend professional sporting events. Nike has spoken out about gender equality, age, and the disabled, but the fact that they do not address race is “just not doing it.”

CHAPTER V

CONCLUSION

In 2020 we saw collegiate and professional sports intersect with race in America. The unjustly killing of Breana Taylor, Ahmaud Aubery, and George Floyd and the hands of police and white vigilantes sparked unrest.²⁷³ After the killing of Jacob Blake in Kenosha, Wisconsin, Black men in the NBA decided not to play in any games for two nights. Black men in sports were grappling with how they could use their enormous platform to confront the issues of police brutality and over-policing in communities of color. Black athletes in other words, were trying to figure how can they use their bodies rhetorically to exact change. How amplified would voices be if they had an opportunity to address a rhetorical situation created by Black athletes by simply removing their bodies from the playing field to address issues of race and racism in America. That amplification, however, relies on media platforms and the Black masculine athletic body is subject to the representations contained therein.

In this dissertation I used racial rhetorical analysis of media representation of Black male bodies in sports to better understand how the treatment of Black athletic body is emblematic of the larger society. Through these three case studies, I found that new media platforms do not give rise to new interpretations about the Black masculine body in sports. More specifically, I discovered that Black bodies are visually scripted inauspiciously when they disrupt American patriotic rituals. Furthermore, I became aware of how sports digital journalists emasculated Black coaches, while at the same time I uncovered that these same sports journalists failed to have the fortitude to label

white hegemonic male NFL owners as racists or convey that these owners practice racial hiring practices. Lastly I realized that in an efforts to address racial issues that affect Black communities, Nike perpetuated stereotypical tropes about the Black masculine body in their commercial ads and they exploit the Black athletic body for profit. In what remains of this conclusion, I will consider the implications of these findings.

To begin with, new media platforms presents possibilities for sports journalists, publics, and organizations to produce tele(visual) and textual representations that can reach a massive audience more rapidly. As great as this potential is, old-aged stereotypical tropes about Black masculinity body are still being publicized through these new media platforms. As long as entities use new media platforms to publish deleterious inscriptions of Black bodies in sports, then new media platforms are just a more suitable conduit to spread unfavorable racial representations of the Black athletic body. For example, in chapter two, Black coaches are portrayed as incompetent and not ready to lead an NFL team. Sports journalists utilized digital articles to spread these messages. In chapter three, Kaepernick is portrayed as evil and a threat. Inventors used visual Internet memes platforms to disseminate these representations. These three depictions are common scripts that exhibit how the Black masculine has been portrayed since their arrived in America in chains.

Most notably, however, is Nike's use of *new* media to circulate an advertisement that addresses equality and poverty through tired and well-worn conceptions of the Black athletic body originating from impoverished places. In Nike's endeavor to be virtuous, Nike promotes a negative perception of the Black masculine athletic body.

Negative stereotypes that are attached to project living are connected to the Black athlete. Crime, drugs, hypersexuality, and gun possession are just a few beliefs audiences conjure up about the Black athlete. The use of YouTube to forward this image of the Black athlete is detrimental as it proliferates and perpetuates the myth that Black males can only make out of their environment through athletics.

Second, these case studies demonstrate that the representations of Black men in sport not only denigrate Black masculinity, but they do so in ways that reinforce white supremacy. For example, in the coverage of the Rooney Rule (RR), Black coaches are portrayed as in need of assistance and need of a white savior. In the article written by Brooke Pryor on the RR, it is reported that the NFL has programs set up for minority coaches to receive the necessary training, which will hopefully lead to a head coach position.²⁷⁴ However, there are no programs set up for white coaches, implying that white coaches do not need any additional training to be head coaches. Indeed the white savior trope works in a larger journalistic narrative that neglects to describe or analyze the NFL or its white owners as racist and implies that black achievement is relying on white benevolence. In so doing, this coverage not only masks racist practices, systems, and motives, it emasculates Black male bodies as it reinforces white hegemonic masculinity.

Additionally, Chapter four's discussion of Nike's CSR ads reveals that the monetization of social justice is yet another mechanism by which Black male bodies are exploited for white men economic gain. Nike purports to be altruistic by addressing social issues that impact communities of color, and by using Black athletic bodies to

speak out against various issues, the Black athletic body is still being used to move product for profit.

