



# The Performance and Reception of Race-Based Athletic Activism: Toward a Critical, Dramaturgical Theory of Sport

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## Abstract

The emergence of an unprecedented wave of race-based athletic activism in the last decade presents the opportunity to formulate a more critical, cultural theory of the significance and socio-political function of sport in contemporary life. We begin by centering athlete agency and highlighting the distinctive performative, communicative, and symbolic opportunities that sport affords. However, athletic activism and social messaging are also structured—and their impacts shaped—by a range of contextual factors and institutional forces as well as sport’s own unique cultural status and ideological claims. We catalog these constraints to capture the larger cultural field of sport as a site of racial commentary and contestation. Situating this multifaceted field of protest and response in its larger social, cultural, and media contexts leads us to argue that sport presents a vehicle not only for the performance of protest (as existing theory might have it), but for the representation and dramatization of social contestation, struggle, and change more generally. The lessons and broader implications of this synthesis are discussed in the conclusion.

**Keywords** Race · Culture · Protest · Performance · Politics · Dramaturgy

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## Introduction

Of all the many extraordinary aspects of the struggle against racism and white supremacy that has come to be known as the “Black Lives Matter” (BLM) movement in the United States, few are as prominent—if underappreciated and still misunderstood—as the acts of protest, organized dissent, and insistent solidarity undertaken by athletes and their allies.

The remarkable rise of race-based sports activism has been headline news since at least 2016 when then-San Francisco 49ers quarterback Colin Kaepernick decided to “take a knee” during the playing of the national anthem at NFL pre-game ceremonies. But the roots of resistance in and around sport—what sociologist Harry Edwards (2016) has called the “fourth wave”—go back at least to emergence of the BLM movement itself earlier in the decade (Coombs and Casillo 2017). Subsequent years ushered in previously unheard of gestures of defiance and solidarity from superstar athletes like LeBron James, Meghan Rapinoe, and Serena Williams, athletic leaders and coaches, countless demonstrations at high school and youth sporting events across the nation (Zirin 2021), and a threatened boycott by college football players at the University of Missouri that helped bring down a college President (Trachtenberg 2018)—and this isn’t even to mention the international arena (Kilcline 2017). In the wake of the police killing of George Floyd in Minneapolis, Minnesota in May 2020, race-based athletic mobilization reached previously unimaginable heights with never-before-seen player strikes (Williams 2022), forays into electoral politics such as the 2020 Senate election in Georgia (Delevoye 2021), and anti-racist initiatives from sports leagues themselves (Blair and Wright 2022).<sup>1</sup>

There are, of course, reasons to be cautious about the embrace of race-based activism by the athletic establishment, as well as to be careful about overstating the accomplishments of protest or underestimating the impact of reactionary backlash. But there should be no doubt that the athletic activism of our era is broader and more sustained than any sport-based movement since the anti-apartheid movement against South African sport in the 1960s and 1970s (Booth 1998) or the African American Olympic protest movement that resulted in the iconic clenched-fist victory stand demonstration of Tommie Smith and John Carlos at the Mexico City Games in 1968 (Bass 2004; Hartmann 2003a).

The emergence of this movement provides a unique opportunity to rethink the power and operation of sport as a cultural-political force in contemporary social life. Indeed, this paper is based upon the notion that an analysis of this overt effort to leverage sport in service of larger agendas of social change and racial justice—and of reactions and responses to this activism—can help us to see both where and how sport is most impactful as a social, cultural, and political force as well as what limitations and constraints it comes up against. Our core claim is that a close, cultural

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<sup>1</sup> See also: Given, K. (2020) “Athletes Take a Leading Role in Black Lives Matter Protests” WBUR. June 6; Mazzeo, M. (2020) “Justin Anderson opens up about peacefully protesting with Jaylen Brown, Malcolm Brogdon” Yahoo! Sports. June 3; Schultz, K. (2020) Natasha Cloud celebrates Mystics’ call for justice for Jacob Blake. *Outsports*. August 27.



analysis of contemporary race-based athletic activism shows that the socio-cultural force of sport lies not in its ability to bring about concrete, institutional change but rather in its capacity to symbolically represent and bring widespread public attention to social issues that are otherwise contentious or difficult to publicly acknowledge and engage.

Our analysis begins from the claim that sport is a prominent public platform of and for the performance of protest made possible by the unique features of the sporting world and media coverage of it. We center the agency of athletes in this context. However, we also believe it is important to realize that sport protest and social messaging is also structured and constrained by a range of contingent factors, including both public reception and institutional responses, as well as underlying ideals and beliefs about sport's appropriate role in society. We catalog these factors and sketch the ways in which they shape the meaning and impact of protest performances, and are themselves key forces in a larger social drama of resistance and response enacted in the athletic arena. Ultimately we argue that it is the dynamic of struggle—rather than just the performance of protest—that is dramatized for public audiences in and through sport. This analysis is developed out of existing and emerging research, including some of our own, on activism and politics surrounding sport, race/racism, and social change in the BLM era. We place these materials in dialog with sport scholarship on the cultural politics of sport, cultural sociology on the civic sphere as a contested performative space, and race-critical sociology.

## Existing Literature, Analytic Goals, and Theoretical Foundations

A rich literature on the race-based athletic activism of the past decade has emerged, much of it produced by a diverse new generation of sport scholars and public intellectuals (cf. Cooper 2021; Bryant 2018). There is now a great deal of research on how athletes participate in activism and the social conditions that constrain and enable their actions (Ferguson and Davis 2019; Houghteling, and Dantzer 2019; Niven 2021; Sanderson, Frederic, and Stokes 2016; Cunningham, et al., 2019; Cooper et al. 2019a, b). In the contemporary era, for example, sport-based activism has been driven by athlete's connections to larger Black Lives Matter movements, as seen in their direct participation in protests across the US and world. Central among the wide-ranging contributions of this work is the explication of the power of sport as a platform for resistance and political expression, especially from a Black perspective (Cunningham and Gill 2016; Trimbur 2019; see also Towler et al. 2020), and situating this protest as part of the larger, progressive legacy of sport as a site of resistance and change (Donnelly and Gruneau 2019; Nauright and Wiggins, eds. 2017).

The analysis that follows draws heavily from this scholarship as well as emerging work on various reactions and responses to athletic activism including public opinion, mass media coverage, institutional responses, and Right-wing backlash. Our own original research and analysis on both athletic activism and responses to that activism are also incorporated. It is important to emphasize, however that this project is not intended as a comprehensive empirical treatment; rather, we offer a new theoretical orientation and synthesis. One of our goals, for example, is to explain



how expressions of protest emanate from the unique properties of athletic participation and media coverage of sport. Another is to situate this activism and the messages of resistance, dissent, and solidarity that are conveyed through sport in the broader social, institutional, and cultural contexts within which they are processed and made impactful (or not). More generally, we hope to provide a framework for capturing the broad meaning, significance, and impact of racial contestation in and around sport as well as for conducting future research of sport in society.

Our retheorization begins from a well-developed body of sport scholarship on the “cultural politics” of sport. At the core of this work are two insights: first, the recognition that sport is reflective of and, thus, representative of all manner of social issues, identities, and ideologies; and second, that the cultural prominence of sport and media attention devoted to it make sport’s social qualities—in this case those related to racial images, ideologies, and meanings—distinctly powerful as a symbolic and communicative form, impactful far beyond the bounds of the sporting world itself.

