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Abstract

In the fall of 2016, LeBron James and Colin Kaepernick stood as two of the most visible figures in the recent revival of Black sport-activism. It is perhaps inevitable, then, that both men engaged in that season's Presidential contest between Hillary Clinton and Donald Trump. However, they did so in disparate ways. James aligned himself with Clinton, publicly endorsing the Democratic candidate through an optimistic worldview in which benevolent social leadership paved the way toward lessened inequality, racial or otherwise. On the other hand, Kaepernick rejected both candidates as representatives of institutional oppression, instead favoring grassroots, community-based resistance. When placed in historical context, their actions reflect deep strands in the history of Black politics, particularly the distinct but overlapping ideologies of liberalism and radicalism. Through a study of their engagement with Presidential politics, it is demonstrated that contemporary sport activism, or what may be described as a network of interconnected "activisms," echoes both the shared ideology and internal nuance present in Leftist Black politics for over a century.

Keywords:

Liberalism; Radicalism; Athlete Activism; Sport and Politics

1. Introduction

On the morning of November 9, 2016, in the aftermath of the U.S. Presidential election, LeBron James posted a decree to his Instagram social media page. The high-profile National Basketball Association (NBA) player had publicly endorsed Democratic candidate Hillary Clinton, and now responded to her defeat to celebrity executive Donald Trump. Next to an embedded music video for Kendrick Lamar’s hip-hop anthem “Alright,” James offered an optimistic vision:

As I woke up today looking and searching for answers on what has happened this song hit it right on the head!...Yes we all wanna lace up the boots, put on the hard hats and strike but that's not the answer...Love, genuine LOVE and FAITH will be the only thing that can get us through this....The man above will never put something in our paths that we can handle no matter how difficult it may feel/be! To all the youth out there I PROMISE I'll continue to lead u guys every single day without no hesitation!! Time to educate and even more mold my children into being the greatest model citizens they can become in life! They will continue the legacy beyond life!...¹

The post’s expressed faith in higher power, embodied by “the man above,” displaces the need to “strike” against the incoming administration. James’s emphasis on American youth, and his leadership of them, indirectly positions *himself* as the “man above” who will guide his followers into a better future. His declaration received over 1.5 million views and 175,000 “likes,” indicating a broad resonance.

One day later, National Football League (NFL) player Colin Kaepernick, who had vaulted himself into the public eye through a protest of pregame renditions of “The Star-Spangled Banner,” delivered his own Instagram response. Kaepernick posted a pair of

¹ LeBron James [KingJames], “As I woke up today looking and searching for answers on what has happened this song hit it right on the head!...” [Instagram post], November 9, 2016, <https://www.instagram.com/p/BMmHGGr0BOC-/>.

video recordings of Malcolm X being interviewed prior to the 1964 Presidential election.² When asked by the White interviewer, “Who would you suggest that Negroes vote for in the coming election?”, X responded, “I wouldn’t suggest that they vote for *any* party or *anybody*.” He expressed his desire for “so-called ‘Negroes’ to become politically mature, and realize the power they hold in the field of politics,” which would generate more attention and respect from political leaders; at the moment, in his view, “most of the Negro leaders sell out to the political, to the White politicians for crumbs.” In the second video clip, X mused that a victory by Republican candidate Barry Goldwater would force Black Americans to “face up to the facts”:

This in itself is *good*, in that Goldwater is a man who’s not capable of hiding his racist tendencies. And at the same time he’s not capable of even pretending, to Negroes, that he’s their friend, so this will have a tendency to make the Negro, probably for the first time, do something to stand on his *own* feet and solve his *own* problem instead of putting himself in a position to be misled, misused, exploited by the Whites who pose as liberals only for the purpose of getting the support of the Negroes.

Kaepernick offered no additional commentary to the videos, instead implying a consonance between his present-day views and those of Malcolm X a half-century earlier.

Placed side by side, James’s and Kaepernick’s social media posts feature overlap and discrepancy. Both affirm Black political optimism despite the election of Trump, a candidate who had brazenly appealed to White Christian nativism and earned the endorsement of White supremacist groups. However, they present divergent paths toward a progressive future. James favors “faith” over “strike,” advocating a process in which he will act as a benevolent leader in guiding others through adversity. By contrast, Kaepernick downplays his role as a social leader, instead deferring to the words of Malcolm X, who promotes political consciousness and the doing of “*whatever* is necessary” to gain political equality. X’s radical call for confrontation clearly departs

² Colin Kaepernick [kaepernick7], [Malcolm X responds to interviewer’s question about his recommended candidate for Black voters in the 1964 Presidential election] [Video], November 10, 2016, <https://www.instagram.com/p/BMolji0jg9H/>.

from the faith-based invocation of James; furthermore, his wariness of alliance between Black Americans and White leaders reverberates in James's endorsement of Clinton.

These digital texts reflected broader differences between James and Kaepernick, two of the highest-profile activist athletes during the fall 2016 Presidential campaign spectacle. While James gestured toward radicalism through "Alright," which had emerged as the anthem of the Black Lives Matter (BLM) movement, his advocacy of faith over radical "strike" echoed the Black liberalism embedded in his general politics. He was a leading figure in the revival of Leftist athlete activism in the 2010s, which was intertwined with BLM in protest against police violence in Black communities. James had also aligned himself closely with Barack Obama and Hillary Clinton, both representatives of corporate-capitalist "New Democrat" identity. Kaepernick joined the athlete-activist movement in August 2016 through his protest of the national anthem, eventually expanding into a broader set of actions from press conference commentaries to financial donations for community development organizations. In the process, he largely embodied the antiestablishment, self-help ethos of Malcolm X and other Black radicals of the past and present. Thus while they are both key figures in the contemporary revival of athlete activism, James's and Kaepernick's particular expressions, or "activisms," differ in significant ways.

