

ABSTRACT

Title of Dissertation: SPORT, RACE, AND GRASSROOTS ACTIVISM:
A CONTEXTUAL ANALYSIS OF COLIN
KAEPERNICK'S KNOW YOUR RIGHTS
CAMP AS A SPORTING SOCIAL MOVEMENT
ORGANIZATION

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This dissertation engages Know Your Rights Camp for Black Liberation (KYRC) – founded and led by athlete-activist Colin Kaepernick – as a case study for critically analyzing the contemporary intersections of sport, race, and grassroots activism. Among other related initiatives, KYRC hosts “camps” across the U.S. designed to facilitate empowerment, solidarity, and critical education about structural racism for Black and Brown youth in marginalized communities. KYRC is illustrative of the recent resurgence of sporting activism in the 2010s and early 2020s, in conjunction with the broader Black Lives Matter (BLM) social movement. Not only is Kaepernick a symbolic figure of both athletic protest and Black resistance more generally in this era, but KYRC is representative of how contemporary sporting activism has evolved in more radical, coordinated, and grassroots directions. Because these emerging sporting initiatives more closely resemble the character of social movements organizations than traditional sport-for-development or sporting philanthropy initiatives, I propose conceptualizing these grassroots

organizations as Sporting Social Movement Organizations (SMOs). Borrowing from social movement frameworks, I examine KYRC as a Sporting SMO, defined as an organization that utilizes its connection to sport or athletes to pursue social, political, or cultural change in a coordinated, strategic, and sustained manner.

While scholars within Physical Cultural Studies and related fields have outlined the historical significance of and public reactions to this resurgence in sporting activism, there remains a considerable lack of theoretically and empirically rigorous research into Sporting SMOs, let alone with data collected in collaboration with organizations that can speak to their inner workings and on-the-ground mechanics. This project fills these gaps. The underlying research question is: *in what ways, and within what broader sociopolitical contexts, does Know Your Rights Camp conduct grassroots sporting activism?* First, based on in-depth interviews with KYRC associates, content analysis of KYRC's social media, and textual analyses of KYRC's public-facing pedagogical documents, I conduct a micro- and meso-level sociological analysis of KYRC's mechanics, logics, strategies, messages, tensions, and challenges of KYRC's model of grassroots activism. Second, based in the methods of radical contextualism and articulation, I conduct a macro-level cultural studies analysis of the social, political, economic, historical, technological, and ideological contexts within which KYRC is situated. Overall, this dissertation contains a precise sociological analysis of what KYRC is and does, as well as a broader cultural studies analysis of what KYRC tells us about sport, race, and politics in contemporary America.

To summarize the key findings, I suggest that KYRC is simultaneously a Black Radical political project, a form of celebrity sporting activism, a team-based Sporting SMO, a grassroots pedagogical project, and an anti-essentialist progressive conjunctural response to racial capitalism/neoliberalism. KYRC's blueprint of grassroots activism can be characterized as the

symbolic mobilization of high-profile celebrity association and the material mobilization of philanthropy/donor contributions for the purposes of youth empowerment, collective community uplift, and critical public pedagogy. KYRC is propelled by the Kaepernick Brand – referring to Kaepernick’s stature as a global commercial symbol of bold and authentic political resistance – which uniquely affords the organization material and symbolic resources that the KYRC team strategically channels into navigating the non-profit sector and serving its communities with critical education and rapid community response. Based on these findings, I argue that KYRC reveals the political and transgressive potentials inherent to the immense economic and cultural expansion of sport, in ways that urge us to reconsider our assumptions about sport’s emancipatory potential and heighten our expectations of Black (celebrity) athletes. More broadly, KYRC demonstrates how the Left can intervene through the terrain of popular culture to resist neoliberalism and the Right’s reactionary authoritarian populism, and instead articulate a vision for America based in abolition, solidarity, and liberation from all forms of oppression.

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A CONTEXTUAL ANALYSIS OF COLIN KAEPERNICK'S KNOW YOUR RIGHTS CAMP
AS A SPORTING SOCIAL MOVEMENT ORGANIZATION

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To those being the world they want to see.

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Introduction

The idea for this project was conceived during a time of apparent social upheaval. In May 2020, as the disruptions caused by the COVID-19 pandemic compelled much of the world to (re)examine taken-for-granted norms and social structures, protesters around the world gathered in the streets to protest the murder by police of George Floyd. Long-overdue discussions about structural racism reverberated through corporate boardrooms, media headlines, and family dinner tables. Hearing of daily protests with allegedly staggering numbers and fervent energy, I decided observe firsthand a protest for racial justice and police accountability in Washington D.C. On one side of the street at this protest was a battalion of over one hundred D.C. police officers, each armed with guns, batons, a riot shield, riot gear, helmets, grenades, and tear gas, supported by tanks, snipers, and air drones in the background. On the other side of the street were the fully peaceful protesters, ‘armed’ with plastic water bottles, creative signs, and an eagerness for pithy synchronous chants.

During the moments of silence for George Floyd – the most tense and somber moments – protesters kneeled on one knee. In these moments, as a critical scholar of sport, I could not help but reflect on how the simple action of kneeling – in mourning and solidarity with Black lives affected by oppression (Bass, 2023; Marston, 2021; Trimbur, 2018) – had diffused from its beginnings in sport to become the defining symbol of a political moment. Initially infused with its meaning by athlete Colin Kaepernick during the obligatory National Anthem prior to National Football League (NFL) games, the symbol of the kneel had penetrated the artificial cultural boundaries between the ‘fun and innocent’ realm of sport, and more ‘serious’ political issues.

While the protests I observed dispersed without any clashes or arrests, demonstrations in other cities around the world had ended with protesters being arrested and jailed, often with dubious legal merit (see Kornfield et al., 2020; Oladipo, 2023; Pratt, 2023). When I returned home that night, still pondering the protesters kneeling, I had come across a CNN headline on social media that read: “Colin Kaepernick starts legal defense fund for protesters arrested in Minneapolis” (Asmelash, 2020). This “Legal Defense Initiative” – which had paid the legal fees for those arrested during the George Floyd protests – was started by Kaepernick’s organization called Know Your Rights Camp for Black Liberation (KYRC). I had heard of KYRC before, but did not know much about it. Upon looking into this organization started by Kaepernick in the aftermath of his kneeling protests, I was immediately intrigued by its dedication to critical youth education and uplifting marginalized communities. Given that scholars have long been theorizing the potential for the cultural and economic power of sport to be mobilized for critical pedagogy and structural transformation (Andrews, 2019; Farred, 2003; Forde & Kota, 2016; Hartmann & Kwauk, 2011; King-White, 2011; Wilson, 2007), I was surprised to see no academic work on KYRC. During this tumultuous time, from which I thought a new social and cultural order might emerge, it seemed pertinent to examine a real-world example of sport being mobilized for progressive transformation at the grassroots level.

I finished this dissertation in a vastly different social context than I started it. By the time of this writing in Spring of 2024, the systemic social change that appeared on the horizon in Summer of 2020 has not yet occurred. To say that everything just quietly went back to normal later that year would be insincere, because it seems things have gotten worse. The optimism bred by the possibility of re-imagining our political and economic status quo has been usurped by a frustration with slow-moving reformism and – in yet another instance of what Klein (2007) calls

disaster capitalism – deeper inequalities and further entrenchment of structural oppression (Giroux, 2021). What appeared to be a moment of budding progressive consensus has resulted in intense conservative backlash and even more bitter political (and racial) polarization (Goldberg, 2023; Johnson, 2022). The breakdown in public confidence in many of our institutions – associated with the deeper splintering of neoliberal hegemony – has sparked contestation over what kind of nation the United States is, has been, and should be going forward (Andrews, 2019; Hartman, 2015; Taylor, 2021). As I studied KYRC in the time that I watched this conjuncture unravel (Grossberg, 2019; Hall, 1988), I realized that KYRC in 2016 anticipated the precise social and cultural tensions that, to this point, have characterized the 2020s. The future that regressive conservative forces are desperately trying to prevent – a society bound together by liberation, abolition of oppressive institutions, cross-racial solidarity, critical thinking, and the empowerment of the historically marginalized – is the exact future that KYRC has been working to bring to fruition. As such, this dissertation developed into considering more broadly what KYRC reveals about the current intersections of race, sport, and grassroots activism.

The resurgence of activism in and through sport that spawned KYRC has been one of the foremost stories of the 21st century. Rendering dubious the once-deeply-held notion that sport is merely an apolitical realm of innocuous escapism, the past decade has seen sport not only adjacent to – but at the forefront of – the most pressing issues, debates, and anxieties festering within the United States (see Anderson, 2022; Bryant, 2018; Cooper, 2021; Lomax & Hawkins, 2024; Hartmann et al., 2022; McGrath, 2022; Montez de Oca, & Thangaraj, 2023; Weiner, 2020). While the connection between sport and politics is certainly not new, the contemporary mechanics of how sport is being mobilized to intervene into broader social debates differs from

previous eras. Within the past decade – and most notably in conjunction with the Black Lives Matter social movement (see Brown & Foxx, 2021; Evans et al., 2018; Taylor, 2021) – there has been a noticeable shift in the sites, objectives, tactics, and messages of sporting activism. Now that the euphemistic floodgates of sport’s political power have been opened, individuals and groups have developed new ways to strategically use sport as a catalyst for social change. KYRC is demonstrative of a broader phenomenon unfolding, in which athletes and activists have increasingly moved from the symbolic and institutional sites to the grassroots community site (Cooper et al., 2019), with tactics that use the cultural power of sport for explicit pedagogical purposes (Andrews, 2019; Freire, 2017; King-White, 2011), and with messages underpinned by an unapologetic radicalism¹ (Kaepernick, 2021; Marston, 2017; Robinson, 1983).

I have struggled to understand these new developments with preexisting conceptual models. Because they both escalate and deviate from the core principles of earlier forms of sporting activism (Cooper, 2021), sport-for-development (Darnell et al., 2019), and old-fashioned sporting philanthropy (Palmer, 2021), these grassroots organizations more closely resemble the logics and functions of social movement organizations (McCarthy & Zald, 1977; Tilly et al., 1975). As such, I borrow from social movement literature to propose conceptualizing these initiatives as Sporting Social Movement Organizations (SMOs), referring to organizations that utilize a connection to sport or athletes to pursue social, political, or cultural change in a coordinated, strategic, and sustained manner (building from Hartmann & Kwauk, 2011; Harvey et al., 2014; Forde & Kota, 2016). This dissertation presents an empirical and theoretical

¹ By radicalism, I do not insinuate its negative American connotation of excessive extremism. Rather, as Kehinde Andrews’ (2018) explains, the original meaning of radicalism is a perspective that focuses on the structural roots of social issues. In other words, a “radical” is oriented towards calling entire systems into question.

examination of KYRC as a Sporting SMOs, as a way to investigate the contemporary intersections of sport, race, and grassroots activism.