The cultural politics of sport are typically deployed, often via Foucaultian or Marxian frames, to demonstrate sport’s often unseen role in the reproduction of the social status quo, dominant categories of identity and belonging, and the legitimation of power and privilege. In contrast, the case of race-based athletic activism allows us to explore the possibilities for strategic resistance and change that are also present in thinking of sport as a dramaturgical, communicative form. Here, we are guided by an understanding of sport as a “contested racial terrain,” in the Gramscian tradition championed by Stuart Hall (1994) and CLR James (2013). This critical cultural orientation helps us bring out the twin facts that (a) ideas about and representations of race, racism, and racial change in sport are not singular or fixed but conflicted and multifaceted, and (b) that these complicated, conflicted representations and assemblages are, themselves, recognized, actively discussed, and struggled over by athletes, reporters, fans, and leaders of the athletic establishment for all to see (see also, Carrington 2010; Hartmann 2000).

Jeffrey Alexander’s cultural sociology of the civil sphere (2006; 2011) is another primary theoretical touchstone for this project. The civil sphere is, for Alexander, a realm of performative display and communication of various social and political interests, ideologies, and formations in a democratic context. Particularly useful for our sport case is Alexander’s understanding of the civil sphere as fraught with contestation and conflict (on race, see also Ostertag and Diaz 2017) as well as his (2004) pragmatist framing of political expression as a dialectic of strategic action in and through the ritualized structure of politics.

Alexander’s cultural conception of a contested civil sphere fits well with a dramaturgical understanding of sport as deployed in Trygve Broch and Eivind Skille’s work on athletics and political legitimacy (2019). We draw and build on Broch’s (2020) skillful application of, and advocacy for a cultural sociology of sports—a meaning centered theoretical framework that takes seriously how culture-structures shape the social and material worlds of sports. In analyzing how the meaning of handball shapes gendered life in Norway, Broch shows that sport is not just ritual, but performance; and that actors and audiences join in the dramaturgy of putting culture into action. Crucially, Broch demonstrates that the enchantment and solidarity



which emerges from mundane and public sporting performances, dramas, and narratives cannot be assumed to just reproduce inequality, but can also be a source of legitimation for projects of democracy and gender equality.

In adapting Alexander and Broch's theories to the case of race-based athletic activism, we offer three extensions. First, we identify the cultural codes and ritualistic conventions that mark sport as a unique and uniquely powerful institutional context for activism and protest. In addition to centering athlete agency, we reengage certain classical dramaturgical scholarship. We also highlight the deep ideological structure of sport itself with respect to politics and colorblind, meritocratic ideals about race. Our second contribution has to do with context and contingencies. Our basic insight here is that the social and institutional dynamics surrounding the performance and reception of protest in sport are even more complicated and externally constrained than Alexander's basic civil sphere binaries allow, decisively shaping both the meaning and consequence of activist interventions. Finally, and perhaps most ambitiously, we harken back to Gramscian theories to argue that what is dramatized in and through the sporting arena is not the performance of protest per se, but a larger dynamic of protest and counter-protest, of reaction, reform and repair, of social struggle itself.

The paper proceeds as follows. The first part will explicate the ways in which athletes make use of the public platform of sport for the performance of protest and cultural-political resistance. In the next section, we identify and catalog the array of contingencies, constraints, and contexts that structure this activism, with an eye toward assessing how it is received and the extent to which it has been impactful in a highly polarized political climate. In the third and final section, we provide a sketch of the overarching dramaturgical synthesis that results—what might be considered, to deploy another of Alexander's formulations, an argument for a "strong" theory of the cultural power and specificity of sport as a social-political force. We conclude with a discussion of the broader lessons for sport scholarship and theories of culture and politics.

## Athlete Agency

One of the most important insights from recent research on athletic activism is that athletes are the central and indispensable agents of a performance and presentation of social issues in and through sport. It is the statements and actions of athletes—not the messaging of league officials, sports media, or other actors in the athletic arena—that drive sport to be a platform for social engagement (see Kaufman and Wolff 2010). In this section, we center athlete agency to demonstrate how counter-hegemonic or subaltern narratives about the social world and sport itself are constructed and conveyed. Informed by Jeffrey Alexander's explication of the cultural pragmatics of political performance in the civil sphere (2004), we pay particular attention to how the strategic action of protest and political dissent is structured in and through the resources, norms, customs, and conventions of the sporting arena—what Alexander might describe as the ritualistic qualities, codes, or capacities of sport.



*Bodily Displays and Demonstrations* Bodies are central to all social performance in sport. Bodily interaction during play, presentation of body types through dress, the regulated location of bodies on the field, bodies exerting celebrated physical actions, and audience's evaluation of bodies are all part of sporting dramas and a key source of symbolic meaning making. With this in mind, one of the most prominent ways that athletes use sport to call attention to wider racial injustice and demonstrate solidarity with racial justice movements is through symbolic gestures on fields of play. In these moments, athletes use their bodies to implement a disruptive social performance, thus, contesting the expected sacred sporting codes and social meanings embedded in the cultural structure of sport. As a result, athletes shift the stage of sport away from pure escapist entertainment by inserting visions of Black subjectivity, critiques of nationalism, and calls for substantive social inclusion into sporting dramas.

For example, on November 30th, 2014, three months after Michael Brown was killed by Ferguson, MO police officer Darren Brown, five Black players from the St. Louis Rams used the ritual of pre-game starting lineup announcements to express frustration with a grand jury's decision to not indict Wilson. On national television and in a stadium with 55,000 people in attendance, Stedman Bailey, Tavon Austin, Jared Cook, Chris Givens, and Kenny Britt collectively emerged from the tunnel and onto the field doing the "Hands Up, Don't Shoot", a saying and gesture that had become a common rallying cry among protestors in Ferguson and around the country. Instead of running, they walked. Instead of jumping and waving their arms to increase fan noise, they stood still and held their arms up steadily. Under spotlights, machine-induced fog, and hype-up music, these five athletes used their bodies to upend the expected performances associated with a pre-game ritual in the NFL (Sports Illustrated Wire 2014).

Similar disruptive actions have occurred at other levels of competitive sport across the past decade. For example, one day prior to the pre-game performance of solidarity by the Ferguson Five, Ariyana Smith, a Black woman and basketball player/student at Knox College, made the "Hands-Up Don't Shoot" gesture during the pre-game national anthem. She was motivated by frustration with Knox College and its athletic department's lack of recognition of the BLM Movement just twenty minutes away from Ferguson, MO. After the anthem finished, she walked over to the American flag, kneeled, and collapsed to the ground, and lay there for four and a half minutes to represent Mike Brown being left on the street for 4.5 hours after being killed. Having centered her body for political expression, Smith offered a Black power salute and walked out of the gym (Minor 2014).

Such demonstrations should, extending from Alexander, be situated within the broader cultural conventions and performative structure of American sporting rituals. In a routine pre-game social performance, athletes do dynamic stretching and warm-up drills while wearing team and league-sponsored athletic gear. They are expected to convey hyper-focus on a sporting task, preparation for competitive sporting conflict, and commitment to their respective teams. During the pre-game portion of televised sporting events there are frequent cut-ins to show athletes during this time of preparation. With this visibility, the minutes before an official game



begins are a prime moment of opportunity for athletes to use the stage of sport to express alternative social messages.