Approaching the intersection of athlete activism(s) and Presidential politics, this article addresses LeBron James's and Colin Kaepernick's engagements with the 2016 election. Hermeneutical analysis reveals that two distinct strains of Black liberation politics, deeply embedded in history, are resonant in their actions. James tended toward Black liberalism, most evidently through his association with the Clinton campaign, while Kaepernick favored Black radicalism in rejecting establishment politics as fundamentally oppressive. However, this is not to simplify James as "purely" liberal or Kaepernick as "purely" radical, just as it would be erroneous to characterize liberalism and radicalism as mutually exclusive ideologies. This is, instead, an examination of political currents' overlapping iterations within the rhetoric of two major athlete-activists. Such a study reveals that, rather than as a homogenous movement, the recent revival of Leftist sport activism is better understood through attention to its nuance.

2. Liberalism, Radicalism, and Black Identity Politics

“Liberalism” is an opaque concept in contemporary American political discourse. As noted by Nikhil Singh, the interchangeable use of the terms “liberal” and “Left” obscures the deeply embedded liberalism within which major political parties offer competing interpretations.³ Stuart Hall defined liberalism, which emerged in eighteenth-century Euro-American context, as an ideology emphasizing “individualism in politics, civil and political rights, parliamentary government, moderate reform, limited state intervention, and a private enterprise economy.”⁴ This system, predicated on the individual “rational agent” who thrives when “free from coercive and/or arbitrary political authority,” is promoted as an engine of human progress.⁵ Liberalism has persisted as a foundational ideology in American politics; as succinctly stated by Michael C. Dawson, “Liberalism is hegemonic.”⁶

However, this is not to say that liberalism is uniformly inflected. Simmons, Dobbin and Garrett identified two strains of liberalism with distinct emphases: economic (“free market” activity with minimal state interference) and political (state protection of “rights to political participation”).⁷ These strains developed in tandem, particularly as the rise of liberalism coincided with that of capitalism. Singh noted, “Central to every version of liberalism is an insistent, quasi-naturalistic link between human and market ‘freedom.’”⁸

³ Nikhil Pal Singh, “Liberalism,” in Bruce Burgett and Glenn Hendler (Eds.), *Keywords for American Cultural Studies*, 2nd Edition, New York: NYU Press, 2014, pp. 153-154.

⁴ Stuart Hall, “Variants of Liberalism,” in James Donald and Stuart Hall (Eds.), *Politics and ideology: a reader*, Philadelphia, PA: Open University Press, 1986, pp. 34-35.

⁵ Luigi Esposito and John W. Murphy, “Post Civil Rights Racism and the Need to Challenge Racial/Ethnic Inequality beyond the Limits of Liberalism,” *Theory In Action*, 3, no. 2, 2010, p. 41; Norberto Bobbio, *Liberalism and Democracy*, London: Verso, 2005; John Gray, *Liberalism*, Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1986.

⁶ Michael C. Dawson, *Black Visions: The Roots of Contemporary African-American Political Ideologies*, Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 2001, p. 241.

⁷ Beth A. Simmons, Frank Dobbin, and Geoffrey Garrett, “Introduction: The International Diffusion of Liberalism,” in David A. Baldwin (Ed.), *Key Concepts in the New Global Economy. Volume 1*, Cheltenham, U.K. and Northampton, MA: Elgar, 2012, pp. 782-783.

⁸ Singh, “Liberalism,” p. 154; see also Hall, “Variants of Liberalism,” p. 39.

In the past half century, economic liberalism has been incarnate in the form of neoliberalism, an orientation based on the premise that “free markets automatically generate civic order and economic prosperity,” in turn prioritizing economic over civic participation.⁹ Liberalism (of both the economic and political varieties) has spread globally, resulting in increased resources and structural instability at the aggregate level.¹⁰

Liberal ideology has also been inflected through Black liberation movements, particularly since the turn of the twentieth century. In comparing this iteration with “traditional American liberalism,” Dawson points to the stronger Black demand for political equality through the “belief that liberal egalitarianism should encompass the economic as well as the social and political realms.” Black distrust of economic liberalism, given the historical meshing of racism and capitalist logic (slavery onward), has facilitated an emphasis on political liberalism through state protection of rights.¹¹ This demand is accompanied by a willingness to work with White liberal leaders to discover shared interests, mirroring the general promotion of racial integration as a progressive process.

However, throughout its history, support for Black liberalism has been accompanied by criticism. Black nationalists, Marxists, and feminists have expressed particularly strong suspicion of liberalism as an idealistic ideology whose promise goes unfilled. Furthermore, such prominent leaders as W.E.B. Dubois, James Baldwin, and Martin Luther King, Jr. became disenchanted with liberalism late in life, eventually viewing racism is so entrenched in American society as to impair integrationist paths toward equality.¹² Contemporary scholars have joined these criticisms. Esposito and Murphy argued that racism is “inherent to liberalism itself,” pointing toward the capitalist-liberalist assumption that all humans are wealth-seeking. Furthermore, despite framings of neoliberalism as apolitical in the promotion of the “free market,”

⁹ Singh, “Liberalism,” p. 157.

¹⁰ Simmons, Dobbin & Garrett, “Introduction,” p. 781.

¹¹ Dawson, *Black Visions*, pp. 240, 243-244.

¹² Dawson, *Black Visions*, pp. 86-87, 238-239, 273-280; Bill Lyne, “God's Black Revolutionary Mouth: James Baldwin's Black Radicalism,” *Science & Society*, 74, no. 1, 2010, pp. 15-18.

deregulation allows for embedded racism to persist in private spaces.¹³ Critics have also focused on the assimilationist emphasis within liberalism, arguing that the process prioritizes White over Black cultural norms, resulting the loss of the latter.¹⁴

Such counterpoints emanate from Black Left-radicalism, which has existed in various forms in the U.S. since acts of slave resistance. Robin Kelley noted the “freedom dreams” that have driven such radicalism, particularly Black visions of a future in which the liberal notion of “freedom” was reimagined through alternatives to capitalism. Such narratives have been informed by the transnational flow of anticolonialist ideology between the U.S. and abroad, including post-colonial Africa.¹⁵ In the 1960s, Malcolm X emerged as the “ideological father” of the student Left, promoting Black nationalism and inspiring plots to overthrow the U.S. capitalist system.¹⁶ The rise of the Black Power movement in this decade also drew in a number of high-profile athletes, including Muhammad Ali, Bill Russell, and sprinters Tommie Smith and John Carlos, who famously raised their fists in a “power to the people” salute at the 1968 Olympics. Though each figure varied in their expressive activisms, they collectively named and confronted systemic racism in a more direct manner, staging what became known as “the revolt of the Black athlete.”¹⁷

¹³ Esposito and Murphy, “Post Civil Rights Racism,” pp. 50-53; see also Vikash Singh, “Race, the Condition of Neo-liberalism,” Conference Papers – *American Sociological Association*, 2016, pp. 1-21. In “Thinking with Flint: Racial Liberalism and the Roots of an American Water Tragedy,” *Capitalism Nature Socialism*, July 19, 2016, Malini Ranganathan applies this argument to the recent Flint, Michigan water crisis, remarking that liberalism was critical in obscuring “the racial foundations of capitalist exploitation” (p. 3).