As indicated, this dissertation will examine these intersections through a specific case study: Know Your Rights Camp for Black Liberation (referred to throughout as KYRC), founded and lead by athlete-activist Colin Kaepernick. In fulfilling its mission to “to advance the liberation and well-being of Black and Brown communities through education, self-empowerment, [and] mass-mobilization” (“Our Mission”, accessed Jan. 2023), KYRC travels to inner-city communities across the U.S. to hold one-day seminars for Black and Brown teenagers and young adults. During these seminars – or camps as they are called –Kaepernick and other athletes, educators, activists, and KYRC associates educate attendees about topics relating to police brutality, the criminal justice system, and structural racism in its various manifestations. Beyond critical education, KYRC claims to forge among attendees a collective sense of physical, social, and intellectual empowerment that can be galvanized for transforming structures of oppression within their respective communities (“Impact Report”; retrieved January 2024). As this project outlines, KYRC is a Sporting SMO that perhaps most visibly and authentically embodies the aforementioned shifts in sporting activism. It thus serves as the ideal case study for a sociological examination of the structures, logics, goals, strategies, and challenges of contemporary sporting activism.

However, this dissertation is not just a sociological examination of KYRC. In addition to the literatures of social movements and sporting activism, the foundation of this project is in Physical Cultural Studies. A cultural studies approach based in radical contextualism (Grossberg, 2010) is necessary to pair with my sociological case study approach because KYRC – and Sporting SMOs in general – did not emerge in isolation. Rather, KYRC is a conjunctural

formation. It is both enabled by, and actively shaping, its corresponding social, cultural, political, economic, and technological contexts (Clarke, 2010; Hall et al., 2013; Grossberg, 2010; 2019). In this cultural studies approach, the micro-level specifics of KYRC are most significant when they are articulated to the macro-level processes that shape them. Put simply, it is important to understand KYRC because its emergence – at this particular moment in time – tells us something about the wider social formation. The story of KYRC is also a story of the realities of activism within late capitalism; how the structures of contemporary sport and both enable and constrain opportunities for political resistance; the capacity for sport-based critical pedagogy to empower and uplift marginalized communities; and finally, the difficulties and necessities of responding to the conjunctural crisis of neoliberalism with a utopian vision for a world based in social justice, solidarity, and liberation. In other words, a comprehensive study of KYRC is – inevitably and unavoidably – a study of contemporary America.

I specifically argue that, as a *radical* SMO (Fitzgerald & Rogers, 2000), KYRC's model of grassroots activism entails mobilizing the material and symbolic resources provided by the Kaepernick Brand for both youth-oriented critical education and rapid community response. Additionally, their communications and rhetoric via digital media reveal a pedagogical strategy that promotes social critique, engagement with academia, localized community action, and an instrumental use of sport as an entry point for highlighting broader social issues. KYRC only makes sense – and was made possible – within a favorable political opportunity structure (McAdam, 1981) marked by a specific configuration of contextual factors. The organization's emergence was linked to three central contextual factors: the racial consensus of neoliberal colorblindness beginning to publicly fracture (Bonilla-Silva, 2014); the institution of sport providing politically-conscious athletes with a global mediated platform articulate their views

(Rowe, 2011); and blatantly-racist backlash to Kaepernick’s kneeling protest that rendered him an authentic, radical, and subsequently commercial symbol of racial resistance that could be more readily translated into further political maneuvering (Doehler, 2023; Duvall, 2020; Nepstad & Kenny, 2018). Kaepernick and KYRC thus exploit the political openings enabled by the commercial explosion of sport, and in doing so radically redefine our conception of – and I argue heighten our expectations of – the Black athlete. More broadly, KYRC provides the blueprint for a bold, coordinated, grassroots progressive response to recent reactionary conservative backlash about shifting ideologies of race, history, and education in the United States. Taken altogether, this project critically examines what KYRC is and does, *and* what it represents in this moment.

Research Question

The overarching research question that underlies this project is the following: *In what ways, and within what broader socio-political contexts, does Know Your Rights Camp conduct for grassroots sporting activism?* Deriving from this question are a number of sub-questions that guide the collection of empirical data and pertain to the specific foci of each chapter.

1. What are KYRC’s beliefs and influences? (Chapter 3)
2. What social, political, and historical conditions shaped KYRC’s emergence? (Chapter 4)
3. What is KYRC’s model of activism? (Chapter 5)
4. What does KYRC teach, and how do they teach it? (Chapter 6)
5. What does KYRC reveal about the contemporary politics of sport, race, culture, and activism? (Chapter 7)

KYRC Organizational Overview

Before elaborating on why and how this project approaches KYRC, it is necessary to provide a more detailed overview about the organization. Know Your Rights Camp (KYRC) is

an organization founded and led by former NFL quarterback and current activist Colin Kaepernick. KYRC is listed as a 501(c)(3) charity with donations being tax-deductible, and is a fund that operated under the fiscal sponsor Entertainment Industry Foundation, a philanthropic organization who characterizes their mission as to “Help Artists, Athletes and Influencers Expand Their Philanthropic Footprint” (“2022 impact”, retrieved December 2023).

KYRC’s signature effort is coordinating one-day seminars that offer predominantly Black and Brown youth education about police brutality, the criminal justice system, and generally navigating structural racism in its numerous manifestations. These are commonly called “camps” by KYRC staff, and I will use that term throughout this project. The KYRC annual report (2022) states the origin and purpose of the camps:

Our namesake Know Your Rights Camp engagements are daylong, site-based youth camps that are packed with impactful and immersive content and tailored to local contexts and represent our organization’s signature programmatic offering. Beginning months ahead of time and through outreach to local grassroots organizations and after-school programs, we identify adult community leaders and youth who are interested in attending our camps... Youth leave our camps with actionable knowledge across a range of topics as well as supplies and resources meant to empower them further. (p. 7)

Overall, KYRC’s model leverages the platform and status afforded by Kaepernick’s activism to “[provide] young people with legal, cultural, and community resources to fight back against systemic oppression, police terrorism, and racial inequality” (p. 3).

Since 2016, KYRC has held 11 camps in the following cities: Oakland, New York City, Chicago, New Orleans, Baltimore, Atlanta, Miami, Las Vegas, Amsterdam, Los Angeles, and Houston. Their website claims under the section “Our Impact” that they have engaged over 1400

people in their tours, a 274% increase in participants, and a 98% increase in people understanding their rights (retrieved December 2023). The attendees of the camp (sometimes referred to by KYRC associates as “students” or “the youth”) are roughly high-school aged, around 14-18 years old. Attendees are engaged through a mixture of education, activities, and entertainment by the speakers. Participant #3 (of the six KYRC associates I interviewed for this project) explained that the camps are “integral” to KYRC because they emphasize:

making an impact and wanting to be able to create the best experience possible within the short amount of time... there's a lot of preparation that goes into the camps and making sure that it's a positive experience and memorable for each student.²

Each camp appears to follow a similar structure with slight differences in the speakers, activities, or educational emphases dependent upon what issues are relevant to each community. It appears that Kaepernick typically opens and closes the camps, but there are far more speakers than him. Additional speakers come from a wide variety of backgrounds that include: fellow athlete-activists, scholars, local community activists, holistic health coaches, entrepreneurs, college counselors, attorneys, legal aids, financial education instructors, dietitian nutritionists, authors, health and wellness professionals, tech professionals, historians, and artists.

While the camps are not disclosed to the general public in advance, they are publicized via social media as they occur. Pictures and videos that recap the camps are released by KYRC immediately afterwards. In the photos and videos, each participant is given a local resource guide and is seen wearing a black shirt with white letters that read “I Know My Rights” on the front, and a list of the KYRC Ten Points on the back. Drawing inspiration from the Black Panther

² For this project, I conducted interviews with six KYRC associates. Participants were randomly assigned a number as their pseudonym. Given the relatively small sample size, each participant throughout this project is referred to with the anonymous pronouns of they/them as a measure of protecting their identity. It does not reflect their actual gender identification. Further details on methodological decisions and procedures are provided in Chapter 1.

Party's Ten Point Plan,³ KYRC has listed their Ten Points as the following (Impact report, 2023):

- 1) You have the right to be free.
- 2) You have the right to be healthy.
- 3) You have the right to be brilliant.
- 4) You have the right to be safe.
- 5) You have the right be loved.
- 6) You have the right to be courageous.
- 7) You have the right to be alive.
- 8) You have the right to be trusted.
- 9) You have the right to be educated.
- 10) You have the right to know your rights.

According to the KYRC annual report (2022), each seminar is divided into workshops and trainings in the following “subject areas”, taught by experts or KYRC programmers: Know Your Rights; Holistic Health, Know Your History, Finance, Education, Tech - S.T.E.A.M., and Empowerment. Participants spoke about how the curriculum for each camp is tailored to each city/community. Participant #4 stated in their interview that camps are “community-specific”, explaining that:

we bring educators from those cities, we bring professors, teachers, and lawyers. People who know that city. Because at the end of the day, we're also learning too, so we have to bring in organizers and workers who have done the work prior to us coming to that city, to kind of join forces with them.

³ The historical connections between the Black Panther Party and KYRC are discussed thoroughly in Chapter 3.

As such, most camps also partner with local organizations and activists, such as: police accountability organization Silicon Valley De-Bug in Oakland; Free Write Arts & Literacy in Chicago; the Hidden Genius Project in Baltimore; and local artists in New Orleans, Miami, Baltimore, and Atlanta. These partnerships reflect the emphasis on catering specifically to youth in each city, rather than a one-size-fits-all approach. For instance, Participant #6 stated that in each city:

we always try to find a venue that has some sort of historical significance, so we can also teach the youth that ‘hey, your city has a history already, you know? What you might call the standard or typical education system does not always teach you about your own history.’

The artists help develop the Resource Guide for each camp, which is a pamphlet that details and summarizes the various resources in physical and mental health, tech, finance, education, and law that are available for local attendees, specifically tailored to explain the rights within each camp city or state.

KYRC’s camps also reflect the trend of SMOs engage the public in an explicitly emotional and cinematic manner. By creating demonstrations or “scenes” that incorporate music, art, dancing, and culture into their social justice advocacy, social movement events attract the attention of new members and outside parties, energize participants and members, communicate meaning across digital platforms to those not present, create a memorable experience that encourages future participation and results in a positive association with the message (Kallman & Clark, 2019). KYRC’s camps appear to reflect similar sentiments. In most camp videos, the rooms appear to be decorated with pictures and artwork depicting civil rights leaders (most prominently Malcolm X, a choice that foreshadows the camp’s political ideology), as well as

pictures and art depictions of Kaepernick kneeling in his 49ers uniform. Each video shows Kaepernick, his partner and KYRC co-founder Nessa (who plays a large role in the camp's structure and operations), and other speakers interacting candidly with the young attendees. Attendees of the camp receive a free breakfast, lunch, and take-home dinner. There is also music and dancing throughout. Participant #4 spoke on the mobilization of various forms of culture to supplement the educational curriculum:

There was a band at our last camp. We do games. Like, how we engage the students, it's not just by lecturing them. We have it where they can draw art, however you're feeling, express that on a piece of paper and come tell us what you just drew. It's things like that. And it's also like the lunch where we're playing music. They have a dance floor. They can be free and be themselves for an hour, so I think those are the things other than like the, you know, the education that we get them to interact and really be engaged.

Participant #5 corroborated the mood of the camps, stating that the camps “look like one big party. I will say my first camp, I felt like you can feel just the love and the energy.”