Pre-game demonstrations and gestures, enacted at these crucial, dramatic moments, break with expected meaning, messages, and performances. These displays force fans and other audiences and organizational leaders to engage with the experiences of Black victims, racial justice movements, policing, and the personhood/political voice of Black athletes. Following these actions sports and general news media outlets at the national, local, and international levels, such as Sports Illustrated, ESPN, CBS News, Al Jazeera, CNN, Washington Post, The Guardian, The Nation, USA Today, and Quad Cities News ABC (Illinois), further amplify these messages by summarizing the purpose of these protests and documenting how organizations such as the NFL and Knox College responded.

*Clothing* Sports apparel, often taken for granted as a physical object used to symbolically reinforce team identification or brand advertising, is also a crucial object available to alteration and the expression of counter-hegemonic cultural styles (Hebdige 1979). Distinctive within broader fields of fashion and anti-fashion (Polhemus 2011, a (see Polhemus 2011), athlete. an official sports uniform represents a certain form of conformity athletes are required to wear uniforms as markers of their usual role or roles in the athletic arena and their broader symbolic meaning and function. Yet, athlete activists can modify the standard sports uniform for the purpose of social protest and inserting criticisms of the racial status quo into the public eye. In short, they use clothing as a tool to disrupt audience expectations, center racial injustice and call attention to anti-Black state violence during the pre-game warm-ups.

In 2015, Black NFL and NBA players used pre-game warm-ups to bring attention to the case of Eric Garner, a Black man who was killed by a NYPD police officer via chokehold during an arrest for selling loose cigarettes. Garner's last words, "I can't breathe", were made known to the world after video footage of the event went viral. On December 4th, 2014, the NYPD officer was not indicted, and a wave of protests followed across the United States. Black athletes such as Derrick Rose, Kobe Bryant, Davin Joseph, Reggie Bush, Johnson Bademosi, and entire NBA teams wore "I Can't Breathe" t-shirts over their official sporting jerseys (Adande 2014).

WNBA players have been at the forefront of using clothing to communicate their feelings and ideas about anti-black police violence. Prior to the beginning of the 2020 season, which took place in a "bubble" in Florida due to Covid-19, the WNBA players amplified the BLM movement and Black women who were victims of police violence. In pre-game, all players wore black warm-up shirts with "Black Lives Matter" written on the front and "Say Her Name" on the back (Close and Riles 2020). During the game, players wore jerseys with the name of Breonna Taylor, an EMT who was killed by plainclothes Louisville police officers during a no-knock warrant, printed on the back.<sup>2</sup> In late August 2020, following video of Kenosha police shooting Jacob Blake in the back, the entire Washington Mystics

<sup>2</sup> Gibbs, L. (2020) "The WNBA will #SayHerName. This is why." Power Power Plays. July 25. <https://www.powerplays.news/p/the-wnba-will-sayhername-this-is-why> (Accessed December 18, 2021).





team—players, coaches, staff—stood at center court arm-in-arm and each wearing a plain white t-shirts with letters that collectively spelled out “JACOB BLAKE.” On the back of each shirt seven holes were cut out and outlined in red ink to represent each time Blake was shot (Harvey 2020). For an entire WNBA season, WNBA players changed the expected pre-game ritual through performances of dissent. Through these performances, that relied on uniform modification, they refused to separate basketball from the lived experiences of Black women and systemic racism.

*Anthems and Other Rituals* The national anthem is a pre-game ritual that has become routine throughout American sport, especially post 9/11. Dominant codes of nationalism, honor, sacrifice, courage, and pride are performed and celebrated. In line with Victor Turner’s classic work on ritual (1974), the sequences of actions and symbols that surround the national anthem at sporting events serve as a mechanism to maintain a particular social solidarity (see also: Macaloon 1984; McDonald 2020; Turner 1995). Athletes are expected to be stoic, still, and convey deference to the sacred nationalistic ritual by interacting with symbols such as the U.S. flag and national anthem in a way that reinforces dominant values and formational myths about the meaning of America. Yet, these components of the pre-game ritual also serve as multi-vocal symbols that are “capable of more than one interpretation, hence becoming a possible cause of conflict as different groups attempt to have their particular definition adopted as the standard” (Miller 2017). Thus, the national anthem represents another prime pre-game space and performative opportunity for athletes to challenge established understandings of equality, racial injustice, and nation. The kneeling of former San Francisco 49ers quarterback Colin Kaepernick during the 2016 NFL season is perhaps the most famous and influential such gesture.

Initially, Kaepernick sat while the national anthem played prior to a pre-season game in protest of police officers receiving no legal punishment after physically killing or injuring Black people such as Freddie Gray, Mario Woods, and Alton Sterling (Zirin 2021).<sup>3</sup> Kaepernick explained that he did not feel pride in a nation that oppresses Black people and other people of color. After consulting with military veteran and former NFL player Nate Boyer, Kaepernick began kneeling during the national anthem as a way to demonstrate respect for military service members while still protesting against racism in America. Kaepernick continued to kneel throughout the 2016 season.<sup>4</sup> By kneeling during this seemingly sacred moment, Kaepernick turned a symbolic celebration into a site of political contestation, shifting attention from nationalism and sporting fun to systemic racial oppression and police brutality.

The political, cultural, and media fervor that Kaepernick’s actions caused reveals the power of an athlete’s social performance during an otherwise routine athletic

<sup>3</sup> See also: Walker, R. (2018) One year later, Steve Wyche reflects on breaking the Colin Kaepernick story. *Andscape*. August 28. <https://andscape.com/features/one-year-later-steve-wyche-colin-kaepernick-story/>

<sup>4</sup> Witz, S. (2016). “This Time, Colin Kaepernick Takes a Stand by Kneeling.” *New York Times*. September 1, 2016. <https://www.nytimes.com/2016/09/02/sports/football/colin-kaepernick-kneels-national-anthem-protest.html> (Accessed December 8, 2021); Wyche, S. (2016) “Colin Kaepernick explains why he sat during national anthem” *NFL.com*. August 27. <https://www.nfl.com/news/colin-kaepernick-explains-why-he-sat-during-national-anthem-0ap3000000691077> (Accessed December 2, 2022).





ritual. Athletes in professional, collegiate, and youth sports knelt in protest of racism across American sporting fields over the coming years (Zirin 2021). Some went even further. In July 2020, the Seattle Storm and New York Liberty of the WNBA walked off the court while the anthem played as an act of solidarity with the Black Lives Matter movement (Thuy Vo 2020). In June 2020, many players from the National Women's Soccer League (NWSL) kneeled during the national anthem (West 2020). NBA players also collectively took the knee during the national anthem as the NBA returned to play in the "bubble" (Brito 2020). Suffice to say, the playing of the national anthem provides a multi-vocal moment and rite that American athletes can tap into, reinterpret, and use as a way to express dissent and demonstrate solidarity with larger social justice movements.