¹⁴ Esposito and Murphy, “Post Civil Rights Racism.”

¹⁵ Robin D.G. Kelley, *Freedom Dreams: The Black Radical Imagination*, Boston, MA: Beacon Press, 2002; see also Lyne, “God’s Black Revolutionary Mouth,” p. 28.

¹⁶ Ibram H. Rogers, “‘People All Over the World Are Supporting You’: Malcolm X, Ideological Formations, and Black Student Activism, 1960-1972,” *Journal Of African American History*, 96, no. 1, 2011, p. 16.

¹⁷ Harry Edwards, *The Revolt of the Black Athlete*, New York: Free Press, 1969; Douglas Hartmann, *Race, Culture and the Revolt of the Black Athlete: the 1968 Olympics Protests and Their Aftermath*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2003.

By the late twentieth century, Black Americans were largely abandoned in regards to social welfare, while targeted in regards to law enforcement, and Black leaders generally favored the liberal themes of “personality responsibility” and “self help” as solutions to racial inequality. In response, the Black Radical Congress was formed in the late 1990s, representing a Leftist alliance focused on intersectional oppression.¹⁸ Such activist emphases were eventually renewed by the Black Lives Matter movement of the 2010s, further discussed below.

When viewing these radical movements in sum, it should be acknowledged that while they represent challenges to liberal ideology, they are also infused with elements of liberalism. Black radical critiques of the oppression inherent in “racial capitalism” have also been informed by the liberal tenets of individual human rights and equality, at times targeting the ineffectiveness of liberal strategies toward realizing such conditions.¹⁹ Thus liberalism and radicalism are distinct but intersecting ideologies; the present study is an effort to capture such complexity within contemporary athlete activism.

3. LeBron James, Colin Kaepernick, and the 2016 Presidential Election

In March 2012, American media discourse was heavily focused on the shooting and killing of Trayvon Martin by “neighborhood watch” person George Zimmerman in Sanford, Florida. The event set off a national conversation about race, particularly violence against Black men. Amid this discourse, the Miami Heat basketball team, led by LeBron James, posed for a photograph that he posted to his Twitter account.²⁰ In the image, thirteen Miami players are dressed in their dark-gray hooded team sweatshirts, their faces partially obscured as they look to the ground. It is a pose of mourning, but the image also connotes, through covered faces, a generalized and shared identity between

¹⁸ Jennifer Hamer and Clarence Lang, “Black Radicalism, Reinvented,” in Herb Boyd (Ed.), *Race & Resistance: African Americans In The Twenty-First Century*, Cambridge, MA: South End Press, 2002, pp. 109-136.

¹⁹ Cedric J. Robinson, *Black Marxism: The making of the Black radical tradition*, Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 2000, p. 2.

²⁰ LeBron James [KingJames], “#WeAreTrayvonMartin #Hoodies #Stereotyped #WeWantJustice” [Photograph], March 23, 2012, <https://twitter.com/kingjames/status/183243305428058112?lang=en>.

each subject and Martin. The caption clarified the post's political intent: "#WeAreTrayvonMartin #Hoodies #Stereotyped #WeWantJustice." Nguyen has noted the hoodie's operation as a racialized signifier of threat, and James's engagement with the politics of this symbol signaled his, and other athletes', arrival in the political arena.²¹

3.1 The Revival of Black Sport-Activism(s)

The Martin-Zimmerman event ignited a general reinvigoration of Black politics, most visibly in the form of the Black Lives Matter (BLM) movement. After Zimmerman was acquitted of all charges in 2013, Oakland resident Alicia Garza wrote a "love letter to black people" on Facebook, which concluded with the phrase "Our lives matter."²² Her post helped launch a movement that truly expanded in 2014 after the police killings of Eric Garner and Michael Brown.²³ The movement is radical in its attention to the inequalities of "racial capitalism," and poses a deeper challenge to institutional devaluation of Black health and wellbeing.²⁴ Though sharing the occupation technique with past Black liberal movements, BLM is a rejection of the "politics of respectability"; in the words of Juliet Hooker, it entails a "radical critique of the carceral state that rejects the distinction between law-abiding middle-class black citizens and always-already

²¹ Mimi Thi Nguyen, "The Hoodie as Sign, Screen, Expectation, and Force," *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society*, 40, no. 4, 2015, p. 793.

²² Ruth Milkman, "A New Political Generation: Millennials and the Post-2008 Wave of Protest," *American Sociological Review*, 82, no. 1, 2017, p. 24; Martha Biondi, "The Radicalism of Black Lives Matter," *In These Times*, 40, no. 9, 2016, pp. 16-19; Russell Rickford, "Black Lives Matter: Toward a Modern Practice of Mass Struggle," *New Labor Forum*, 25, no. 1, 2016, p. 35.

²³ BLM reflected the broadly heightened political consciousness among "millennials," which emerged from the 2008 economic recession and was partially enabled by social-media mobilization. See: Nikita Carney, "All Lives Matter, but so Does Race: Black Lives Matter and the Evolving Role of Social Media," *Humanity & Society*, 40, no. 2, 2016, pp. 180-198; Milkman, "A New Political Generation."