Referring back to Participant #4's comments, however, the critical education is still the SMO's primary focus. I analyze the KYRC Political Education Curriculum (2023) frequently throughout this dissertation, but here, I will briefly detail how participants characterize the education. Participant #1 explained the educational approach as one that mixes critical thinking of systemic barriers with empowerment and learning to how to cope with and survive various institutions. Participant #3 focused on the empowerment and solidarity that stems from collective education, stating:

what I think is the driving force behind the camps is how can we make these minority students of color feel empowered leaving this camp. And what can they take away from

them? What can they learn to take away to implement within their own lives and practices?

...I think that the camps are really a great place for connecting those who all want to make a difference and want to make an impact.

In general, how participants described the objectives of the camp closely reflected how KYRC promotes them. The strategies, challenges, and institutional logics that underpin the camps are the focus of Chapter 5, and their version of pedagogy is the focus of Chapter 6.

Beyond the camps, the second primary organizational focus of KYRC is conducting what the KYRC team calls “rapid response”, which refers to partnerships, drives, events, and other initiatives that offer direct material support to communities. There are many examples that highlight the range of KYRC’s efforts. In 2023, these included various back-to-school giveaways, donations of hydrogen electric vehicles (EVs), and awareness campaigns about the harm of book bans in Florida⁴ (“2023” Wrapped, retrieved 2023). In 2022, partnerships included one with an NYC hip-hop station to donate laptops and Netflix gift cards to students in the Bronx, as well as a collaboration with the progressive ice cream brand Ben & Jerry’s, creating a vegan-flavored ice cream called “Change the Whirled” with the proceeds going towards KYRC (benjerry.com; retrieved August 2022). This partnership also included installing educational billboards around Los Angeles during the weekend the Super Bowl was there. Billboards included messages related to the necessity of targeting the root causes of crime, alongside a picture of Kaepernick and the Ben & Jerry’s logo. For example, one of the billboards stated: “If the U.S. Law enforcement were a country, it would have the 3rd largest military budget on the planet at \$205,000,000,000. Imagine if we invested in our communities instead?” (knowyourrightscamp.com; retrieved August 2022).

⁴ KYRC’s work in relation to the backlash to “Critical Race Theory” is discussed further in Chapter 7.

KYRC also partnered with and provided support for various smaller youth empowerment groups, as well as rapid response community groups. In-person camps were not held from October 2019 – April 2022 due to Covid. During this time, the camp engaged in numerous other initiatives. One of the main ones is the Autopsy Initiative, which fundraises for and provides free autopsies for those who experience a police-related death. Additionally, the organization created a Covid-19 Relief Fund that raised over \$1 million, with a specific focus on Black and Brown communities disproportionately affected by Covid (with detailed charts, statistics, quotes, and explanations on how structural racism has resulted in Covid harming marginalized communities in particular). KYRC partnered with fitness brand Ergatta (with whom Kaepernick has a sponsorship) to provide connected rowers to Black and Brown communities that lack physical health resources in 7 cities.

The bulk of KYRC’s work during the pandemic was aimed towards fundraising and donating to various antiracist causes. In July of 2020, the organization committed \$1 million to local organizations in 10 U.S. cities to raise community bail funds and free people from jail (rfkhumanrights.org, retrieved August 2022). Kaepernick, a prison abolitionist,⁵ was passionate about this cause as a way to help diminish the criminalization of poverty, stating: “our legal system unjustly criminalizes our Black and Brown communities, penalizing poverty under the guise of keeping our communities safe” (para. 6). KYRC also created The Colin Kaepernick Know Your Rights Camp Legal Defense Initiative on their website – as mentioned above – which allowed people to fill out a form and receive free legal advice if they have been arrested or were a victim of violence by the police. This was designed to assist protestors in the wake of George Floyd’s death in 2020, many of whom were falsely imprisoned, arrested on flimsy

⁵ Kaepernick’s edited book called “Abolition for the people: The movement for a future without policing & prisons” (2002) is explored in Chapter 3, along with Kaepernick’s general ideological orientations.

charges, or experienced violence at the hands of police during peaceful protests (Berman & Wax-Thibodeaux, 2020). For this purpose, KYRC also created a pamphlet entitled “Know Your Rights: A Guide for Protestors” (2022) that provided information on the rights, risks, and support systems for protestors of racial injustice.

On their social media accounts (Facebook, X, Instagram, and TikTok) the organization shares news articles, current events, historical reminders, and statistics that spread awareness for their causes. Their annual report (2022) states that KYRC was referenced in 2,384 news articles and had an online reach of 7,787,968,870 in 2021. The same report touts statistics about their social media presence (by the end of the calendar year 2022): their Instagram page had 438,000+ followers, 786 posts, and 2.3 million engagements; their Facebook page had 91,000+ followers, 646 posts, and 136,000+ engagements; and their X (formerly Twitter) page had 72,000+ followers, 1,300+ tweets, and 68,000+ engagements.

In 2023, KYRC significantly expanded their media presence. First, the organization released the official KYRC app. Described by KYRC as “the ultimate tool for engaged activism, empowerment, knowledge, and converging community” (“2023 Wrapped”, 2023; p. 8), the app features a range of options that align with KYRC’s mission and education. Users can search for relevant civilian law codes by state (specifically regarding traffic stops and protesting), receive notifications, donate, and access camp recaps and other information that is on the website. Second, KYRC began its podcast. The weekly episodes feature scholars, industry professionals, and other experts discussing a range of topics relevant to the organizational topic areas. For instance, across roughly 15-20 minutes, episodes have included discussions on the importance of history, education, mental health, art, activism, financial literacy, and technology for the Black community (“Know Your Rights Camp Podcast”, retrieved 2023). An analysis of KYRC’s usage

of and framing via social media is discussed in Chapter 6. Third, KYRC develops and disseminates to the public “curriculums” that contain detailed and systematic instructions for educating about the organization’s core beliefs and issues (mostly relating to race and racism, policing, incarceration, activism, community organizing, and sport). Details for the two curriculums that I engage throughout this dissertation – The Kaepernick Curriculum (2021) and The Political Education Curriculum (2023) – are provided in Chapter 1 and analyzed most thoroughly in Chapter 6. This project analyzes and contextualizes KYRC’s various causes, beliefs, strategies, initiatives, and pedagogy.

What this Project Is

Admittedly, this project has undergone a series of directional shifts over the past few years. When I first started, only knowing as much about Kaepernick and KYRC as the casual observer, I was curious to see if and how the organization’s lofty aspirations were being fulfilled. I had idealistically assumed there was a tangible impact or outcome of KYRC’s work that I could empirically pinpoint, analyze, and describe. I soon discovered, as Hartmann et al. (2022) notes, that attempting to neatly track the outcome, impact, or accomplishments of any sport-based social movement initiative is theoretically and empirically limited. This is especially the case for examining radical social movements and organizations (Fitzgerald & Rogers, 2000), whose objectives are based in wide-scale structural change (i.e. Black liberation). Even if possible, identifying things such as “outcomes” and “accomplishments” are best served by more positivist, quantitative approaches that this project does not adopt (Coombe, 2012). One cannot unilaterally isolate any variable and “prove” some sort of causal relationship between, say, attendance at a KYRC seminar and a deeper understanding of the structural causes of racism, or how levels of participation in KYRC programming might result in “empowerment.” Such notions themselves

fall apart easily. I instead realized that it was important to understand the meanings, processes, and institutional logics of KYRC before we can attempt to assess its application.⁶ These motives are served by my sociological case study approach (Lofland, 1996), based in the methods of in-depth interviewing and content analysis (Patton, 2002; Sanderson, 2022).

As I advanced with this design, I began to think about KYRC more broadly. With each new development, I became far more interested in what KYRC represents within the bigger picture, or put differently, what the micro-level logics of KYRC tell us about the more macro-level social, political, and cultural logics that define our present day. These deliberations nudged this project towards a more qualitative, cultural studies approach that aims to contextualize and situate KYRC. This approach reads KYRC as a phenomenon through which we can tell what Grossberg (2018) calls a “conjunctural story” of the present moment, a mode of analysis that:

seeks to understand the specificity of what is going on by identifying as carefully as possible what is new and what is old, what is part of a longer history and what has been introduced into the current context, and then, how these multiple elements shape each other so that the old can take on new characteristics and effects, and the new can take up residual forms and resonances. (p. 34)

Following Grossberg, I realized that before asking “is KYRC working?”, we must ask “what precisely is KYRC doing, how, why, and why *now*?”

To answer these questions, I anchored this dissertation in the approach of cultural studies. In brief terms, the discipline/project of cultural studies analyzes and contextualizes the meanings, significations, and politics of popular culture as a mode for attaining insight about the operations of power, dominance, and resistance within cultural expressions and social formations (During,

⁶ These “revelations” mainly derived from pointed and productive feedback from colleagues, most of all the members of my committee.

1999; Hall, 1981; 1996; 2021; Grossberg, 2006; 2010; 2019). For decades, scholars have analyzed how popular culture is made to contain, disseminate, and reproduce ideologies most conducive to the ruling class and dominant order (Althusser, 1971; Berry, 2012; Dworkin, 1997; Hargreaves, 1986). Indeed, most critical studies of sport and physical culture seek to expose how various norms, practices, or discourses about sport and the body *reproduce* dominant power relations (an understandable trend, given that there is so much to unpack within the world of sport that has for so long operated under the guise of “apolitical”) (Atkinson, 2017). Yet, as Stuart Hall argues (1981; 2021), culture is not solely wielded by powerful groups to assert their will onto the powerless masses. It is also an avenue of potential conscientization and *resistance* by the masses (Procter, 2004). The importance of popular culture to Hall transcended that which it is granted in the orthodox Marxist model of base/superstructure (Marx & Engels, 1844; McClellan, 1979), in which popular culture was just a subsidiary superstructural element determined fully by the economic base (Hall, 2016). This model ignored the agency of the superstructural elements such as popular culture; let alone the agency of people themselves in operating within their given historical conditions to create their own meanings and experiences (Andrews & Loy, 1993). Hall (1981) famously argued that popular culture only matters because it is “one of the sites where this struggle for and against a culture of the powerful is engaged: it is also the stake to be won or lost in that struggle. It is the arena of consent and resistance” (p. 239). Popular culture therefore should not be approached with an assumption of wholesale pessimism or wholesale romanticism. Scholars should instead operate at the complex intersections of power and agency (Bennett, 2009): acknowledging a site of both domination *and* resistance, corruption *and* authenticity, coercion *and* autonomy (Hall, 1981).

Sport should be critically analyzed with the same approach. As Gruneau (1988) argued, “the history of modern sport, as in all areas of popular culture, is a history of cultural struggle” (p. 20). Sport is and has been a site through which values, beliefs, ideals, and ways of living/being have been contested (Andrews, 2002; Carrington & McDonald, 2009; Gruneau, 1988; Morgan, 1994). Like popular culture, sport cannot be reduced to one pre-packaged analysis; it is sometimes a distraction, sometimes a rallying point, sometimes unifying, sometimes polarizing, and – as KYRC explores – sometimes a site of transformation (Hargreaves, 1986; Silk et al., 2017). Yet, because formations are contingent and dynamic – never fixed, never given in advance, never guaranteed – the intellectual and political work must be an “ongoing, endless conversation” that must move as the contexts do (Grossberg, 2014; 2017). It is the task of the scholar not to simply copy-and-paste these perspectives onto each new sporting phenomenon, but to instead “radically contextualize” the operation of sport in each new conjuncture (Grossberg, 2017).