*Athlete Voices in Traditional Media Settings* Pre-game interactions and ritualized ceremonies are not the only stage where athletes can resist racial oppression. Post-game and pre-game press conferences and interviews with local and national sports media also provide platforms where athletes disrupt assumed cultural codes and send powerful social messages. And in this context the emphasis shifts from bodies to voices. In one of the earliest such examples, in July 2016, Maya Moore, Rebekkah Brunson, Lindsey Whalen, and Seimone Augustus held a pre-game press conference to explain why they were wearing shirts that said, "Change Starts With Us", "Justice and Accountability", "Black Lives Matter" and the names of Alton Sterling and Philando Castille, along with the Dallas Police Department emblem. Moore and Brunson, in particular, directly called for the end of racial profiling, senseless violence, and to shared their own frustrations with the realities of racism in the US as Black women (Shoichet and Martin 2016).

While the Lynx used the in-arena press conference to speak directly about local and national incidents of police brutality, other athletes asserted their agency and political voice through actions of refusal. In late July 2016, WNBA players from the New York Liberty and the Indiana Fever refused to answer any questions pertaining to basketball from media members before or after the game (Bieler 2016). They made this decision after the WNBA initially fined players for wearing black t-shirts that conveyed concerns about police violence instead of wearing team/brand-sponsored apparel. Tamika Catchings, a Black woman, made clear that players would not be confined to just speaking about basketball. In 2020, NBA players implemented a similar strategy with media as their season in the bubble began. Instead of answering questions about basketball, star and role players from multiple teams, such as Marcus Smart, Jaylen Brown, Jerami Grant, Tobias Harris, Alex Caruso, and C.J. McCollum, responded with statements that all included the phrase "Justice for Breonna Taylor." Each player summarized the case, shared their conversations with



and support for the Taylor family, and/or demanded that the attorney general arrest the police officers responsible for Taylor's death (Feldman 2020).

In each of these cases, athletes individually and collectively enacted unexpected social performances that countered normative expectations and conventions of sports press conferences or post-game media scrambles. Such media interactions generally have a standard flow where media members ask players to share their reflections about certain plays, individual performances, the game as a whole, and muse about broader sporting narratives about the season. Athletes, in turn, are expected to answer these questions through clichés or deep introspection, along the way affirming cultural ideals of work-ethic, courage, teamwork, sporting execution, tactical strategy, desire to overcome sporting obstacles, gratitude for the opportunity to play the game, and/or praise for the opponent. These interaction rituals are economically important for leagues, players, and TV networks as pre- and post-game variations are actually written into media rights deals and collective bargaining agreements to provide content for sports journalists and other sports entertainment outlets. Yet, through a creative strategy of selective refusal, athletes inserted their political voice and forced all ranges of sports media to publish information about systemic racism, police brutality, no-knock warrants, and the role of the Attorney General—topics sports outlets normally do not engage with.

Athletes have exerted their agency in other media venues as well. Players on the Boston Celtics wrote a piece, published in the *Boston Globe*, criticizing the governor of Massachusetts for failing to regulate facial recognition technology in a police reform bill (Boston Celtics Players 2020). The players stated that they aim to raise public awareness about policing and systemic racism and advocate for changes in law enforcement that improve public safety. Other professional and collegiate athletes have used *The Players' Tribune*—a digital media outlet where athletes write first-person essays about topics of their choosing—to write about race in the United States. Just within the NBA, players have written articles that reject colorblindness, criticize white privilege, highlight the realities of structural racism and interpersonal prejudice in the USA, and call for social change (Manning et al. 2021). NFL and WNBA players have written about the racist and oppressive foundations of America, shared experiences navigating white spaces as a Black person, called for a Juneteenth federal holiday, the need for white people to confront racism, frustrations with people in positions of power responding to racial injustice and social movements with silence, and their own experiences as victims of racial profiling.<sup>5</sup>

<sup>5</sup> See, in order: Charles, Tina (2020) "Change Beyond Surface" *The Players' Tribune*. July 17. <https://www.theplayertribune.com/articles/tina-charles-wnba>; Leslie, L. (2020) "Dear America" *The Players' Tribune*. June 7. <https://www.theplayertribune.com/articles/lisa-leslie-dear-america-racism> (Accessed December 3rd, 2021); Montgomery, R. (2020) "When the W Comes Back, I Won't Be There" *The Players' Tribune*. June 19. <https://www.theplayertribune.com/articles/renee-montgomery-wnba-racial-injustice>; Daniels, Mike (2021) "Juneteenth Should Be a Federal Holiday." *The Players' Tribune*. <https://www.theplayertribune.com/posts/mike-daniels-cincinnati-bengals-nfl-football-juneteenth>;

Thomas, J. (2020) "Just Being 'Not Racist' Is Not Good Enough" *The Players' Tribune*. June 17. <https://www.theplayertribune.com/articles/joe-thomas-systemic-racism-nfl> (Accessed December 12, 2022); Cloud, N. (2020) "Your Silence is a Knee on My Neck" *The Players' Tribune*. <https://www.theplayertribune.com/articles/natasha-cloud-your-silence-is-a-knee-on-my-neck-george-floyd>; Jackson, K. (2020) "It's Time to Get Uncomfortable" *The Players' Tribune*. July 10. <https://www.theplayertribune.com/articles/kareem-jackson-denver-broncos-racial-injustice>.



*Social Media and Podcasts* In addition to strategically using formal digital news platforms, players have actively used social media and their own podcast platforms to offer their socio-political voices (Sanderson et al. 2016; Schmittel et al. 2015). NCAA athletes now regularly use social media to call attention to racism on and off-campus and demand commitment to social change. Nigel Hayes, a former Wisconsin basketball player regularly published thoughts on systemic racism, the criminal justice system, and American history to his 69,000 followers, and Kylin Hill, a running back for Mississippi State, advocated for the state to remove the Confederate emblem from the state flag, tweeting “Either change the flag or I won’t be representing this state anymore.”<sup>6</sup> Kansas State University student athletes made a public statement on Twitter calling attention to how Black students on campus have been impacted by the wave of police killing Black people and acts of interpersonal racism on campus.<sup>7</sup> University of Texas Football players collectively published a statement pushing the University to not only condemn racism but also to change the names of buildings and its alma mater, “Eyes of Texas”, given their racist underpinnings (Giambalvo 2020).

During the protests following the police killing of George Floyd, athletes and former athletes also inserted themselves into podcasts, a medium that has afforded more accessible opportunities for audiences to hear athletes discuss racial inequality.<sup>8</sup> Through these op-eds, social media posts, and podcasts, current and recently retired athletes offered new, creative, and multifaceted expressions of dissent and social consciousness with direct and immediate audiences, expressions of dissent and authentic self-consciousness that play off of and push against both dominant media conventions as well as cultural expectations about athletes and athletics.

*Summary* Athletes are indispensable in the construction of narrative, myth making, solidarity, and enchantment that is embedded into sport. The narratives and codes that surround their performances are generally structured by stable discursive cultural codes that define the sacred and profane aspects of meaningful sport, which affords audiences to narrow focus on a particular flow of event (Broch 2020). In rituals both on the field and within media settings, athletes can perform deference to the nation, reverence to the sport, a hyper-focus on conquering a sporting quest, and in turn enforce a boundary between sport and profane socio-political realities that many audiences expect and celebrate. However, as Broch also notes, sport creates interpretive spaces for people to bend, break, and reshape meaning through culture.