Finally, this project demonstrates that the richness of sport as a crucial site for the (re)making of maintenance of white supremacy. My attention is on Black male bodies in sport because I believe that social issues discourse intersects to make sport an important location for rhetorical study. Professional athletes have large personas and even larger platforms that offer them the opportunity to address social issues. Moreover, with the advent of social media, Black athletes who have tremendous platforms with millions of followers give them a remarkable influence. Sport can indicate and provoke ideals and dissension that are relatable to the public. Sport is a significant rhetorical site that can help foster change in various communities. In this dissertation, I repositioned sport as a place to study the representation of the Black masculine athletic body.

Recently, rhetoric and sport scholarship has concentrated on social and political issues. Rhetoric and sport has demonstrated its significance within the discipline. Using sport to address issues that are indicative of the larger society has brought sport to the forefront of issues surrounding race and racism in America. When basketball players from the NBA and WNBA wore t-shirts that read I can't breathe they immediately became a rhetorical sites of contention. It is episodes like this that make sport a creditable rhetorical site because athletes are using their bodies to address issues that are impacting Black men. When Black athletes speak out against unjust treatment or decide to adorn an article of clothing on that makes a political statement during pre-game warmups or the national anthem they are counting on their demonstrations to reach

others. These acts of resistance by Black athletic bodies are sites that rhetoricians should be drawn to.

As this dissertation offers strong support that the Black athletic body in new media has been depicted as emasculated, scripted as disruptive, and used and exploited to generate revenue, future research should direct attention to the user commentaries posted to the digital articles, the memes, and the YouTube commercials. The respondents' assessments or criticisms can be explored and analyzed to see how the audiences consume to these constructions of the Black athletic body. As mentioned above, I think exploring the Black masculine body in sport through the lens of new media platforms merits special attention. I think the Black masculine body in sports can be examined with the help of different theories. The professional sports leagues in the United States can be questioned about how their policies change to adapt to the Black resistance athletes showcase to the broader public.

In this dissertation, I examine how and in what ways was the Black men in sports represented in new media. Three different media platforms were used to analyze the Black masculine body. By using rhetoric as a tool to unpack these depictions of the Black masculine body, I found out a few things. First, new media platforms does not prohibit sports journalists, the broader public, nor fortune five hundred companies from producing textual and visual forms of racists representations. Second, I learned that new media platforms have a become more powerful than traditional media outlets because of their ability to circulate to a broader public swiftly. Lastly, I learned that sport a site for rhetorical construction and the Black masculine athlete can use their bodies to perform

rhetorical acts. In short, African bodies arrived in this country in 1619, and they were ridiculed, negatively represented, and punished if they dared to step out of line. We move forward 400 years, and we see the same behaviors toward Black bodies. Indeed, the physical treatment is not the same, and the laws are not blatant, but the representation of the Black masculine body is similar.

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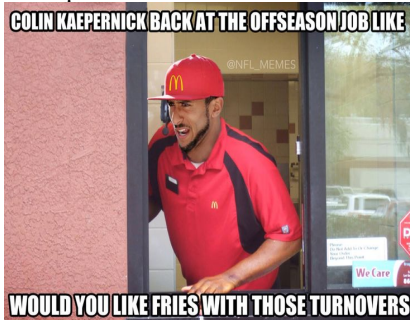
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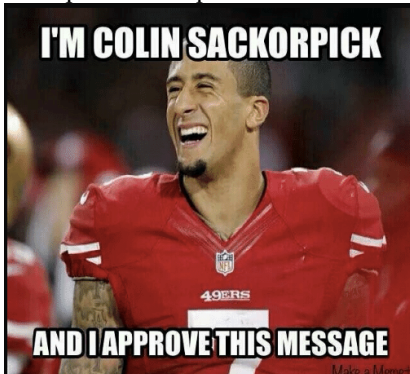
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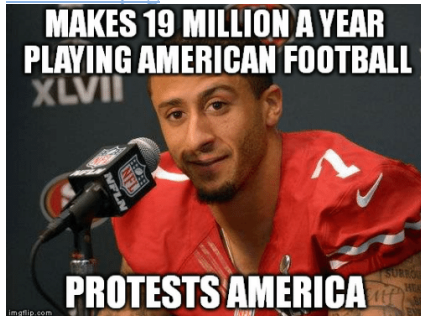
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7 Must-See Colin Kaepernick Memes Created By His Haters

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Best of 2016. Merica

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