As Hall (1983) reminds us in his call for a “Marxism without guarantees”, there is no necessary correspondence between the various, sometimes overlapping and sometimes estranged variables that I will argue have enabled the creation and resonance of KYRC (among them sport, race, activism, branding, social movements, the non-profit/Third sector, neoliberalism, social media, Black radical politics, and authoritarian populism). As such, this project aims to excavate and express the concurrent “ad-hoc grouping” of these variables that constitute the KYRC assemblage (Bennett, 2005; p. 24; see Delanda, 2016).

While this approach sounds good in theory, I quickly realized that explaining the relations of each of these elements in a neat and tidy narrative is easier said than done. As the outline indicates, I will argue that KYRC is simultaneously a Black Radical project (Chapter 3), a form

of celebrity activism (Chapter 4), a community-driven Sporting SMO (Chapter 5), a grassroots pedagogical project (Chapter 6), and a progressive response to a conjunctural crisis (Chapter 7). The multi-scaled nature of KYRC demands different empirical entry points, each of which requires a different methodological approach. As such, each chapter explores a unique empirical entry point, analyzed at a particular scale (i.e. micro, meso, or macro), and perhaps focusing on a dimension (i.e. discursive, material, or affective). A full analysis of each of these elements requires the context of all the rest, meaning that the chronology of analysis that I ultimately settled on (after much trial and error) is artificially imposed. Each discussion – though at times they may seem disparate – is intended to contribute to understanding the broader whole of KYRC and its articulation to its social, cultural, political, and historical contexts. The cohesivity that is perhaps lost by my merging of sociological and cultural studies analytic approaches is hopefully made up for by the depth and range of analytical layers that emerge by the end of this project.

What this Project is Not

Importantly, I want to emphasize that this project is *not* an assessment of KYRC. I do not intend to – or even find it necessary to – endorse or reject KYRC, or diagnose the organization as sufficiently or insufficiently transformative, good or bad. Granted, there will be moments throughout the following chapters wherein I oscillate between an explanatory tone that describes aspects of KYRC for the sake of clarity and understanding (specifically Chapters 4-6), and a more declarative tone that argues how the insights derived from studying KYRC can be harnessed for social transformation (specifically Chapter 2, 3, and 7). Overall though, rather than a wholesale evaluation, my interest is to understand and contextualize KYRC. As mentioned above, this project stems from a recognition of the centrality of sport in popular culture, followed

by a curiosity of what political opportunities this presents for those interested in engaging in counter-hegemonic struggle. Moving towards an answer to this question is done by situating rather than evaluating. I find it important to understand both the mechanics of KYRC's operation, but also the contextual forces that constituted its organization model, approach, and objectives (Andrews, 2002; Blackburn, 2014). In other words, the intention is to use the emergence and existence of KYRC to offer a "political history of the present" (Grossberg, 2006; p. 2).

Make no mistake, however. My disinterest in analyzing KYRC through the myopic lens of "good" or "bad" does not mean that I am approaching this project as a neutral observer (as if there could ever be one). Following cultural studies, I aim to articulate knowledge for social change rather than social reproduction (Miller, 2001). As Carrington (2001) notes, cultural studies is an "explicitly transdisciplinary project that owes less to academic notions of bounded, specialized knowledge production, than it does to forms of *engaged political critique*" (p. 275, italics added). Engaged political critique, to me, is not one that does so – to use a sporting metaphor – from the sidelines. I personally have not had the luxury to live my life on the sidelines of our political formation. As a Black male whose identity was in large part constructed through sport and race – whom, ironically or not, hails from the same community that KYRC serves – I could not launch my analysis from a wholly positivist "neutral" positionality, even if I intended to do so. I see the purpose of analyzing, contextualizing, and politicizing as aiding in the exposure of injustice and inequality. While this approach in excess may lead scholars to become overly-optimistic and romanticize transgressive potential in popular culture, I view these potential flaws as far more acceptable than the excesses of an approach that masquerades as

“objective” while effectively equivocating, obfuscating, or hesitating to name the violences and injustices embedded into the status quo of modern racial capitalism.

A Note on Audiences

This dissertation as a whole is indebted to the work that the KYRC team has already done. My intention is certainly not to evaluate, advance, or critique the work done by these individuals as well. It is instead to translate their insights into the bigger picture; to situate KYRC within shifts in sporting activism, celebrityhood, race, and social movements. Therefore, it is – at times awkwardly – written to be read by at least three different audiences: academic scholars, social movement activists (including KYRC itself), and the general public. It is likely that each audience will not be wholly satisfied by the end. Nonetheless, I hope that each audience will be able to recognize the insights relevant to them, and more generally concede the practical, symbiotic benefits involved for each party. The current project is my best attempt to merge the empirical with the theoretical, the on-the-ground with the contextual, the concrete with the abstract. My overarching attempt is to excavate the insights drawn from KYRC’s on-the-ground operations and translate them to the academic world in a manner that advances our understanding of contemporary grassroots activism. Additionally, it may also benefit KYRC and other Sporting SMOs by historicizing and situating KYRC within a broader scholarly lineage. This can then provide practical insights based on scholarship of what has been done, and is being done, in the realm of race-based sporting activism. For the public, I aspire for the above analyses to both advance and complicate the way we conceptualize the intricate relationship between sport, race, politics, social movements, and activism.

Methodological and Theoretical Preview

As elaborated upon in Chapter 1, the overarching methodological tool engaged in this project is case study (of KYRC). Case study has been used as a method to find general trends within social movement research that speaks to the contexts within (and against) which individuals and organizations mobilize (Carley, 2019; Lofland, 1996; Feagin et al., 2016). The method merges an empirical sociological approach designed to suggest broader insights from a specific phenomenon with a theoretical cultural studies approach designed to put those insights into productive context. Working through this interplay, the aim of analyzing case studies is not to excavate a generalizable “truth” or assemble a constellation of contextual forces that can heedlessly be applied to a subsequent phenomenon. The more modest purpose is instead “to illustrate an idea, to explain the process of development over time... to explore uncharted issues... and to pose provocative questions” (Reinharz, 1992; cited in Carley, 2019; p. 5). The various studies within this project utilize other methods to examine my case study of KYRC. These methods include in-depth interviewing (see Patton, 1990), textual analysis (see Markula & Silk, 2011), social media content analysis (see Patton, 2002), and articulation (see Hall, 1985; Slack, 1996).

What unites my use of these various methods is a critical qualitative methodology. Within the sociology of sport, much of the work regarding sporting activism has aimed to quantitatively track the public’s reactions to and perceptions of activism (see Dubrow, 2016; Intravia et al., 2018; Jepsen & Jepsen, 2023; Towler et al., 2019). While this quantitative work is valuable, what is missing from these accounts is an in-depth examination of what specifically sporting activism entails, how it is implemented, and the objectives and experiences of the people conducting the activism. Studying these questions requires a critical qualitative approach. Granted, there has been an abundance of works that have offered their perspective on contextual relations of

contemporary sporting activism (Bryant, 2018; Cooky & Antunovic, 2020; Cooper et al., 2019; Farred, 2022; Marston, 2021; Mower et al., 2017). However, to my knowledge, none of this scholarship has rooted their grand analysis in the accounts and perspectives of the on-the-ground people and organizations that orchestrate the activism. This project fills these methodological gaps with a qualitative approach, developed in collaboration with the people doing the work.

My immediate influence, and hopeful contribution, is to Physical Cultural Studies and the sociology of sport (Silk et al., 2017). My analyses of the role of sport in all these processes are indebted to scholars within these fields (see Andrews, 2008; Bustad & Andrews, 2020; Carrington, 2010; Chahardovali, & McLeod, 2022; Clevenger & Andrews, 2017; Clift, 2019; Coakley, 2021; Cooky & Antunovic, 2020; Darnell et al., 2019; Edmonds, 2020; Edwards, 2019; Esmonde & Jette, 2020; Farred, 2003; Friedman, 2023; Giardina & Newman, 2011; Gruneau, 1988; Hargreaves, 1986; Hartmann, 2003; Joseph, 2017; Jette et al., 2016; Marston, 2021; McLeod, 2022; Mower et al., 2017; Nelson & Jette, 2023; Posbergh, 2022; Silk et al., 2017). Rather than reducing the complexity of this project to a single theoretical framework, this project deploys a theoretical eclecticism for which previous PCS scholars have called for (Wheaton, 2017). I draw from and attempt to synthesize a number of aligned literatures and theoretical traditions: the social movement paradigm of resource mobilization from sociology (Buechler, 2011; Harvey et al., 2014; McAdam, 1981; McCarthy & Zald, 1977); the discussion of institutional logics and SMOs from organizational theory (Fitzgerald & Rodgers, 2000; Larson & Lizardo, 2015; Lofland, 2017); framing and rhetoric from media and communications (Bennett & Segerberg, 2015; Ellis & Earl, 2018; Schradie, 2018; Snow et al., 1986); racial capitalism and the Black Radical Tradition from history and Black studies (Bhattacharyya, 2018; Kelley, 2003; Matlon, 2022; Robinson, 1983); and Gramscian and Freirean models of critical pedagogy and

liberation from cultural Marxism (Bloch, 1986; Freire, 2017; Gramsci, 1992; Giroux, 2011). As explained above, anchoring this merging of literatures and theoretical traditions is an approach based in “cultural materialism” (Williams, 2020), which is a Marxist theoretical approach that situates culture as dialectically-related to material conditions, and as such focuses on the ways in which power and hegemony are constructed and – most important for our purposes, exposed and contested – through everyday popular culture (see Hall, 2016; Miller, 2001). As such, I hope that the various angles from which I approach KYRC throughout this project, in the end, coalesce to paint a detailed-yet-comprehensive picture of how KYRC – and sport more generally – can intervene into power relations and be mobilized in service of transformative social change.

Chapter Overview

This dissertation analyzes what KYRC is and does, as well as what it more broadly represents. I begin by detailing my methodology (Chapter 1) and the conceptual frameworks through which I am thinking about KYRC (Chapter 2). Then, I outline two key macro-level contexts from which KYRC emerged. The first is the theoretical and political lineage of the Black Radical Tradition (Chapter 3), while the second is the cultural and historical lineage of sporting activism (Chapter 4). Then, engaging interview data with KYRC associates, I turn to a more micro-level empirical examination of KYRC’s institutional logics, structure, tensions, and experiences (Chapter 5). Next, I critically analyze KYRC’s social media and educational curriculums to explore their beliefs, framing tactics, and overall vision for grassroots critical public pedagogy (Chapter 6). Finally, I synthesize the discussions of previous chapters to examine how KYRC represents a progressive response to the United States’ conjunctural crisis of neoliberalism, as expressed through tensions over race, history, and education (Chapter 7).

In Chapter 1, I detail the methodological underpinnings and procedures of this project. These include in-depth interviews with KYRC associates, content and textual analysis of KYRC's public documents, radical contextualism, and articulation. After describing how this project is situated in and extends the discipline of Physical Cultural Studies, I outline my specific approach to KYRC as a case study from which we can advance our understanding of Sporting SMOs, as well as race, sport, and grassroots activism more broadly.