Athlete activists, as we have seen here, enact performances that contest and dramatize struggle over what is coded as sacred, enchanting, and profane. They exert their agency to protest in relation to the temporal, cultural, and interactional ritual patterns of sport. When athletes are not performing athletic feats on the field during

<sup>6</sup> Maraniss, A. (2016) “Wisconsin’s Nigel Hayes on racism, Malcolm X and his new leg tattoo.” *Andscape*. October 10. <https://andscape.com/features/wisconsins-nigel-hayes-on-racism-malcolm-x-and-his-new-leg-tattoo/>; Hill, K. (2020) “Tweet Message” June 22. [https://twitter.com/H\\_Kylin/status/1275128689638936581](https://twitter.com/H_Kylin/status/1275128689638936581).

<sup>7</sup> K-State Student Athletes (2020). “Tweet Message” June 28. [https://twitter.com/kstate\\_athletes/status/1277402142555455488](https://twitter.com/kstate_athletes/status/1277402142555455488) (Accessed December 15, 2021)

<sup>8</sup> Eagles, B. (2020) “Tweet Message” June 12. [https://twitter.com/\\_BrennanEagles\\_/status/1271518098248667139](https://twitter.com/_BrennanEagles_/status/1271518098248667139)



official game play, they strategically utilize other ritual moments within the sporting arena that surround in-game action to exert their socio-political agency. Athletes use and reinterpret symbols that are building blocks of the pre-game or post-game sports ritual and, thus, challenge the social interests, ideals, and solidarities that such sacred rituals are assumed to produce. This is done by kneeling, raising a fist, putting one's hands up, wearing a t-shirt about the realities of anti-black racist violence during warm-ups and while on the bench, or re-directing post-game press conferences away from questions about sporting action and toward the realities of racism. For some audiences, these actions are read as profane and a dramatic pollution of the sacred sporting space; other audiences may be enchanted by the iconic athlete dramatically invoking a tradition of athletic activism grounded in a sacred moral desire for sport to be a model and ally for a racially egalitarian society. Regardless of audience reception, these agentic social performances are evidence of athletes skillfully playing with symbols and maneuvering cultural scripts within sport to put other forms of culture and counternarratives into the dramatic scene of sport.

## Context and Contingencies

There is a tendency among liberal and progressive-minded sport scholars to romanticize sport-based protest—to take the agentic actions of athletic activists at face value and assume that the mere expression of dissent is, in and of itself, impactful. This is problematic for several reasons. One is because, as with any social movement, it can be difficult to translate this activity and these messages into institutional reform or broader structural transformation (Staggenborg 2016). A second problem is that such activism is as likely to provoke backlash and opposition as it is to garner new sympathy among the general public, policy makers, political leaders, opinion leaders, and others not already inclined to be supportive of athlete activists and their positions (Cf. Braunstein 2022). In other words, audiences react to protest in tremendously varied, often unexpected ways.

These concerns map onto the general sociological truism, elaborated by theorists such as Giddens and Bourdieu, that agency is always constrained or “structured.” This truism certainly applies to political action in and through sport. For researchers, the meanings that are received and the various complicated, contingent ways in which different audiences and institutional actors translate these ideas into action (or not) requires data and analysis well beyond the expression of dissent itself. To a certain extent, this insight is already built into the discussion of athlete agency above in our focus on how the actions fits in and works off of existing features of the sports world—bodies, ritualistic practices both on and off the field, the role of media and social media. In Alexander's (2006) cultural pragmatist terms, this is the dynamic between strategy and ritual, action in and through structure. Yet we believe the ways in which and the extent to which athletic activism is structured—socially and institutionally as well as ideologically—are far broader and sport specific than we have captured so far.

In the following section we identify aspects of reception and response to athletic activism that are crucial to constructing a sophisticated cultural analysis of



contemporary race-based activism: (1) media coverage and framing; (2) audience reception—including both general public opinion and broader commentary; (3) backlash and counter-protests; (4) establishment leaders; and, (5) the deep ideological structure of sport itself. Taken as a whole, these constitute a provisional framework for theorizing the full field of action and response that constitutes the dramas of racial struggle enacted in and through the athletic arena for public consumption.

*Media Coverage and Framing* We have already highlighted the vital role that media play in helping athletes bring messages about race to broader social prominence. Literatures in sociology and communication studies have established sport's media prominence as key to sport's outsized social influence, especially in terms of delivering and amplifying social issues to otherwise uninterested or unaware audiences (Antunovic 2022). Framing is another crucial aspect of how media coverage of sport and social issues operates. In this vein, sport scholars have begun to document the ways in which race-based activism has been framed by various sport media, often attending to stereotypes and biases that creep into coverage or structural issues that may be missing or marginalized (Marsten 2021; Boycoff and Carrington 2020).

Communication researchers are also tracking the emergence of new media conventions, norms, and practices. One recent change is that mainstream sports journalism is increasingly attentive and committed to reporting on race-based activism (and social issues generally). In contrast to earlier generations who saw social topics as taboo, a new generation of sports writers have emerged who take it as their role to report on social issues in and around sport (Broussard 2020; Schmidt 2018). On the other hand, scholars have also documented the emergence of more conservative voices in the sporting/media landscape (Falcous, Hawson, and Neuman 2019). It is important to analyze the extent and effects of these recent changes, and whether negative framing of and/or explicit opposition to sport-based racial activism and media coverage is driven by negative reactions to all race-based organizing in the BLM era, or by traditional norms and beliefs about politics as simply not appropriate in the realm of sports—the “shut up and dribble” sentiment infamously voiced by Fox News host Laura Ingraham in response to LeBron James criticizing President Trump (see Manning et al. 2021). In any case, media coverage and framing are powerful drivers of the broader impact of all forms of athletic activism.

*Audience Reception* How various public audiences perceive and respond to athletic activism is another factor that shapes the meaning and potential impacts of athletic activism. Sports researchers have taken a number of different approaches to assessing public perceptions. Traditional public opinion polling with new survey items have proven extremely helpful in both tracking trends (Allision, Knoester, and Ridpath 2021; Johnson et al 2020; Smith and Tryce 2019) and in assessing the social determinants of attitudes (Frederick et al. 2019). Interviewing has also been used to delve deeper into expectations, understandings, and views that help account for these patterned social responses (Chaplin and Montez de Oca 2019). Response patterns are being tracked and analyzed in several other creative ways as well—for example, via social media reactions (Marsh 2021; Montez de Oca and Suh 2020), television ratings (Brown and Sheridan 2020), and economic impacts (Niven 2019; Watanabe, Yan, and Soebbring 2019).



The results of these early studies are enlightening. One basic finding is that race-based athletic protest engenders as much public opposition as it does support; indeed, bifurcated, polarized opinions are perhaps the most prominent and basic pattern (Mueller 2021; Fredericks, et al. 2019). Not surprisingly, race is a key dividing line in attitudes about athletic activism, and pre-existing political beliefs and commitments also play a major role in shaping support or opposition (Niven 2021; Mueller 2021; Intravia, Piquero and Piquero 2018). However, there is also more variability than we might expect. For instance, more white respondents support protest than in previous eras, and Black Americans are far from united in their appraisals. Public opinion scholars have also documented that traditional beliefs about patriotism, competition, and the military remain fairly strong across wide swaths of the population (Knoester and Davis 2022), and that sports media outlets have become somewhat politicized (Peterson and Munoz 2022).