²⁴ Barbara Ransby, "The Class Politics of Black Lives Matter," *Dissent*, 62, no. 4, 2015, pp. 31-34; Alondra Nelson, "The Longue Durée of Black Lives Matter," *American Journal of Public Health*, 106, no. 10, 2016, pp. 1734-1737.

criminalized black ‘thugs’ in urban ghettos.”²⁵ However, in a departure from some past iterations of Black radicalism, BLM is led by women and is highly intersectional and inclusive, as indicated by its focus on police targeting of transgender people.²⁶

James’s #WeAreTrayvonMartin post predated Garza’s “love letter” by one year, indicating that the athlete-activist revival was not a product of BLM so much as intertwined with it. It also previewed the blend of radicalism and liberalism in James’s political rhetoric. His very expression of resistance might be considered “radical” in the context of muted major-athlete political advocacy since the 1970s; furthermore, James leaned toward radicalism when addressing violence against Black men. In December 2014, he and other National Basketball Association players took the court in t-shirts emblazoned with the phrase “I Can’t Breathe,” echoing Eric Garner’s final words; in July 2016, after the police killings of Alton Sterling and Philando Castile, he Tweeted a *Time* story with this comment: “This article says it all man! Sickens me and I shed multiple tears about it all. #ItNeedsToStop #BlackLivesMatter.”²⁷ On the other hand, James carried on a close public association with President Obama, who had ridden a wave of multiculturalist liberal optimism to the White House.²⁸ James led a 2008 get-out-the vote

²⁵ Juliet Hooker, “Black Lives Matter and the Paradoxes of U.S. Black Politics,” *Political Theory*, 44, no. 4, 2016, p. 465; Biondi, “The Radicalism of Black Lives Matter,” pp. 16-17; Rickford, “Black Lives Matter,” p. 36.

²⁶ Ransby, “The Class Politics of Black Lives Matter,” p. 32; Biondi, “The Radicalism of Black Lives Matter,” p. 19.

²⁷ “LeBron James, Kyrie Irving, more wear ‘I Can’t Breathe’ shirts,” *Sports Illustrated*, December 9, 2014, <https://www.si.com/nba/2014/12/08/LeBron-james-kyrie-irving-i-cant-breathe-eric-garner>; LeBron James [KingJames], “This article says it all man! Sickens me and I shed multiple tears about it all. <http://time.com/4397086/minnesota-shooting-philando-castile-role-model-school/?xid=tcoshare> ... #ItNeedsToStop #BlackLivesMatter” [Tweet], July 7, 2016, <https://twitter.com/kingjames/status/751234227836841989>.

²⁸ Stephen Campagna-Pinto, “Barack Obama and the Habit of Hope,” *Anglican Theological Review* 97, no. 3, 2016, pp. 519-536; Kenneth Fuchsman, “Barack Obama and the Cycle of American Liberalism,” *The Journal of Psychohistory* 37, no. 2, 2009, pp. 145-159.

rally for Obama in Ohio, publicly joined Michelle Obama in support of her “Let’s Move” initiative, and promoted the Affordable Care Act.²⁹

Liberalism was particularly embedded in James’s politics in 2016, as evidenced by his rhetoric at that summer’s Excellence in Sports Performance Yearly (ESPY) awards show. In an indication of amplified Black activism inside and outside of sport, James joined fellow NBA players Carmelo Anthony, Chris Paul, and Dwayne Wade as they opened the show, solemnly standing in suits, with a commentary on the outbreak of documented police attacks on Black Americans. After Anthony began by declaring, “The system is broken...the urgency to create change is at an all-time high,” Paul and Wade followed with forceful criticisms of the police system, though also highlighting the ongoing gun violence in Chicago and elsewhere that, in Wade’s refrain, “has to stop.” James then offered his closing statement:

We all feel helpless and frustrated by the violence. We do. But that’s not acceptable. It’s time to look in the mirror and ask ourselves, what are *we* doing to create change? It’s not about being a role model, it’s not about our responsibility to a condition of activism. I know tonight, we’re honoring Muhammad Ali, the G.O.A.T. [Greatest Of All Time]. But to do his legacy any justice [audience applause], let’s use this moment as a call to action for all professional athletes to educate ourselves. Explore these issues, speak up, use our influence, and renounce all violence. And most importantly, go back to our communities, invest our time, our resources, help rebuild them, help strengthen them, help change them. We *all* have to do better. Thank you.

James’s speech drew on conservative iterations of Black liberalism through an emphasis on self-accountability (“what are *we* doing to create change?”, “educate ourselves,” “We *all* have to do better”) and the call to “renounce all violence.”³⁰ It would also preview the politics of his engagement with the Presidential election that fall.

²⁹ Alexander Wolff, *The Audacity of Hoop: Basketball and the Age of Obama*, Philadelphia, PA: Temple University Press, 2016.

³⁰ Dawson outlines this conservatism in *Black Visions*, pp. 19-20.

Within one month of the ESPYs, Colin Kaepernick initiated his own protest. He began by sitting, unnoticed, during the national anthem before two preseason games. Once spotted and questioned about the gesture, he offered comment to the National Football League's official media outlet: "I am not going to stand up to show pride in a flag for a country that oppresses black people and people of color." Kaepernick followed with direct criticism of U.S. institutions of power for not fulfilling liberal promises:

I'm going to continue to stand with the people that are being oppressed. To me, this is something that has to change...People are dying in vain because this country isn't holding their end of the bargain up, as far as giving freedom and justice, liberty to everybody.³¹

Over the course of the season, Kaepernick's protest led to a wave of others around the NFL, though the intended messages (through sitting, kneeling, raising a fist, or locking arms) were not always clear. His own practices shifted as well: after being accused of disrespect for military personnel, Kaepernick switched from sitting to kneeling in order to "get the message back on track...[and] show more respect to the men and women who fight for this country."³² This might be characterized as a moderation of radicalism, given the symbolic deference of kneeling. Thus like James, his activist performance mixed elements of radicalism and liberalism, at times adaptively shifting the mode of protest.

These practices took place within differing league-political contexts. The NBA, in regards to image management, has recently projected a multiculturalist (neo)liberalism that might be termed "corporate leftism." This orientation has been particularly evident during the tenure, beginning in 2014, of Commissioner Adam Silver. Within months of his new role, Silver expelled Los Angeles Clippers owner Donald Sterling for audio-recorded comments in favor of excluding Black spectators from his games; Sterling's ownership had not been jeopardized by a deep history of racist practices, including

³¹ Steve Wyche, "Colin Kaepernick explains why he sat during national anthem," *NFL Media*, August 27, 2016, <http://www.nfl.com/news/story/0ap3000000691077/article/colin-kaepernick-explains-protest-of-national-anthem>.