In Chapter 2, I provide a conceptual overview of KYRC. Engaging the social movement research paradigm of resource mobilization, I elaborate on my definition of a Sporting SMO, as well as why it is necessary to conceptualize KYRC in this way. I argue that KYRC exists at the intersection of the literatures on traditional SMOs, sport-for-development organizations, and the role of sport/athletes in social movements. Each of these concepts offers a partial-yet-incomplete explanation of KYRC. I propose that KYRC offers a more transformative and progressive model for engaging and educating youth with resources accumulated through sport. By developing youth politically and intellectually, and working *with* rather than *on* youth, KYRC provides a blueprint for current and future Sporting SMOs. However, this blueprint is contingent on favorable structural factors elaborated in subsequent chapters.

In Chapter 3, I draw on interview data and textual analysis to explore the ideological underpinnings of KYRC. The organization is first and foremost dedicated to Black liberation, and organizing for the empowerment and uplift of Black and Brown communities. I begin with examining KYRC's connections to, and beliefs about, historical and contemporary racial politics. From the organization's main stated influence of the Black Panther Party to the more recent Black Lives Matter moment (Fujino & Harmachis, 2020; Taylor, 2021), I articulate how Kaepernick and KYRC harbor a radical materialist approach to collective Black uplift. I argue

that Kaepernick and KYRC challenges – if not upends completely – our assumptions about the power and position of the Black athlete in racial capitalism. The latest iteration in a longer lineage that I call the Black Radical Sporting Tradition, KYRC demonstrates that radically-oriented collectivist outreach – as opposed to individualist enrichment – is not only now possible for the contemporary Black athlete, but arguably more urgent than ever. I conclude the chapter by proposing that KYRC offers a blueprint for how the Black (Radical) Athlete can take its obligation to the collective Black community seriously.

In Chapter 4, I outline how KYRC is both made possible by, and makes a significant contribution to, a long history of activism connected to sport. From Harry Edwards and the Olympic Project for Human Rights in 1968 to resurgence of sporting activism in the 2010s (Bass, 20014; DuBois, 2023; Hartmann, 2003), I outline the sociopolitical contexts – or the political opportunity structure (McAdam, 1981; Buechler, 2011) – of the contemporary resurgence in sporting activism in the 2010s that scholars have called the “Kaepernick Moment” (Mower et al., 2017). I argue that Kaepernick’s kneeling protests in 2015 became a symbol of a wider cultural reckoning about race, which led to Kaepernick himself ascending as a celebrated icon of authentic racial resistance and activism (Bryant, 2018; Deflem, 2022; Zirin, 2021). This “Kaepernick Brand” later became the engine of KYRC. The ascension of Kaepernick and the establishment of KYRC thus dramatically updates and extends our cultural understanding of the “emancipatory potential of sport” (Morgan, 1994). Overall, I conclude that KYRC and the Kaepernick Brand capitalize upon the *political* possibilities inherent to the commercial and cultural explosion of sport over the past decades (Andrews, 2019; Rowe, 2011).

In Chapter 5, I draw upon interview data with KYRC associates to explore how they perceive the logics, goals, strategies, experiences, and tensions of KYRC. The central argument is that the

Kaepernick Brand is the engine of KYRC, as it uniquely allows them to overcome many of the main challenges faced by traditional SMOs (such as publicity, funding, recruitment of labor and participation, coalition-building, enthusiasm, and other symbolic and material resources) (Fitzgerald & Rogers, 2000; Lofland, 1996; Wilson & Hayhurst, 2009). However, it requires a coordinated and passionate team to convert resources bestowed by the Kaepernick Brand into its objective of tangible community impact. The Kaepernick Brand also both contributes to and helps reconcile the tensions that arise from navigating the non-profit sector and balancing KYRC's celebrity associations with its community-centric imperatives (Dunning, 2022; Harvey et al., 2014; Kallman & Clark, 2019; Meyer, 1995; Palmer, 2021). The overall impact of KYRC, according to participants, primarily takes the form of empowerment and solidarity at the camps, as well as material rapid response for communities via KYRC's various initiatives.

In Chapter 6, I examine KYRC's digital communications and rhetoric as a way to explore how the organization constructs their grassroots pedagogy, based in the Gramscian (1992) and Freirian (2017) tradition of critical public pedagogy. Drawing mainly upon a content analysis of KYRC's social media, I document the strategic framing that KYRC utilizes to curate its pedagogical messaging and organizational promotion. The main findings of the content analysis are that KYRC primarily – but not exclusively – uses social media to spread critical awareness of issues related to policing, the criminal justice system, and anti-Black racism. Through highlighting both justice and injustice, as well as celebrating Blackness, KYRC engages in what social movement scholars identify as the four core framing mechanisms: bridging, amplification, extension, and transformation (Snow et al., 1986). Then, drawing from a textual analysis of The Kaepernick Curriculum (2021) and the Political Curriculum (2023), I highlight how KYRC's

critical pedagogy prioritizes a detailed intersectional, academic, action-oriented approach that often uses sport as a framing device for denaturalizing hegemonic social and cultural norms.

Finally, in Chapter 7, I unpack the cultural politics of KYRC by considering “why KYRC *now?*” (inspired by Johnson et al., 2004). I situate KYRC’s mission within the current conjuncture (Grossberg, 2019), marked by a moment of division and backlash in the cultural terrain from the conservative Right. While derived from a repudiation of racial progress and intuitive anxieties of neoliberalism more generally, this authoritarian populist conservative backlash has materialized in broader culture wars over race, history, and education (Goldberg, 2009; Hall, 1981). After discussing the latest “moral panic” (Hall et al., 2013) over Critical Race Theory, I argue that KYRC demonstrates how the Left might contest neoliberal hegemony in the political-ideological realm, by articulating a vision for society based in anti-essentialist racial equality, social justice, and the abolition of oppressive systems (Grossberg, 2009; Hart, 2023; Norris & Inglehart, 2019). Despite the uneasy relationship between the Third Sector and Black America (Incite, 2007; Kallman & Clark, 2019; Samimi, 2010), I propose that KYRC represents a sport-based progressive conjunctural response through unapologetic critical pedagogy and strategic, grassroots community action.

In considering the recent cultural politics of sport, Andrews and Carrington (2021) wrote that: “The disarticulation of uber-sport from its currently reactionary pose and its re-articulation to and through a more progressive Leftist politics are possible; they are just difficult to imagine, let alone realise” (p. 196). The authors also argue that, despite such ubiquitous political-cultural work done by Trump and the Right, many on the Left have still failed to see the significance of sport and its potential role in the articulation of a more emancipatory politics. As much as we

Physical Cultural Studies scholars pontificate about the importance of conscientizing the public to think critically and imagine alternatives to the status quo (Andrews, 2019; King-White, 2012; Rich et al., 2017), the stark reality is that we do not know much about the process of conscientization. Many of us scholars can speak at length about the theoretical lineage of conscientization, but we have not adequately explored its mechanics, strategies, challenges, or real-world applications. In other words, we know a lot about the *what* and the *why* of conscientization, but we know very little about the *how*.

If nothing else, this project is a systematic study of how, and under what circumstances, the public conscientization that we scholars advocate for is actually being brought to fruition. The central objective of this project is to outline and examine KYRC – one of the foremost initiatives that, in an almost unprecedented strategic and coordinated fashion, is explicitly attempting to use (uber)-sport to articulate a more critical, inclusive, and liberatory vision for America based in progressive politics. This, in a nutshell, is why Know Your Rights Camp matters. Though it is yet to be seen the extent to which KYRC and other Sporting SMOs realize their progressive vision, the hope is that, at the very least, this dissertation can help scholars to imagine it.

Chapter 1: **A Physical Cultural Study of KYRC: Methodological Overview**

This section provides details on this project's methodological approaches. First, I explain the primary discipline within which this work is situated: Physical Cultural Studies. Then, I describe the methods and procedures of data collection used throughout this project: broadly, the method of case study; more specifically, in-depth interviewing with KYRC administrators and volunteers, content analysis of KYRC's social media, textual analysis of two educational documents created and used by KYRC, and radical contextualism and articulation. These methods are intended to understand KYRC's logics, structures, and beliefs, but also express the broader contextual forces and processes that shape its emergence and operation. These methods are underpinned by an interpretive, social constructivist paradigm, wherein the purpose of research is to understand how unequal power relations are navigated, meaning is subjectively created, and social realities are interpreted, while acknowledging that the participants and researcher mutually participate in the construction and expression of knowledge (see Denzin & Lincoln, 2005; Guba & Lincoln, 1994; Manning, 1997; Markula & Silk, 2011). Because each subsequent chapter has a different empirical or conceptual focus, each chapter also has its own corresponding methodological approach. I briefly state the methods used within each chapter. However, for the sake of flow and retaining empirical focus, I refrain from a more substantive methodological discussion in each chapter, and instead offer it below.

1.1 On Physical Cultural Studies

This project is first and foremost anchored in the discipline of Physical Cultural Studies (PCS). The primary site of analysis for PCS is *physical culture*, which encompasses both the spectacularized and mundane enactments of physicality, included but not limited to elite sport,

non-elite sport, exercise, health practices, dance, recreation, and other forms of embodied movement (Hargreaves & Vertinsky, 2007; Kirk, 1999; Silk & Andrews, 2011). With a specific focus on how power relations and sites of inequity are reproduced and resisted on the everyday-level of physical culture, PCS employs qualitative methodologies to critically analyze and theorize the ways in which bodies and identities are constituted by, and active constitutors of, their broader social, cultural, political, economic, and historical contexts (Andrews, 2008; Atkinson & Gibson, 2017; Heywood, 2017; Ingham, 1997; Pringle & Thorpe, 2017). As an interdisciplinary project, PCS mobilizes a range of methods, theories, and scholarly approaches to analyze and contextualize physical cultural practices across multiple overlapping scales and dimensions (including but not limited to the ideological, discursive, material, and affective) (Giardina & Newman, 2011; King, 2005; Markula & Silk, 2011; Wheaton, 2017).

A PCS-inflected approach seeks to understand empirical sites of sport and physical culture not for their own sake, but because their contextual formations reveal insights about the broader moment (Andrews & Loy, 1993). In other words, certain structures, practices, and phenomena within sport can be used as vehicles to critically denaturalize and articulate hegemonic forms of power (Andrews, 2002). Most importantly for our purposes – and admittedly the reason I was initially drawn to the discipline – is that PCS approaches sport and physical culture as sites through which power relations can be reified and perpetuated, but also can be exposed, contested, and potentially transformed through critical public pedagogy and scholarly praxis (Donnelly & Atkinson, 2015; King-White, 2012; Olive, 2017; Silk & Mayo, 2017). As such, it harbors an interventionist axiology that advocates for pairing intellectual academic work with a duty to intervene into sites of oppression, injustice, and inequality (Andrews, 2008; Atkinson, 2011; Miller, 2017).