Taken together, these analyses suggest that public opinion about race-based sport protest is driven NOT by attitudes about sport so much as by social background, values and other contextual factors. That is, athletic activism does not change minds so much as it reflects or even reinforces pre-existing beliefs and commitments. On this point, even though researchers have found that conservatives tend to evaluate traditional sports media negatively for their coverage of athletic activism, these “newly politicized attitudes” did not reduce the actual viewing of sport or use of sports media (ibid).

On the other hand, some researchers have detected a more general ambivalence toward sport-based protest. In interviews, Chaplin and Montez de Oca (2019) found some college students want to avoid talking about sport-based protest; similarly, Mueller (2021) has used experimental techniques to reveal reluctance to support protestors among some Black respondents. What is at the root of much of this ambivalence is ideas about sport as a place free of activism, protest, and unrest. Of course, attitudinal change is not the only measure of success; what is also clear is that athletic activism can bring social issues like race and racism to broader public visibility and frame attention, what political scientists have called “agenda seeding” (Wasow 2020).

*Backlash and Opposition* One set of actors in the dramas of athletic protest and response that has so far been overlooked by scholars are the conservative political leaders and media elites who have aggressively positioned themselves against race-based athletic protest. The actions of Donald Trump while on the campaign trail and during his presidency are illustrative.

Trump carved this path while running for office through directly engaging with the aforementioned actions of Colin Kaepernick by suggesting that he “should find a foreman that works better for him” rather than protesting (quoted in Martin & McHendry 2016). As president, Trump upped his criticism of NFL athletes, as well as the league and owners for allowing the protest to continue, going as far as calling for fans to boycott and “leave the stadium” if a single player kneeled.<sup>9</sup> In doing so, he framed the actions of protesting athletes as being “disrespectful to our flag and

<sup>9</sup> Graham, B. (2017) “Donald Trump blasts NFL anthem protesters: ‘Get that son of a bitch off the field.’” *The Guardian*. September 23: <https://www.theguardian.com/sport/2017/sep/22/donald-trump-nfl-national-anthem-protests>.



country,” while also engaging in repeated Twitter feuds with other Black athletes (Graham 2017; Remnick 2017; Serwer 2017). This included an argument with Steph Curry over whether the NBA championship Golden State Warriors were *choosing* not to attend the White House for the traditional celebration or whether Trump had already rescinded the offer, and a back-and-forth with LeBron James referring to Trump as “a bum” in the most retweeted post of 2017. Trump’s attacks were so familiar that a joke about athletes failing to stand for the national anthem even made it into one of his State of the Union addresses (Lockhart 2018).<sup>10</sup>

In these exchanges, Trump moved away from the “strategic breach of patriotism,” as theorized by Montez de Oca & Suh (2020), and questions of who was breaching the sanctity of sport, to direct and personal insults. Nevertheless, Trump’s attacks on athlete activists and the athletic establishment were clearly part of a conservative white nationalism that centered sport for its promotion and public outreach (Andrews 2019; Kusz 2019; see also: Seigel 2019). Trump’s overtly partisan use of sport stands in sharp contrast to the more subtle and unifying use of sport by previous Presidents (Green and Hartmann 2014). And in this mix, the condemnations of athletic activists not only functioned as symbolic shorthand for all manner of racial resentments, the social media exchanges they provoked were—because of the celebrity and prominence of the athletes themselves—key vehicles for inserting the “Make America Great Again” vision in broader public discourse (see also: Hartmann forthcoming).

It should be emphasized that Trump, while the most dominant conservative voice in the contested racial terrain of sport, was not a lone actor. Indeed, the success of his communicative strategies and symbolic shorthand was in part due to how they aligned with other MAGA movement activists and the positive coverage by conservative outlets and their conservative cooption of sports-based rhetoric. The most conservative media outlets such as Breitbart and the Daily Caller aggressively characterize sport, in particularly basketball, as a liberal bastion (see, again, Falcous et al. 2019) while prominent figures on popular *Fox News* programs have received attention for their characterizations of athletes as entitled and not deserving of a political voice (e.g., the aforementioned request for LeBron James to “shut up and dribble”). All of this backlash, opposition, and counter-protest should be seen as part of the larger field of racial contestation and struggle enacted in and through the realm of sport.

*Establishment Responses* Calls for social change in and through sport often run up against both the long-standing complicity of the sporting establishment with capitalism, power, and racial privilege—what Bruce Kidd (2013), in the Olympic context, has described as the tension between the “movement” and the “sport-media complex”—as well as the forces of institutional compromise and cooptation that Omi and Winant (2014) have termed “racial rearticulation.” There is also a history of sports organizations policing protest quite strictly (Rounds 2020). At the same time, recent non-scientific polling (cited in Sparvero and Chalip 2022) suggests that

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<sup>10</sup> It should be noted that Trump’s criticisms and attacks, prompting outrage against him as well: he was booted during appearances at several sporting events, including the World Series which included chants of “Lock Him Up” (AP 2019; Lutz 2019; Romero 2019; for related response, see: Nakamura 2020).





46 percent of industry leaders believe their organizations should take a larger role in anti-racism initiatives, though 58 percent also said their fans didn't want their games and events beset with social messaging. Sport scholars themselves have criticized the ways that athletic leaders have addressed athletic activism under the guise of "woke capitalism" or institutional cooptation (Montez de Oca, Mason, and Ahn 2020; Boycoff and Carrington, 2020). More of this work—sometimes conceptualized as corporate social responsibility (CSR) in sport—is needed, not only to document the institutional impacts of protest but because these reactions and reforms serve to further disseminate and amplify ideas about race, racism, and social change in the culture at large.

There is also research to be done on the effects that Right Wing, ethno-nationalist engagements with sport have on the various institutions of the athletic establishment, and how these organizations responded. The NFL—its owners, its players and the player's union, and the league itself—would be one example. Consider Commissioner Roger Goodell's immediate response to Trump's initial attacks on the league: "Divisive comments like these demonstrate an unfortunate lack of respect for the NFL, our great game and all of our players and a failure to understand the overwhelming force for good our clubs and players represent in our communities." It is no coincidence that the league subsequently embarked on a widely publicized anti-racism initiative (Rugg 2020). Such rhetorical defenses and institutional reforms—which have been undertaken by sports leagues and associations ranging from the NFL and WNBA to the NCAA and even at more local levels—are what Alexander (2004) would call the "repair work" being done by those in the sporting establishment to solidify or re-establish traditional norms and reputations about sport and its role in socio-political processes.