³² David Fucillo, "Colin Kaepernick, Nate Boyer meet in San Diego, discuss National Anthem controversy," *SBNation Niners Nation*, September 1, 2016, <http://www.ninersnation.com/2016/9/1/12761112/colin-kaepernick-nate-boyer-meet-in-san-diego-national-anthem-controversy/in/12463381>.

housing discrimination, but this overtly anti-Black discourse offered Silver an opportunity to affirm his commitment to racial liberalism.³³ He also followed previous commissioner David Stern in openly facilitating a relationship with President Obama, whose public embrace of basketball was accompanied by his own liberal orientation.³⁴ By contrast, the NFL has tended toward a more conservative politics and less overt embrace of multiculturalism. The league's nationalism, distinct from the NBA's globalist identity, is reinforced by its militaristic ethos, both in regards to game aesthetics and close relations with the U.S. military, particularly since the September 11 attacks and subsequent "War on Terror."³⁵ Thus, as will be demonstrated below, James's predominant liberalism largely aligned not only with Obama (and later Clinton) but also his own league's ideological orientation. By contrast, Kaepernick's radicalism more sharply diverged from NFL politics, particularly in his protest during a militaristic ritual, and likely shaped his future inclusion in the league.

3.2 The 2016 Presidential Election

James and Kaepernick would be drawn into a contest, between Hillary Clinton and Donald Trump, that featured starkly disparate tones, if not equally disparate ideologies. Exceptional as the first female Presidential candidate in a U.S. general election, Clinton had long engaged in a gendered struggle to appear "authentic," particularly given notions of womanhood that emphasize warmth, kindness and "likeability."³⁶ As a candidate, she

³³ Mark Berman, "Why the world finally noticed Donald Sterling's appalling history," *The Washington Post*, April 28, 2014, http://wapo.st/1iuSiTT?tid=ss_mail&utm_term=.4d8161174228.

³⁴ Wolff, *The Audacity of Hoop*.

³⁵ Michael Butterworth, "Fox Sports, Super Bowl XLII, and the Affirmation of American Civil Religion," *Journal of Sport and Social issues* 32, no. 3, 2008, pp. 318-323; Michael Butterworth, "NFL Films and the Militarization of Professional Football" (pp. 205-225) and Samantha King, "Offensive Lines: Sport-State Synergy in an Era of Perpetual War" (pp. 191-204), in Thomas Oates and Zack Furness (Eds.), *The NFL: Critical and Cultural Perspectives*, Philadelphia, PA: Temple University Press, 2014; Adam Rugg, "America's game: The NFL's 'Salute to Service' campaign, the diffused military presence, and corporate social responsibility," *Popular Communication* 14, no. 1, 2016, pp. 21-29.

³⁶ Shawn J. Parry-Giles, *Hillary Clinton in the News: Gender and Authenticity in American Politics*, Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2014.

promoted the “American nationalist thesis” that posited a common “social ethos, a political creed” across a culturally diverse citizenry, and shared with Barack Obama an optimistic vision of the American past, present, and future.³⁷ In the midst of a fracturing Democratic Party, itself split between liberal and radical factions, she exuded (neo)liberalism through a “New Democrat” faith in corporate capitalism’s facilitation of social wellbeing.³⁸ In contrast with Clinton’s establishment ethos, Trump offered anti-establishment populist rhetoric. He was a longtime celebrity executive and “master of media spectacle” whose ascent was enabled by the hegemony of corporate capitalism.³⁹ Trump had paved the way for his candidacy through a White-nativist campaign of doubt that Obama was, in fact, born in the U.S. and thus qualified to serve as President.⁴⁰ As a candidate, Trump tapped into widespread disenchantment with economic opportunity, arguing that the “American Dream” was in danger of extinction, while also contrasting with Clinton through his “sincere”-seeming, somewhat unpredictable oratory that frequently had little basis in evidence.⁴¹ Drawing on Adam Harnes, I join Sasha Bush in describing Trump’s projected ideology as *nationalist neoliberalism*, an iteration of

³⁷ Anatol Lieven, “Clinton and Trump: Two Faces of American Nationalism,” *Survival* 58, no. 5, 2016, pp. 7-22; hari stephen kumar, “‘I Was Born...’ (No You Were Not!): Birtherism and Political Challenges to Personal Self-Authorizations,” *Qualitative Inquiry* 19, no. 8, 2013, pp. 621-633.

³⁸ Kathlee Geier, “Who’s Ready for Hillary?,” *Nation* 299, no. 24/25, 2014, pp. 22-25.

³⁹ Douglas Kellner, *American nightmare: Donald Trump, media spectacle, and authoritarian populism*, Rotterdam; Boston, MA: Sense Publishers, 2016, p. 1; Henry A. Giroux, “Feature Article: Political Frauds, Donald Trump, and the Ghost of Totalitarianism,” *Knowledge Cultures* 4, no. 5, 2016, pp. 95-108.

⁴⁰ kumar, “‘I Was Born...’ (No You Were Not!),” pp. 628-630.

⁴¹ Jeff Taylor, “Historical and Ideological Context of Donald Trump,” *Faculty Work: Comprehensive List*, Paper 575, 2016, pp. 7-8, http://digitalcollections.dordt.edu/faculty_work/575/?utm_source=digitalcollections.dordt.edu%2Ffaculty_work%2F575&utm_medium=PDF&utm_campaign=PDFCoverPages; John Kenneth White, “Donald Trump and the Scourge of Populism,” *Forum* (2194-6183), 14, no. 3, 2016, p. 272.

neoliberal economics that emphasizes national rather than global circulation.⁴² His slogan “America First” called for an invigoration of nationalism through protectionist economics and militaristic hard power, accompanied by the repression of dissent.