My understanding of PCS is similar (though not identical to) the discipline's foundational definitions offered by Andrews (2008), and later by Silk et al. (2017). In the first PCS handbook, Silk et al. (2017) define PCS in the following way:

PCS is a dynamic and self-reflexive transdisciplinary intellectual project, rooted in qualitative and critical forms of inquiry. Its research object is the diverse realm of physical culture... PCS is concerned with a process of theorizing the empirical, in identifying, interpreting, and intervening into the ways physical culture-related structures and institutions, spaces and places, discourses and representations, subjectivities and identities, and/or practices and embodiments, are linked to broader social, economic, political, and technological contexts. By contextualizing physical culture in this way, PCS looks to explicate how active bodies become organized, disciplined, represented, embodied, and experienced in mobilizing (or corroborating), or at times immobilizing (or resisting), the conjunctural inflections and operations of power within a society. As a form of critical pedagogy, PCS aims to generate and circulate the type of knowledge that would enable individuals and groups to discern, challenge, and potentially transform existing power structures and relations as they are manifest within, and experienced through, the complex field of physical culture. (p. 5)

Within the aforementioned definition is what Andrews and Silk (2015) argue to be the eight “pillars” of rigorous PCS work: 1) *empirical* (driven by an acknowledgement of sporting experiences and practices as negotiations of structure on a micro and macro level experienced through a wide range of empirical dimensions); 2) *contextual* (outlining the multiple and intersecting structural formations that constitute and are constituted by physical cultural experiences, while not reducing those experiences to any single determinant); 3)

transdisciplinary (borrowing influence from various scholarly disciplines that assist in providing insight, while remaining paradigmatically consistent); 4) *theoretical* (engaging a range of social and cultural theories as hermeneutically tools to understanding empirical phenomena); 5) *political* (guided by a commitment to understanding, exposing, and critiquing the operations, directions, and manifestations of power, which is at the foundation of a praxis aimed at intervening into sites of inequality and injustice); 6) *qualitative* (prioritizing validity, depth, and nuance of empirical research, which functions to counter the hegemony of positivism in many social sciences); 7) *self-reflexive* (making explicit the elements listed above while always maintaining the same level of criticality for ourselves and our approach as we maintain for others); and 8) *pedagogical* (valuing knowledge not merely for knowledge's sake, but for dissemination to the public in efforts to conscientize individuals about themselves in relation to society). This project embodies and demonstrates all eight pillars.

I envision this dissertation advancing and expanding PCS in numerous ways. First, and ironically, my analysis of KYRC is an articulation of an articulation.⁷ By this, I mean that this study is unique because the empirical object of analysis (KYRC) is itself an initiative that, on a popular and grassroots level, is breaking new ground with critical public pedagogy, exposing power relations, and intervening into sites of injustice and inequality. In many ways, KYRC manifests the type of (sporting) pedagogy and popular conscientization that scholars within and adjacent to PCS have been advocating for (Andrews, 2019; Forde & Kota, 2016; Giardina, 2005; Hartmann & Kwauk, 2011; King-White, 2011; Spaaij et al., 2016). Second, and related, this project further extends the empirical reach of PCS to the domains of the grassroots, the organizational, and the (ever-expanding) digital. These domains are where the work of KYRC is

⁷ I will explain in-depth what I mean by articulation later in this chapter.

situated, and thus my analysis explores each of these levels. Third, on a methodological level, this project demonstrates PCS work that is done in collaboration with the people and initiatives that it critically analyzes, thus answering calls for PCS scholars to come out of our “ivory towers” and do work with and amongst the people we study (King-White, 2017; Rich & Sandin, 2017).

Fourth, this project borrows theories and conceptual tools from – and in the process puts PCS in conversation with – new scholarly disciplines; including but not limited to social movement studies, the Black Radical Tradition, organizational theory, media and communications, and celebrity studies. I do not claim that each of these disciplinary influences are brand new to PCS, but I do believe that what results from their specific convergence in this project yields fresh and productive pathways for future research. I also hope that this project can stimulate symbiotic insights and dialogues between PCS and these disciplines. Fifth, as with each new project that aims to analyze our unstable and ever-changing social formation, this unique blend of these aforementioned contributions offers new ways to theorize, (radically) contextualize, and operate within our current conjuncture. Importantly, it pairs necessary theoretical analysis – typical within PCS – with on-the-ground strategic details and mechanics of how conscientization is happening, and therefore could happen (not so typical within PCS). Overall, this analysis of KYRC, in both concrete and theoretical terms, demonstrates how sport is – and thus can be – mobilized to respond to new terrains of sport, race, and grassroots activism.

1.2 Case Study and Reflexivity

It is first necessary to explain my method of case study, as well as why and how I chose KYRC. As I have emphasized, this project is concerned with both what KYRC does and is, as

well as how KYRC emerged, what it represents, and what it tells us about the current moment. At times it will divulge into the specific details of KYRC operations, while at others it will speak about KYRC in the abstract, as a device through which we can tell a broader conjunctural story (Grossberg, 2018).

Because I am analyzing KYRC as a Sporting Social Movement Organization (SMO), this project follows Lofland's (1996) guide for a qualitative case study approach to studying SMOs (referring to formal organizations that work to implement goals of a social movement [McCarthy & Zald, 1977; Tilley et al., 1975]).⁸ In critical sociological research, a case study can be broadly defined as an "in-depth multifaceted investigation, using qualitative research methods, of a single social phenomenon" (Feagin et al., 2016; p. 3). In short, the purpose of a case study is to construct a specific example from which we draw broader lessons and insights. The point is not simply to "generalize," as if the patterns, meanings, and processes that undergird one case study can be wholesale transferred to other similar (or dissimilar) cases. Instead, one case that is (or appears to be) demonstrative of a broader phenomenon is comprehensively studied to unveil insights about that broader phenomenon (Hamel et al., 1993).

The goal is to conduct a deep, thorough, contextual, comprehensive analysis of one case – consistent with the aims of PCS – rather than a surface-level examination of multiple cases. In other words, breadth of analysis is sacrificed for depth of analysis. By a "comprehensive" analysis, I refer to the gathering of diverse sets of data about a specific SMO (Lofland, 1996). These can include, for example, in-depth interviews with SMO members and leaders, observation of an SMO, surveys of SMO associates, examining an SMO's communications and rhetorics (i.e. documents composed for the public, documents circulated internally among

⁸ I will explain SMOs with more depth in Chapter 2. Here, I am intending to outline my methodological influences from scholars who have previously studied SMOs.

members, and social media postings). Importantly, by familiarizing themselves with these forms of data, researchers not only generate answers about an SMO. They also can inductively generate *other questions* based on preliminary insights or observations that often can guide a researcher to more faithfully representing and understanding an SMO. As explained by Lofland (1996):

Analysis builds on researchers' efforts to become intimately familiar with the case under study – on their efforts to grasp the realities of the SMO at close range. This is in contrast with the studies in which all the variables of presumed interest and their possible relationships are specified before the study begins. (p. 24)

For the sake of rigor and transparency, below I narrate my process of becoming “intimately familiar” with KYRC.

Generally, and true in my case, researchers are more interested in the broader phenomenon that a case study represents than the details of a case study itself. Therefore, the first step in understanding a broad phenomenon is selecting a useful case study. Lofland (1996) suggests asking three questions about a potential case study. The first – *is it pertinent?* – refers to ensuring that the case study is actually an example of the broader phenomenon that the researcher is trying to understand; and in the case of research that uses SMOs as a conceptual framework, ensuring that it is actually an SMO. The second – *is it practical?* – refers to the extent to which a researcher will be able to gather data with and about an SMO such that they can conduct a holistic analysis. This includes checking for the existence of and ensuring access to the SMOs data sources: scholarly literature, popular literature, own documents (produced publicly or internally), serial publications, critical bodies of literature (that criticize or oppose an SMO), potential interviewees, and potential sites of observations. These are not an essential checklist, but the more of these a researcher is able to gather, the better the data (Lofland recommends a

bare minimum of two of these seven data sources). The third question – *is it my passion?* – refers to whether a case study is interesting or insightful enough to justify the long, grueling hours that researchers will spend studying it (in my case, four years and counting!).

Applying Lofland’s (1996) questions to this project, KYRC is *pertinent* because it represents evolving forms of sporting activism. Additionally, the organization is focused on social issues that are highly relevant to our contemporary conjuncture (Grossberg, 2018). I will admit that, when I began this project, I was not conceptualizing KYRC as an SMO. Instead, I was approaching the project as a novel form of sport-for-development or a sporadic form of sporting activism that is influenced in objective and rhetoric by the Black Lives Matter social movement.⁹ These initial assumptions were not completely wrong, and still influence part of my thinking. However, as I furthered in the process of familiarizing myself with KYRC – put differently, as I conducted the actual research – I realized that KYRC more closely resembled the logics, objectives, structures, and rhetorics of SMOs, and thus needed to be analyzed as such.

Here I must reiterate that SMOs span a vast range and diversity. Each SMO in reality resembles and deviates from the “ideal type” of SMOs, and KYRC is no different (although the more I dug into SMO research, the more I came to consider KYRC as more-or-less typical of an SMO). Rather than using the gaps between actual SMOs and one’s ideal type of SMOs to deny an actual SMO the label, scholars typically use these gaps and points of deviation – put differently, what makes each SMO unique – to productively generate new practical or scholarly insights (Lofland, 1996). In our case, what is unique about KYRC is its connection to celebrity leadership (the Kaepernick Brand), its relationship to sport, its radical messaging, and the cultural processes that it responds to (as detailed in the chapters that follow). For the field of sociology and social

⁹ This conceptual point is the focus of new chapter.

movement research, this project considers how these elements develop our understanding of contemporary SMOs. For the field of (physical) cultural studies and other critical sport studies, it demonstrates the utility and relevance of an SMO framework for understanding the evolution of sporting activism.

Additionally, KYRC is *practical* because of the vast amount of data sources available. I was able to access and analyze five of Lofland's (1996) seven suggestions: interviewees (KYRC staff and volunteers); own documents (social media posts),¹⁰ the Kaepernick Curriculum, and the Political Education Curriculum (all produced by KYRC); popular literature (articles written about KYRC); serial publications (KYRC's newsletter and annual impact reports); and critical bodies of literature (the surprisingly few articles that criticized KYRC, mostly from conservative media, however I also include a generous amount of media critical to Kaepernick). I did not gather much of the other suggestions: scholarly literature (there was remarkably almost nothing on KYRC, although there was an abundance on Kaepernick); and potential sites of observations (these would have included the camps, which I did not attend for this project, but was able to partially "observe" digitally through social media recordings¹¹). Overall, there was sufficient publicly-available data to examine KYRC, and the more exclusive data generated through personal contact and collaboration with KYRC associates was invaluable for outlining a thorough and holistic portrait of KYRC.¹²

¹⁰ Lofland wrote this guide almost a decade before social media became prominent, but I believe he would consider social media postings to be among an SMOs "documents."

¹¹ Social media recordings of camps (mostly public Instagram Stories) were personally interesting to see and helped to give me a sense of what occurs at the camps. However, they did not provide much additional insight that I did not get from the other sources listed above, and none of the data or insights in this project were derived from watching these stories.