Non-sport actors have also engaged in such repair. Within two days of inauguration, President Biden responded to the passing of baseball great Hank Aaron with a short tribute that equated Aaron's resolve on the field to his resolve in life. Sport, for Biden, served as a reminder of a better place that all Americans could seek to emulate, "[i]t was that each time Henry Aaron rounded the bases, he wasn't just chasing a record, he was helping us chase a better version of ourselves." Later in the year, the Milwaukee Bucks re-started the tradition of the NBA champion visiting the White House. During the visit, Biden praised the Bucks for taking "a stand for justice and peace in the wake of the Jacob Blake shooting in Kenosha, Wisconsin, and you've gotten people engaged."<sup>11</sup>

*The Deep Cultural Structure of Sport* A final factor that significantly structures the meaning and effectiveness of race-based athletic activism involves the cultural norms about and surrounding sport—its idealized status in the public imaginary and ideological conceptions about itself. While a full explication of what might be called the "deep cultural structure" of sport is beyond the scope of this section, we will highlight several key aspects.

<sup>11</sup> <https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefing-room/statements-releases/2021/01/22/statement-of-president-joe-biden-on-the-passing-of-henry-louis-hank-aaron/>; [https://www.espn.com/nba/story/\\_/id/32585734/president-joe-biden-welcomes-nba-champion-milwaukee-bucks-praises-team-off-court-achievements](https://www.espn.com/nba/story/_/id/32585734/president-joe-biden-welcomes-nba-champion-milwaukee-bucks-praises-team-off-court-achievements)



Perhaps the trickiest but most basic dimension of the cultural structure of sport in the contested terrain of race involve sport's complicated relationship to politics—or, more precisely, the combination of deeply rooted ideals about sport, cultural beliefs about politics, and long-standing taboos about the need to keep these two unique socio-institutional fields separate and distinct (Green and Hartmann 2014). As a version of the binary that Alexander says defines civil sphere discourse and practice, these cultural norms tend to idealize sport as a pure and safe, if not sacred socio-cultural sphere that transcends the conflicts and complexities of regular life and, thus, needs to be kept separate from politics which are assumed to be inherently bound up with power, conflict, and struggle. Protest in this schema, race-based and otherwise, is rendered inappropriate as transgressing the space through introducing an extreme and divisive version of politics.

Yet, sport also simultaneously holds itself to a higher set of aspirations or beliefs, a self-satisfied ideology about being an arena of meritocracy, fairness, advancement for the disempowered and all of the better things in life (Serazio 2019). This is especially clear with respect to racial issues where sport in the United States has long claimed—with some justification—to be a leader in progress, social mobility, and justice for ethnic and racial minorities, Black Americans most of all. With respect to these ideals, if activism can make a claim to being above the usual political fray, then supporters should see these causes as not only tolerable but as an extension of sport's larger progressive aspirations. Here, what counts as acceptable racial commentary or calls for change are those that are seen as consensus-oriented and unifying, reflecting fairly traditional Western liberal beliefs about the democratic process as being non-conflictual. Serazio and Thorson (2018), for example, frame opposition to athletic protest as an expression of both a desire for race-neutral, colorblind politics and a more general apolitical vision of sport. In other words, the same juxtaposition of utopian politics and sport ideals that has for so long constituted sport as an arena of racial mobility and integration is key to debates about racial justice and change in and through sport today.

These deep cultural structures are what enables advocacy in certain arenas and on certain topics, but also constitutes the outer limits of sport-based activism and change (see Henderson 2009 with respect to the earlier civil rights movement). The fact that these traditional, liberal-democratic ideals are not widely commented upon, but taken for granted and assumed, deeply embedded in culture and commonsense makes social dynamics in the sporting arena all the more powerful and brings us to Geertz's classic notion of deep play.

## **Synthesis: The Dramatization of Struggle**

In the previous section, we cataloged the institutional actors and socio-cultural forces within, against, and through which athletic activism (and sport-based socio-political expression more generally) is processed and which, in turn, shapes and determines its meaning, broader significance, and impacts. The thrust was to see race-based activism as a part of a larger field of strategic action and response (Nepstad and Kenney 2018) that is proper whole of “the movement,” meanings, and impacts



under study. We are reminded here of Raymond Williams's classic (1980) reframing of culture and social struggle as part of larger field of action including dominant, emergent, and residual forces—and his insistence that these performances, actors, and meanings all be seen as in dialectical motion and interaction with each other.

Such framing calls for a more thorough sociological treatment than we can offer here. But what we want to focus attention on is the symbolic significance of this larger dynamic of athletic protest, reception and response, and change (or the lack thereof). Our argument, is that what is represented, displayed, and dramatized in the public sphere through sport is not just activism and protest, but an entire dynamic of resistance and counter-protest, of reaction and response. What is brought to public attention is not only the existence of racial resistance and critique, but an awareness of the broader societal and cultural struggles playing out, over, and around this topic.

The theoretical foundations for this argument can be found in the culturally oriented, race-critical sociology of thinkers such as Stuart Hall and CLR James. What is distinctive about this Gramscian-inspired body of work is not so much its understanding of the symbolic and dramaturgical importance of popular practices and mass media forces; nor is it just the critical orientation to sport and the standard politics of race and racism in a deeply racialized world. Those insights are both well-developed in the standard cultural politics of sport literature. Rather, what is crucial and unique is their understanding of the deep conflicts, inequalities, and social struggles that mark and define social life itself.

In contrast to the somewhat functionalist, reproduction-focused versions of power and social order that are emphasized in standard performative theories of culture and politics, this more critical orientation leads us to pay attention to the representation of the fundamentally unstable and conflictual nature of social life. In Gramscian terms, it is not order that is put on display (and usually legitimated), but contestation, with all the dynamics of engagement and response and struggles over legitimacy and for hegemony itself that are entailed. “When I entered the domain of politics, I did not have much to learn,” CLR James recalled in his magisterial autobiography *Beyond a Boundary* (1963); this was because he had learned about the social conflicts that constituted the politics of protest and power, deeply and organically in the realm of cricket (Hartmann 2003b).

As previously noted, Alexander makes a good deal of the sacred/profane, insider/outsider binaries that define civil sphere political discourse. Ostertag and Diaz's (2017) useful extension on the dynamics of racialized exclusion implicated in civil sphere discourse and practice meshes well with the race-critical orientation required to understand race-based athletic activism. We think such insights are particularly pronounced when we conceptualize the cultural capacity of an institutional domain as going beyond the political expression or the performance of protest to encompass the whole field of social struggle unfolding therein. Moreover, we think sport is uniquely structured to accentuate those dramas.

The cultural sociologist Joe Gusfield's commentary on the unique dramaturgical characteristics of sport is illustrative. In a little-known piece Gusfield (1987) argued that what is distinctive about sport as a platform for social drama is the “agonistic quality of athletic contests and sporting forms”—more specifically, their emphasis on conflict and competition between two mutually opposed and engaged parties,



only one of which can triumph. Following this insight, we suggest that the sporting arena is uniquely structured so as to display in stark form the racial conflicts and calls for change presented by athletic activists.

Clifford Geertz's notion of deep play takes us even further into the ways in which audiences react and respond to the dramas played out in athletic arenas. At the core of Geertz's analysis is the claim that deep play cultural forms are passionately engaged even while simultaneously minimized as trivial and not meaningful. The power of the cockfight in Bali, Geertz's famous case, derived from and, thus, took its significance from the ways in which it was tied up with local kinship and village ties which everyone engaged with and reified even as the deeper cultural significance of the event was only vaguely apprehended and understood.<sup>12</sup> Or, more directly, sport can be the subject of heavy investment (whether time, energy, emotion, or money) and still be viewed as a place not worthy of serious thought and conscious and critical engagement (including the words of the fields most visible actors, the athletes).