Such starkly different candidate identities seemed to augment interest in the Presidential campaign, which at times intersected with the ever-present American sport spectacle. Kaepernick’s protest neatly coincided with the launching of the general election campaign, resulting in their nearly inevitable collision. In the wake of his initial anthem protest, on August 28, Kaepernick was asked about his views on the Presidential candidates, and responded bluntly:

You have Hillary who's called Black teens super-predators. You have Trump who's openly racist. I mean, we have a Presidential candidate who's deleted and done things illegally and is a Presidential candidate. That doesn't make sense to me. 'Cause if that was any other person, you'd be in prison. So, what is this country really standing for?⁴³

While sharing liberal criticism of the “openly racist” candidate Trump, Kaepernick’s radicalism is evident in his accompanying criticism of the liberal-establishment alternative. And while addressing Clinton’s record, he expresses cynicism regarding liberal notions of opportunity, touching on the privilege and protection of the political elite. In a strange moment of alliance, his comment that Clinton should “be in prison” mirrored Trump supporters’ “lock her up” chants.

⁴²Sasha Breger Bush, “Trump and National Neoliberalism, *Dollars & Sense*, December 16, 2016, <http://dollarsandsense.org/archives/2016/1216bregerbush.html>; Adam Harmes, “The Rise of National Neoliberalism,” *Review of International Political Economy* 19, no. 1, 2011, pp. 59-86. See also Christian Fuchs, “Donald Trump: A Critical Theory-Perspective on Authoritarian Capitalism, *Triplec (Cognition, Communication, Co-Operation): Open Access Journal For A Global Sustainable Information Society* 15, no. 1, 2017, pp. 40-41, and John Shattuck, “The Rise of Populist Nationalism in Europe and the United States,” *American Prospect* 28, no. 1, 2017, pp. 40-44. I favor the term “nationalist” over Harmes’s “national” due to the former’s more direct hailing of nationalism, which undergirds this iteration of neoliberalism.

⁴³ Steven Ruiz, “Colin Kaepernick says he'll continue to sit during anthem, calls Donald Trump ‘openly racist,’” *USA Today Sports*, August 28, 2016, <http://ftw.usatoday.com/2016/08/colin-kaepernick-national-anthem-donald-trump>.

However, Kaepernick's indirect public clashes with Trump would be more prominent. The candidate was asked by a Seattle-area radio host about Kaepernick's comments and replied, "I think it's a terrible thing. And uh, you know, he'll uh – maybe he should find a country that works better for him. Let him try, it won't happen."⁴⁴ In late October, at a rally in Colorado, Trump attributed the NFL's declining ratings to the national anthem protest; he uttered "Kaepernick" twice with a frown, eliciting boos from the audience.⁴⁵ It appears, then, that Kaepernick emerged as a useful foil (the unpatriotic, unappreciative Black dissident) against which Trump effectively constructed his own brand of White nationalism. Kaepernick responded by critiquing Trump's nationalist-nostalgic slogan, "Make America Great Again," remarking: "Well, America's never been great for people of color. And that's something that needs to be addressed. Let's make America great for the first time." When asked about the first Clinton-Trump debate, he replied that "it was embarrassing to watch that these are our two candidates," describing them both as "liars" and concluding that "you have to pick the lesser of two evils, but in the end it's still evil."⁴⁶ Thus while most explicitly critiquing Trump, he still refused to endorse Clinton, mirroring Black Lives Matter leaders' own rejection of the Democratic Party's statement of support.⁴⁷ For both Kaepernick and BLM, a radical agenda was incompatible with the party of establishment liberalism.

By contrast, James embraced the tenets of Black liberalism, most evidently in his direct alignment with Clinton. On October 2, *Business Insider* published his letter of endorsement, which opens with a nod to self-accountability through reference to the LeBron James Family Foundation's activities in his hometown. Black (political)

⁴⁴ Charlotte Wilder, "Donald Trump says Colin Kaepernick should find a new country," *USA Today Sports*, August 30, 2016, <http://ftw.usatoday.com/2016/08/donald-trump-colin-kaepernick-new-country-national-anthem-protest-response>.

⁴⁵ "Donald Trump: NFL's ratings are down because of Colin Kaepernick," *Sports Illustrated*, October 30, 2016, <https://www.si.com/nfl/2016/10/30/donald-trump-nfl-ratings-down-colin-kaepernick>.

⁴⁶ Matt Maiocco, "Kaepernick: 'Let's Make America Great For The First Time,'" *CSN Bay Area*, September 27, 2016, <http://www.csnbayarea.com/49ers/kaepernick-lets-make-america-great-first-time>.

⁴⁷ Rickford, "Black Lives Matter," p. 39.

liberalism is also reflected by his emphasis on State assistance: “Opportunities, a support system, and a safety net for kids in poverty or kids in single-parent households shouldn't be limited to those lucky enough to be blessed with athletic talent.” After a reference to “my good friend, President Barack Obama,” the following passage renders his liberalism most apparent: “...we need a president who brings us together and keeps us unified. Policies and ideas that divide us more are not the solution. We must all stand together — no matter where we are from or the color of our skin.”⁴⁸ In consonance with Clinton, James’s faith in the existing liberal order, through which he favors integration, precludes a call for radical resistance to it.

The letter’s themes were reiterated in James’s introduction of Clinton, on the Sunday before the election, at a Cleveland rally. Standing in front of her signature “STRONGER TOGETHER” podium logo, James remarked that he “grew up in the inner city,” a coding of his own Black, working-class identity, and noted that fellow residents may believe that “our vote doesn’t matter. But it really does. It really, really does.” He then discussed his foundation and its goal of “giving my kids an opportunity to feel like they’re important,” as well as convincing children that people “care about them.” These comments point to an emergent theme in his politics: as indicated by the naming of his “Family Foundation,” James framed himself as an embodiment of social fatherhood, consistently focused on the wellbeing of children inside and outside of his biological family. Speaking next, Clinton herself lauded James’s representation of fatherhood: “What he does off the court is to care for every child as if that child were his own.”⁴⁹ Of course, fatherhood is a central element in American mythology, traced back to the nation’s “founding fathers.” The political-parental model taps into the liberal notion of benevolent leadership which Clinton now sought to reconfigure as social motherhood.⁵⁰

⁴⁸ LeBron James, “LeBron James: Why I'm endorsing Hillary Clinton,” *Business Insider*, October 2, 2016, <http://www.businessinsider.com/LeBron-james-why-endorsing-hillary-clinton-for-president-2016-9>.