¹² In Chapter 5, I note what I perceived as a strategic defensiveness of KYRC. Here it is worth noting that I did not explicitly sense a distrust of outsiders among KYRC, but a distrust is certainly common to SMOs, especially more radically-leaning Leftist SMOs (who have dealt with a long history of repression, infiltration, and CIA intervention). I want to acknowledge that KYRC associates assisted and engaged myself and this project to an extent that other

Lastly, to strike a more reflexive and transparent tone in response to Lofland's (1996) guiding questions, I found myself *passionate* about KYRC. Academically, I was excited about what KYRC offered conceptually and how it expanded numerous fields of study, and I found the results of this study interesting and relevant. Politically, KYRC's mission and objectives spoke to me. This occurred initially – before knowing anything else below the surface of KYRC – and remains true to this point of writing. KYRC's politics are similar to mine (although not exact). I consider myself a radically-oriented Leftist who perhaps naively believes that Black liberation will indeed happen, who cannot help but think about issues structurally, who analyzes race materially and historically and is frustrated by identity reductionism and racial essentialisms, who believes in investing in the youth and community members, who emphasizes the role of class and gender in racial politics in aspirations to build coalitions across identity rather than engage in the destructive politics of purity or social currencies of victimhood, and who participates in contemporary activism without yet fully knowing what to make of it. Perhaps more importantly than my political ideology, I once was the urban Black youth that did not know my rights, nor thought that anyone cared enough about me to teach me them. I grew up in the south-side of Chicago, in the exact type of underserved and impoverished communities that KYRC aims to uplift. KYRC held its first camp in 2016, when I was 20 years old. Without a few key mentors who chose to invest in me, as well as even more lucky breaks that many of my other peers did not receive, it is likely that I would have attended a KYRC camp instead of being off at college pursuing my undergraduate degree. I see myself in what KYRC does and who it impacts.

similar SMOs would not have. This would have been a much different – and certainly worse – project without them. I appreciate that engagement, do not take it lightly, and hope to vindicate their trust.

Personally, I liked conducting research with KYRC. I was somewhat indifferent about Kaepernick as a football player.¹³ Yet I admired and agreed with Kaepernick's kneeling protest, and to some extent, it probably influenced my own political evolution and enthusiasm for activism. Furthermore, I liked my participants in this study, and found myself impressed by the level of thought and consideration they put into their work with KYRC. If I were not an academic researcher, I would likely be a personal supporter of KYRC. In all, there were multiple dimensions that sustained the passion that Lofland (1996) urged, and made this project at times fun, at times frustrating, at times overwhelming, but overall a meaningful experience. While I am not pretending to be dispassionate, I do not believe that my personal and political orientations impacted the study to an extent that invalidates any aspect of this project.

I am aware that these admissions do not bode well for my legitimacy to any reader still holding on to the folklore of the completely neutral, detached, objective researcher who merely excavates a "Truth" that they played no role in creating (see Denzin & Giardina, 2016; Giardina & Laurendeau, 2013; Lincoln et al., 2011; Markula & Silk, 2013; Somekh & Schwandt, 2013). Indeed, it is likely that my positionality subconsciously influenced the direction of this project, even in ways that limit it. For instance, Lofland (1996) acknowledges how researchers have immersed themselves within both what many consider to be "good" and "bad" SMOs. The "good" SMOs harbor politics we (as in most academics) perceive as morally virtuous, and tactics we perceive as reasonable (such as Civil Rights organizations, environmental groups, peace activists, etc.). The "bad" SMOs harbor politics we find to be detestable or dangerous, and tactics we find to be coercive or manipulative (such as the KKK, religious cults, and most SMOs who

¹³ ...although as a Chicago Bears fan, one of my favorite sport-spectating memories was when Kaepernick played an incredible game to send the Green Bay Packers home in the 2013 NFL playoffs, and seeing my annoying Packer-fan friends stunned for days. The enemy of my enemy is a friend.

fight for regressive conservative causes). Researchers typically set out to find what the good SMOs are doing right and how they can be more effective, while often trying to understand how the bad SMOs formulate and operate to discover how they might be fought or prevented. It is not that this is an inherently flawed endeavor, but it does, in many cases, subtly underpin our approach. For example, what a researcher might describe in a good SMO as “tactics of persuasion”, they might perceive in a bad SMO as “brainwashing.”

While I did not set out to prescribe KYRC a label of good or bad – in fact, I tried explicitly to avoid a good/bad dichotomy – it is true that I view KYRC as a “good” SMO. Indeed, this may be part of the reason that this project contains what will probably be read as more praise than criticism of KYRC. But I contend that, while this orientation probably shaped my approach to some extent, it did not hinder me from analyzing KYRC *critically*. In fact, I reject a simplistic conception that views “critical analysis” as a report that documents a roughly equal amount of “good” and “bad” things about something. Analyzing critically, to me, means unpacking the opaque layers of a phenomenon, complicating narratives that are proposed to us as simple, and being willing to go beyond the surface-level appearance of things to explore the potentialities, contradictions, tensions, and unities of a social reality. Put differently, the words critical and pessimistic are not synonyms, while critical and optimistic are not antonyms. My critical analysis of KYRC generated more optimism for the world that I had when this project began. I hope the feeling is not exclusive to me.

1.3 In-depth interviews: KYRC Associates

In what follows, I provide more concrete details and procedures that guided this research. The first primary method of this project is in-depth semi-structured interviewing (see Atkinson & Silverman, 1997; Fontana & Frey, 2005; Patton, 1990; Randall & Phoenix, 2009). In-depth

interviews are capable of providing rich illumination of experience, meaning, values, context, motivation, and behavior in regard to certain phenomena (Smith & Sparkes, 2017). The main strength of semi-structured interviewing is its flexibility, as it allows the researcher to tailor the direction of the interview in response to the participant's interests and engagement (Stroh, 2000). Procedurally, after receiving Institutional Review Board (IRB) approval, I constructed a sample of six interview participants (N=6). Purposive sampling was used to find participants who matched the selection criteria for this study (see Gentles et al., 2015). The criteria for selection entailed a requirement that participants were 18 years or older, had worked for and volunteered with KYRC in an official capacity, had attended a camp, and had enough knowledge and perspective of KYRC to speak to the organization's logics. All participants met these criteria. The sample size being relatively small is because the selection criteria is also small. However, the quality of data more than made up for the quantity. Although I cannot list the specific jobs or tasks of each participant within KYRC (as it would identify them internally, and potentially externally), I can say that each participant is involved with KYRC in the planning and production of its camps and various initiatives, either as a worker or volunteer. The six interviews were rich enough that I had reached saturation, meaning that similar themes and perspectives were arising among each new participant.

Participants were solicited via publicly-available information and social media. Four participants were recruited via messaging to their personal social media accounts. After initially explaining this study and asking if they were interested in being a participant, I scheduled their interview. The two other participants were recruited via snowball sampling, referring to the method of asking prior participants to recommend other potential participants who may be interested in interviewing for the study (see Parker et al., 2019). All interviews were conducted

via Zoom. Interviews ranged from 45 minutes to two hours long, with the average interview lasting one hour and 15 minutes.¹⁴ Consent to participate was explained and agreed upon at the beginning of each interview. Interviews were recorded (with participant consent) and transcribed after they were conducted. Once transcriptions were complete, data was de-identified and numbers (i.e. Participant #1) were given in place of participants' names. Consistent with ethical standards of human subject research, the purpose de-identification is to protect the anonymity of participants from the public and, in the case of this project, from each other.¹⁵ Once data was collected, guided by thematic analysis (see Clarke & Braun, 2006), I constructed themes from the data. The majority of these themes from interview data are presented and discussed in Chapter 5, although quotes and insights from interview data appear throughout the project. Because participants provided such rich and precise data, I mostly let the quotes speak for themselves (with light editing to remove redundant verbal ticks such as “umm” or “uhh”). My intervention as the researcher was to interject with summary and context where I saw fit, as well as arranging the disparate comments across participant interview to form a comprehensible narrative that constitutes Chapter 5.

1.4 Content and Textual Analysis: KYRC's Media and Public Documents

My second empirical entry point to understanding KYRC was their media and public documents. This provided insight into their communications, rhetoric, and pedagogical messaging; in other words, what the organization believes, how it constructs and promotes itself

¹⁴ See Appendix A for list of interview questions.

¹⁵ To be clear, none of the KYRC associates that I interviewed expressed a desire for their comments to be anonymous from the public or from each other. Neither did participants indicate any potentially sensitive or vulnerable information in their interviews. Nonetheless, it is still consistent with academic ethical standards to take any measure to protect the identity of research participants from the public and from other participants.

to the public, the audiences (communities) to whom they are speaking, what they actually are saying, and how they are saying it. The first method of answering these questions was analyzing KYRC's social media with content analysis. Patton (2002) defines content analysis as "any qualitative and sense-making effort that takes a volume of qualitative material and attempts to identify core consistencies and meanings" (Patton, 2002, p. 453). Content analysis has been commonly used to examine communications and social media strategies, in both sport literature (Carrotte et al., 2017; Filo et al., 2015; Hambrick et al., 2010; Pegaro & Jinnah, 2012; Scovel, 2023; Wang & Zhou, 2015) and social movement literature (Ferrari, 2016; García-Albacete, 2022; Hanna, 2013; Hope & Paris, 2021; Rone, 2022). My intention with using content analysis was to identify general trends or patterns regarding how KYRC uses social media in relation to its organizational beliefs and objectives. Specifically, I aimed to examine: 1) how KYRC balances critical pedagogy with organizational sustenance, 2) how the organization "frames" (Snow et al., 1986) its critical pedagogical messaging, and 3) the audiences that is it attempting to reach (and in the process, construct). This study is technically mixed-methods, with both quantitative and qualitative aspects. I organized and analyzed the data quantitatively to identify any surface-level trends, but this categorization was based on qualitative coding of the meanings and implications of each post, which was determined subjectively.

Specifically, the data set was composed of KYRC's posts on Instagram (N=211). While I initially also considered including Facebook, X (formerly Twitter), and TikTok, I chose Instagram because it was their most active platform in terms of posts and engagement. Content that was posted on the other platforms was typically first posted on Instagram (meaning there was very little on other platforms that I would not see using only Instagram). I collected the Instagram posts by adding them to a spreadsheet that marked the dated posted, a brief 1-2

sentence description of the post, and the code to which I categorized the post. The sample consisted of posts across three months: June 2023 (N=50), September 2023 (N=93), and December 2023 (N=68). These months were chosen largely because of convenience, as June 2023 was roughly when this study was ready to collect this data. However, I included two other months after realizing that the content, type, and likely engagement of posts was influenced by timing within the year. For example, in June specifically, there are very little sports happening in the U.S, and it had also been a period for KYRC where it had been about four months since a camp and about five months away from their next camp. September was a more active time of the year for sports (which matters for my interest in KYRC, but not so much theirs). December was the month that KYRC hosted a camp, released their app, and also close to when they began their podcast (in late November 2023), all of which influenced their style and content of posting. While this study initially also included “stories” – an Instagram feature that allows accounts to post something that disappears after 24 hours – I decided against inclusion after realizing that KYRC mostly reposted their own Instagram posts (that are already included in the sample), as well as determining that there was not enough value in stories to justify their difficulty to track and categorize. The general idea of how I would categorize posts was based on this project’s theoretical framework and aims (mostly relating to the processes of framing and critical pedagogy). Each post was coded by myself and my research assistant,¹⁶ with three rounds of each, to ensure validity and reliability. Our codes changed slightly after each round of coding due to shifting foci and emerging patterns in the data. In the end, we settled on four codes for the

¹⁶ My undergraduate research assistant, Sarah Lingelbach, assisted me with documenting and categorizing the Instagram posts. The content analysis of KYRC’s social media is heavily indebted to her focus, persistence, and overall brilliance.

general posts: Critical Pedagogy, Organizational Promotion, Partnerships, and the Kaepernick Brand. The themes and general results are discussed and analyzed in Chapter 6.