Taken together, then, what is revealed and dramatized in and through sport are the dynamics of social resistance, counter-resistance, and the contestation of power itself. The racial-political dramas initiated by athlete activists do not necessarily change anyone's minds; however, they do focus attention to issues and social dynamics public audiences might otherwise minimize or miss altogether. Further, they endow this attention with deeper emotional meaning and significance than in more standard political contexts or forms—all effects that are amplified and expanded by the media coverage and cultural prominence of sport itself. Protest is performed; it is received, responded to, and struggled against; and this larger dynamics of racial resistance, struggle, and change are displayed for the world to see, learn from, and reflect upon. This dramaturgical function is the core cultural power and function of sport.<sup>13</sup>

## Conclusion

As with all social movements research, there are perennial questions in the study of sport-based activism about impact, outcome, and accomplishments (Davis-Delano and Crossett 2008). In the context of current, race-based athletic activism many of these have centered around the mobilizations that appear to be most “successful” in terms of institutional reforms or socio-political transformations—the Missouri football players boycott (Yan, Pegru, and Watanabe 2018; Brooks 2016; Trachtenberg 2018), for example, or the more recent role of the WNBA in the 2020 Senate elections in Georgia (Delevoe 2021).

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<sup>12</sup> Back in the 1980s post-structuralist, deconstructionist days of anthropology, Clifford Geertz was criticized for not taking the self-consciousness of the villagers seriously (see Crapanzano 1986). It is indeed important to think through the implications of the agency and subjectivity of those we are studying, particularly in colonial and other marginalized contexts. Nevertheless, we also think Geertz was offering a larger analytic notion that is important: how cultural forms exert their impacts without full, explicit, self-consciousness awareness of their multifaceted dimensions and impacts.

<sup>13</sup> For more on the performative and dramaturgical qualities of sport, albeit in the Olympic context, see MacAloon 1984.



Such assessments are important in terms of helping to document the independent, material effects of sport-based protest for bringing about concrete, institutional change; however, they can also be somewhat misleading. For one thing, such investigations have typically had difficulty isolating any actual independent, irreducible sporting effect(s). This may be because sport-based protest does not necessarily do a lot on its own in the first place—it doesn't appear to change people's minds, nor bring about a great deal of clear, measurable change in sport or in society through sport. Stacey Abrams and her democratic organizers were working on the 2021 Senate race in Georgia well before WNBA players got involved in the Warnock campaign; similarly, protests against racism at the University of Missouri, led by the Black student union, were already at a fever pitch when the football team entered the fray. None of this is unusual or surprising. Social change is always hard, and concrete, societal change through sport in other societal domains typically requires other, non-sport actors, activists, organizations, and resources. As discussed, such change also often runs up against both the institutional complicity of the sporting establishment with capitalism, power, and racial privilege as well as the realities of white backlash, apathy and cooptation, and racial rearticulation.

What is perhaps most problematic with such assessments is that they typically neglect the power and social significance of sport as a dramaturgical form. This shortcoming is the essence of the corrective this paper offers. Building from established theories of the cultural politics of sport, we have tried to illustrate and explicate sport's distinctive ability to dramatize and display, for large public audiences, racial activism and resistance, how it is structured, and the dynamics of reception and response to it. Through the platform of sport, athlete activists (and others in the sporting establishment) can call attention to controversial topics, issues, and claims, get them on the public agenda, in the discourse, and in people's minds.

It is indeed athletes, the players themselves, who are the starting point for and at the center of these dramas. They are the performers who launch the dramas. Any doubt about the central, agentic role of athletes themselves can be addressed by considering the case of Maya Moore: During her playing days, the WNBA star was an amazingly effective leader in the fight against police brutality and the mass imprisonment of Black men including helping to reveal the wrongful conviction of her now-husband Jonathan Irons; however, once she stopped playing basketball to participate in the wrongful conviction case of her now-husband Jonathan Irons, the mainstream media was no longer enthralled. She and her message fell off the stage and out of public attention (McCleren and Fisher 2021).

However, it is not just athletic dissent that is expressed and publicly performed in and through sport; indeed, it is the entire social dynamic of resistance and reception, counter-resistance, institutional reaction, and reform that are made visible and, thus, symbolically significant. Sport puts these social struggles in a concrete, tangible form which can be engaged, and powerfully experienced by attentive audiences, even if only vaguely understood. Just as Geertz said about the Balinese cockfight or *King Lear*, these are artistic cultural forms which gather together themes, organize our sensations, and put some cultural order on an otherwise messy world. They don't, as Geertz insisted, change anything; but they do bring a very real and



significant level of attention and also emotional attachment to issues that might otherwise be missed.

Sport's impacts, in short, are symbolic, expressive, communicative—creating awareness (or consciousness raising or issue salience), framing topics, and bringing out deep, if often polarized or polarizing reactions and responses to it. In many respects this argument—whose roots also include recent work on political legitimation in and through sport—can be understood as a variation on Jeffrey Alexander's civil sphere argumentation applied to the case of protest and sport. We have also tried to identify the defining social characteristics, institutional conventions, cultural codes, and ideological underpinnings that are available to athletic activists and that define how Americans think about and engage the sporting form itself. In emphasizing social context and contingencies we have also tried to insist that the meaning and significance of athletic protest and activism are both more complicated and less determined than is usually realized. Furthermore, specific communities, institutional structures, and organizational gatekeepers are as much a part of the field of protest, politics, and performance of race as anything or anyone else, both our primary object of study and the social “thing” that is put on display and dramatized for broad public audiences.

All of the factors and forces we have outlined are needed for making sense of the recent race-based activism in and around sport as well as understanding the broader power and more general significance of sport as an irreducible, relatively autonomous, and uniquely dramaturgical and communicative cultural form. Even in the most famous and consequential protest events such as the 2015 Missouri football boycott, we suspect the largest impact was not in terms of reforms at the University itself, but in terms of how aware of racial unrest other college presidents and political leaders became, and the lessons they drew from it. More broadly, we believe this dramaturgical framework is applicable to a whole range of social issues and activist agendas we can only mention here—gender equity, Title IX and the fight for equal pay in women's soccer; human rights, labor issues and social inequality; climate change and environmentalism; mental health; sexual harassment, coercion, and assault; and, most recently and controversially, the struggle over transgender athletes. Future studies in all of these cases will want to pay attention to the emergence of more conservative athletic activists and messages and the struggles they bring with them, as well as whether the norms and conventions dictating the relationships among sport, politics, and protest are changing as a result. But the bottom line and core insight is to see sport as a site of social struggles whose meanings and significance extend well beyond the boundaries of sport itself.

It is easy to see social issues in the realm of sport as mere microcosms or reflections of broader societal phenomena, or dismiss them as grandstanding or moral panics. But for us, sport provides a crucial point of engagement, where large numbers of Americans, both in sport and outside of sport, learn about, experience, and process these issues. And the fact that the political significance of popular cultural forms like sport is so often minimized or dismissed by both participants and analysts as meaningless play or mere entertainment only makes them all the more potent.



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