⁴⁹ [ABC News], “LeBron James Campaigns for Hillary Clinton in Ohio [FULL SPEECH]” [Video File], November 6, 2016, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=isbW5RLleDY>.

⁵⁰ Karen Ferguson, *Top Down: The Ford Foundation, Black Power, and the Reinvention of Racial Liberalism*, Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2013, pp. 26-29.

However, she was unable to garner sufficient public support; despite Clinton's victory in the popular vote, Trump won the Electoral College and the Presidency. It was a blow to establishment liberalism, indicating a broad current of disenchantment with the current American political system. In the face of this setback, as documented in the present study's opening, James's Instagram response reaffirmed optimism and faith in liberal progress. He again foregrounded social fatherhood in declaring, "To all the youth out there I PROMISE I'll continue to lead u guys every single day without no hesitation!!" Furthermore, his trust in "the man above" over a "strike" indicated opposition to radical intervention into institutions of power. At the same time, his inclusion of Kendrick Lamar's "Alright" carried complex connotations. While James's faith was echoed in the optimistic refrain, particularly "if God got us, then we gon' be alright," the song and video were also a scathing indictment of police and general institutional oppression of Black Americans. James had previously affirmed alliance with Black Lives Matter, and now posted a protest song closely associated with the movement. Colin Kaepernick's own posted videos, the following day, were more explicitly radical through the words of Malcolm X. The lamentation that "most of the Negro leaders sell out to the political, to the White politicians for crumbs" operates as a repudiation of James's endorsement of candidate Clinton. On the other hand, Kaepernick also included X's characterization of a Goldwater victory as potentially "good," in forcing Black American to "face up to facts" of an overtly racist leadership. Thus he joined James in expressing optimism about the implications of a Trump Presidency, though Kaepernick offered a decidedly more radical vision of Black self-preservation.

Kaepernick had been asked on Election Day if he would vote, and responded in the negative.⁵¹ On the Sunday afterward, he offered the following rationalization:

I think it would be hypocritical of me to vote. I'd said from the beginning I was against oppression, I was against a system of oppression. I'm not

⁵¹ "Kaepernick Declined to Vote on Election Day: Report," *NBC Bay Area*, November 8, 2016, <http://www.nbcbayarea.com/news/local/Kaepernick-Election-Day-400458701.html>.

going to show support for that system. And, to me, the oppressor isn't going to allow you to vote your way out of your oppression.⁵²

The comments reinforced his past rejection of the “system of oppression” within which Kaepernick had grouped both Presidential candidates. The revelation elicited a strong response from commentators: for example, ESPN’s Stephen A. Smith declared Kaepernick to be “absolutely irrelevant” as a result, while Leftist sportswriter Dave Zirin dismissed Smith’s “political wheeze” and defended Kaepernick’s ideological sincerity.⁵³ That week’s Zirin podcast interview with Harry Edwards, a leading figure in the original “revolt of the Black athlete” who had attempted to organize a boycott of the 1968 Olympics, reiterated the ideological complexity of athlete activism. Edwards acted as a mentor to Kaepernick, and despite his history of radicalism, he now expressed disappointment in the public rejection of the ballot box. In arguing for Black Americans’ “obligation to vote,” Edwards remarked, “We must utilize every arrow that we have in our quiver, no matter how small or how short distance,” and highlighted “what the impact of his not voting is upon all of those other millennials and young people who look to him for courage, direction, guidance, insight, and so forth.”⁵⁴ Through these words, a major figure in Black athletic radicalism now criticized the rejection of establishment politics.

While Kaepernick offered his political expression through social media and press conferences, James occupied a very different space in the election’s aftermath. On the following Thursday, he attended the White House as part of a culturally dissonant set of events. First, Barack Obama and Donald Trump, who had openly clashed since Trump’s

⁵² Matt Maiocco, “Kaepernick: ‘It Would Be Hypocritical of Me to Vote,’” *NBC Bay Area*, November 13, 2016, http://www.nbcbayarea.com/news/sports/csn/49ers/Kaepernick_It_would_be_hypocritical_of_me_to_vote-401040155.html?_osource=SocialFlowTwt_BAYBrand.

⁵³ First Take [FirstTake], “‘For him not to vote...as far as I'm concerned, everything he said meant absolutely nothing!’ - @stephenasmith on Colin Kaepernick” [Tweet], November 9, 2016, <https://twitter.com/FirstTake/status/796387727793131520>; Dave Zirin, “On Colin Kaepernick’s Decision Not to Vote,” *The Nation*, November 14, 2016, <https://www.thenation.com/article/on-colin-kaepernicks-decision-not-to-vote/>.

⁵⁴ Dave Zirin (Host), “Dr. Harry Edwards On The Athlete-Activist Under Trump,” *Edge of Sports* [Audio podcast], November 16, 2016, <http://www.edgeofsportspodcast.com/post/153277948375/dr-harry-edwards-on-the-athlete-activist-under>.

launching of the “birther” movement, met in private before making a joint appearance on camera.⁵⁵ It was a striking visual pairing: the leader of the liberal establishment and the man who had predicated his campaign on its deconstruction, a bust of Martin Luther King, Jr. peering over the latter’s shoulder. Hours later, Obama welcomed the NBA champion Cleveland Cavaliers, led by James, and they collectively stood behind the President as he gave a lighthearted, comfortable speech of congratulations.⁵⁶ Later, the team staged a “Mannequin Challenge” video, and James’s close relationship with the First Family was reflected by his smiling pose with Michelle Obama.⁵⁷ The next day, when asked about Trump’s election, James reiterated his own role in “giving back to the community, giving back to the youth,” and finished on an exceptionalist note: “This is the best country in the world, so we all have to do our part.”⁵⁸ Even in the face of voter repudiation, James refused to express doubt on the promise of American liberal progress.

4. Epilogue/Conclusion

An examination of the revival of athlete activism reveals that, reflective of history, Black progress politics are constituted by distinct but intertwined ideological strands. This acknowledgment is key to understanding the complexities, sometimes present within a single figure’s expression, at the intersection of sport and politics. LeBron James may be considered radicalist through his alignment with Black Lives Matter, as well as his general leadership in the Leftist sport revival; on the other hand, in the context of the 2016 election, he largely projected Black liberalism through association with Clinton and the corollary promotion of community self-help, Black paternal responsibility, and faith

⁵⁵ David Nakamura and Juliet Eilperin, “Trump meets with Obama at the White House as whirlwind transition starts,” *Washington Post*, November 10, 2016, https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/post-politics/wp/2016/11/10/obama-to-welcome-trump-to-white-house-for-first-meeting-since-election/?utm_term=.c5d43ef6e0b7.

⁵⁶ [ABC News], “Obama Honors Cleveland Cavaliers at White House” [Video File], November 10, 2016, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=zJn-CxN29Hg&t=555s>.

⁵⁷ [NBA], “LeBron James and Cleveland Cavaliers Mannequin Challenge with First Lady Michelle Obama!” [Video File], November 10, 2016, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=5ZzklOEGW0w>.

⁵⁸ Dave McMenamin, “LeBron James on election fallout: ‘Nation has never been built on one guy,’” *ESPN*, November 11, 2016, http://www.espn.com/nba/story/_/id/18023858/LeBron-james-cleveland-cavaliers-donald-trump-victory-guy.

in institutions of power. Colin Kaepernick also expressed faith in the realization of “freedom dreams,” as well as promotion of community-based, grassroots work to provide uplift in Black communities. Furthermore, he joined James in opposing candidate Trump, who had so explicitly violated multiculturalist principles as to mobilize Leftist opposition. However, Kaepernick adopted a more radical orientation, framing both Presidential candidates as representative of the systematically oppressive institutions in which racism was embedded. Neither James nor Kaepernick rejected the basic liberal tenets of individual human equality and rights, but differed in their proposed paths towards those ideals. These paths reveal the persistence of ideologies of resistance through cultural memory, whether directly (see James’s references to Ali, Kaepernick’s references to Malcolm X) or through more opaque means. Whatever the means, they persist.

In the months after the election, both figures remained publicly linked to the incoming President. In December, it was revealed that James and some Cleveland teammates no longer resided at Trump’s New York City hotel when playing the Knicks. Asked about the change, James was coy:

I’m not trying to make a statement. It's just my personal preference. At the end of the day, I hope he's one of the best presidents ever for all of our sake – my family, for all of us. But it's just my personal preference. It would be the same if I went to a restaurant and decided to eat chicken and not steak.⁵⁹

While a somewhat strange denial of the political implications of his action, the comments echoed James’s tendency toward positive endorsement of candidates in the place of negatively opposing others, while also reinforcing his resilient optimism. That week, he was named *Sports Illustrated*’s 2016 Sportsperson of the Year; in the cover photo, James wears a safety pin, the emergent symbol of support for marginalized groups. The feature article includes no mention of the gesture, but the writer does note that “his form of engagement differs from Kaepernick’s,” supported by this quote from James:

⁵⁹ Dave McMenamin, “LeBron James: Just preference to not stay at Trump hotel,” *ESPN*, December 7, 2016, http://www.espn.com/nba/story/_/id/18227393/no-statement-not-staying-donald-trump-new-york-hotel.

I understand protests, but I think protests can feel almost riotous sometimes, and I don't want that. I want it to be more about what I can do to help my community, what we can do so kids feel like they're important to the growth of America, and not like: "These people don't care about us." I'm not here to stomp on Trump. We're here to do our part, which starts in the place we grew up, street by street, brick by brick, person by person.⁶⁰

Even in the impending era of a Trump Presidency, James favored positivity and offered no indication that a more radical politics of resistance was in his own future. His ideological alignment with the liberalism of powerful institutions (the Obama White House, Clinton candidacy and NBA) facilitated the ongoing amplification of his voice in the public sphere.

Following the 2016 season, Kaepernick was released by the San Francisco 49ers and, as of June 2017, has not been signed by another NFL team. At a March rally in Louisville, Trump claimed credit for Kaepernick's lack of a contract, drawing cheers when he declared that "NFL owners don't wanna pick him up because they don't wanna get a nasty Tweet from Donald Trump!" He added that his own followers "like it when people actually stand for the American flag, right?"⁶¹ Once again, Trump deployed Kaepernick as a symbolic foil against which to demonstrate his own nationalism, while also exuding authoritarianism through the attack on dissent. The next day, it was reported that Kaepernick donated \$50,000 to Meals on Wheels, a federal program targeted for cuts under Trump's proposed budget.⁶² Despite the safe politics of this donation, Kaepernick's general radicalism positioned him in stronger opposition, compared with James, to

⁶⁰ Lee Jenkins, "Crowning The King: LeBron James is Sports Illustrated's 2016 Sportsperson of the Year," *Sports Illustrated*, December 1, 2016, <https://www.si.com/sportsperson/2016/12/01/LeBron-james-sportsperson-of-the-year-sports-illustrated>.

⁶¹ Andrew Joseph, "Donald Trump is taking credit for Colin Kaepernick still being a free agent," *USA Today Sports*, March 20, 2017, <http://ftw.usatoday.com/2017/03/donald-trump-credit-colin-kaepernick-free-agency-louisville-nfl-owners-tweet-anthem-protest>.

⁶² Mahita Gajanan, "Colin Kaepernick donates \$50,000 to Meals on Wheels," *Time*, March 22, 2017, <http://time.com/4708728/colin-kaepernick-meals-on-wheels-donald-trump-nfl/>.

institutions of power. In turn, while James continues to enjoy an embrace and voice in the NBA (if not the current White House), Kaepernick might have jeopardized his access to the NFL's highly visible, mass-mediated space. Racial politics do not solely determine such inclusions, but surely play a part.

Though the events of the coming years are impossible to foresee, it seems likely that Trump(ism), the President and associated ideology, will fortify the reinvigorated athlete activism of this decade. Given that sport is a well-documented "microcosm of society," broader political fractures have been, and will continue to be, refracted through this mass-mediated cultural apparatus. Sport discourses carry power in establishing the fault lines along which spectators engage in political issues, including the often-crossed line between liberal and radical modes of Black politics. It should be clarified that the present study is not offered as an endorsement of either liberalism or radicalism as a more effective engine of democratic progress. However, in the face of an authoritarian executive administration, the sustenance of democracy demands that high-profile athletes continue to demonstrate political engagement as a model for the rest of the nation.