The second method of analyzing KYRC's communications, rhetoric, and pedagogy was textual analysis (see Johnson et al., 2004; MacKay, 2017; Markula & Silk, 2011; Plymire, 2005). Content analysis (as discussed above) cannot provide much more than description and recognition of patterns and trends. For this reason, I only use it for mapping these broad patterns. To attain deeper and more comprehensive understanding, content analysis should be paired with other qualitative analysis capable of excavating the subtexts and contexts of the data (Ogan & Varol, 2017). For this reason, I also include a textual analysis of two public documents created and released to the public by KYRC: what I will call The Kaepernick Curriculum (2021) and the Political Education Curriculum (2023). Broadly, textual analysis aims to analyze the discursive, visual, and symbolic ways in which popular media texts are embedded within, and structured in relation to, prevailing cultural politics and power relations (Markula and Silk, 2011; Wallace & Andrews, 2021). Most textual analyses focus on how power is naturalized and reproduced by dominant groups through popular media communication (Johnson et al., 2004; Silk et al., 2008). Rarely do textual analyses focus on how power is contested and denaturalized by non-dominant groups; despite the insistence of cultural studies analysts on the possibilities of popular contestation (Hall, 1981). Examining KYRC's pedagogy through these public documents is a way to analyze how, through sport, a contemporary SMO might both constructs political and cultural counter narratives while at the same time disseminating them relevant audiences.

The Kaepernick Curriculum is an 85-page document that was developed by KYRC in 2021. It was released to the public concurrent with Kaepernick's 2021 Netflix series titled *Colin in Black and White* (directed by Ava Duvernay), which across six episodes depicts Kaepernick's

coming-of-age as he wrestles with his racial identity and discovers his political consciousness. Although marketed as a companion piece to the series, information, activities, and resources from the Curriculum are connected to the camps; meaning that, in essence, the Curriculum is a de facto written distillation of KYRC's popular culture education. The Curriculum is mainly organized by each of the six episodes, titled: 1 – Cornrows, 2 – Quarterbackin', 3 – Road Trip, 4 – The Decision, 5 – Crystal, 6 – Dear Colin. The series is based on Kaepernick's true life story, with Kaepernick himself acting as narrator and educator on the show. The Curriculum offers historical, cultural, and academic context to the events of each episode, but not for its own sake. It is clear throughout the Curriculum that Kaepernick and KYRC are not as interested in using context to enhance public understanding of the series as they are in using the series to enhance public understanding of the context to which it responds.

Similar to the Kaepernick Curriculum, the other document that I analyze is called the Know Your Rights Camp Curriculum, officially titled: "Speaking Out: Against the Violence of Policing and Systemic Oppression: A Political Education Curriculum" (hereby referred to as the Political Education Curriculum). Released by KYRC in 2023, this 58-page document outlines – in exquisite detail – how to administer public, adult education within communities around the issues of race, policing, and abolition across a five-day course. It is quite literally a curriculum, as it outlines both the content (in terms of subject areas and relevant readings) and pedagogical strategies (in terms of activities, questions, and tactics to productively and safely engage these subject areas). The document is "intended for implementation in grades 9-12, adult education, and community learning spaces... divided into five separate but related days of 50-minute activities. The guide includes all materials, resources, and tips educators will need when teaching" (KYRC website, retrieved March 2024). Thus, it not only provides insight to what

KYRC believes and teaches, but also contains their practical recommendations for educating based in academic sociological and cultural research on race, pedagogy, and abolition. The Political Education Curriculum differs from the Kaepernick Curriculum in that it is a stand-alone document (not tied to the Netflix show), appears to be intended for a mature adult audience (rather than the Kaepernick Curriculum appearing to be intended for teen/young adult audience), is far more developed politically and academically (compared to the Kaepernick Curriculum which is intended to be more introductory and engaging), and most importantly, is written as a set of instructions for teachers, educators, and community members taking on a pedagogical role (compared to the Kaepernick Curriculum which speaks directly to the audience). The Political Education Curriculum, in short, is written as a literal blueprint for community-based critical pedagogy as written by KYRC.

Both documents are rich with insight about various scholarly issues, but also ripe for analysis about KYRC. My specific approach to analyzing them was to focus on what they are teaching, how they go about teaching it, what their pedagogical messages and tactics reveal about KYRC, and to what specific contexts and conjunctural issues that KYRC's understands their pedagogy as a response. More details and deeper analysis on both the Kaepernick Curriculum and the Political Education Curriculum form the basis of Chapter 6, and inform the discussion of Chapters 3 and 7.

1.5 Radical Contextualism and Articulation

The previous section outlines the methods used primarily in Chapter 5 (in-depth interviews) and Chapter 6 (content and textual analysis). The other chapters – Chapter 3 on KYRC's ideological foundation and what it tells us about the contemporary Black (Radical) Athlete; Chapter 4 on the emergence of KYRC and what it tells us about the political potential

inherent to contemporary commercial sport; and Chapter 7 on what KYRC tells us about the American conjuncture – are all based in the cultural studies methodologies of radical contextualism and articulation. Rather than repeating this methodology in each of those chapters, I here want to thoroughly explain the ontological, epistemological, and axiological foundations of cultural studies research.

My understanding of the methods of radical contextualism and articulation is indebted particularly to cultural studies scholars out of the Birmingham Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies, most prominently Stuart Hall, Larry Grossberg, and John Clarke. Grossberg's (2010) summary of this approach underpins this project:

[Cultural studies] is concerned with describing and intervening in the ways cultural practices are produced within, inserted into, and operate in the everyday life of human beings and social formations, so as to reproduce, struggle against, and perhaps transform the existing structures of power. That is, if people make history but in conditions not of their own making, cultural studies explores the ways this process is enacted with and through cultural practices, and the place of these practices within specific historical formations.¹⁷ (p. 8)

It is this “specific historical formation” that is the primary object of cultural studies analysis (Turner, 1990), and also this project. Radical contextualism, then, is the practice and method through which scholars can link the empirical to this broader formation (Davis, 2019; Grossberg, 2006). To radically contextualize an empirical phenomenon means to first recognize, and then give expression to, the complex forces that constitute a social formation. Rather than the political and intellectual work of cultural studies being one dedicated to understanding the empirical

¹⁷ Given the clear parallels, one can see how PCS grew out of cultural studies.

object, it instead uses the empirical object to interrogate the contexts in which empirical is dialectically situated (Hall, 1996; Grossberg, 2010). In other words, a radically-contextual cultural studies is only interested in empirical practices and phenomena – such as sport – insofar as it can tell us something about the broader conjuncture (Andrews, 2002; Grano, 2016).

Admittedly, this approach is half-true for this project, for which KYRC is my empirical object. I am interested in what KYRC tells me about the expressions and relations between contexts (concerning sport, activism, social movements, race, sport, politics, social media), but I am also interested in KYRC as an organization in itself (its strategies, logics, structure, challenges, pedagogy, and rhetoric). However, I am careful not to view the granular details of KYRC in isolation. As we will see, my perspective is that the concrete specifics of how KYRC runs are relational and dialectic; strategically-chosen and themselves both a manifestation and response to KYRC's surrounding contextual forces. This study of KYRC, then, demonstrates how “the identity, significance, and effects of any practice or event (including cultural practices and events) are defined only by the complex set of relations that surround, interpenetrate, and shape it, and make it what it is” (Grossberg, 2010; p. 20). This project is thus an attempt to illuminate the multiple determinations and effects that converge to produce KYRC, and more broadly shape how we conceptualize race, sport, and grassroots activism.

In illuminating these determinations, I utilize the theory/method of articulation. Articulation the embodiment of radical contextualism (Grossberg, 1997; 2010), as it simultaneously names (gives expression to) and forges connections between the contextual forces and processes that produce a given reality. Articulation is the theoretically-informed practice of locating, situating, and expressing the contextual relations within specific historical conjunctures (Clarke, 2015; Hall, 1981; 1996; Hebdige, 2015; Slack, 1996). It entails the

“transformative practice or work of making, unmaking, and remaking relations and contexts, of establishing new relations out of old relations or non-relations, of drawing lines and mapping connections” (Grossberg, 2010; p. 21), while, importantly, recognizing that these forged connections are not necessary, determined, absolute, essential, and reducible to any contextual factor or anchored solely to any one theory (Slack, 1996). Through articulation, one cannot assume a priori a necessary correspondence (or non-correspondence) between sets of relations. We have to instead demonstrate them, knowing nothing is determined or guaranteed in advance. As Hall puts it, when articulating an empirical phenomenon, “what is ‘determined’ is not the inner form and appearance of each level, but the mode of combination and the placing of each instance in an articulated relation to the other elements” (Hall, 2021; p. 222). Because contextual forces can only be linked under certain circumstances, the method of articulation entails scholars unpacking the key question posed by Hall (1996; p. 141): “under what circumstances can a connection be forged or made?”

The point of naming these connections and the circumstances of their formation through articulation is that it offers clarity. It provides (at least partial) clarity to the messiness and complexity of modern life, and in simple terms, sharpens our understanding of what is going on so that we can act accordingly. As Grossberg (2006) reminds us, “cultural struggles are understandable only when their articulation to the hegemonic struggle is made clear” (p. 13). The capacity of articulation to make things clear is important because it illuminates how everyday cultural phenomena has political stakes and is linked to broader struggles over power. Articulation is a practice that demonstrates how “cultural practices contribute to the production of the context as an organization of power, and construct the context as a lived everyday experience of power” which is ultimately “why culture matters, because it is a key dimension of

the ongoing transformation or construction of reality” (Grossberg, 2010; p. 24). The anti-essentialist nature of reality – the view that the structure of reality is mutable and not inevitable – is what drives the PCS scholar to seek out changing social relations and rearticulating power relations to build a better world (Andrews & Loy, 1993; Miller, 2001). Thus articulation – the effort to express and make sense of our complex social reality – is a crucial step towards political intervention and transformation (Clarke, 2023; Proctor, 2004). In this vein, this project uses KYRC as an attempt to articulate the contemporary linkages between sport, race, and politics, as well as how KYRC exemplifies the possibilities for political intervention (or, in more academic language, hegemonic struggle) via grassroots sporting activism.

Lastly, I want to acknowledge the modesty that is required when conducting radical contextualism (Davis, 2019). It is a complex and difficult endeavor. It entails telling the story of a particular contextual formation from within it, knowing that the story that emerges by the end and the vocabulary with which we articulate it are themselves contextually-bound and tethered to the knowledges, practices, and ideological derivatives of that particular formation. Additionally, contextualism can go on forever. If context is everything and everything is context, scholars are forced to arbitrarily choose where to begin and where to stop, which contextual forces to focus on and which to relegate to the background, and the chronology with which one describes forces that are all happening simultaneously and only make sense in the context of everything else. These are inherently subjective decisions that are likely to leave readers at least partially unsatisfied.

As such, recognizing the impossibility of telling the full story, the aim radical contextualism is to move us a little bit closer to understanding what is going on. This project thus will not succeed in telling *the* objective story of KYRC, nor in comprehensively elucidating

exactly what KYRC tells us about the current moment. Nor am I under the delusion that I am the first one to point out some (or most) of the insights that follow. Knowing that I will inevitably fail to reveal *everything*, my more modest goal is to reveal *something*. It is to add to a number of ongoing conversations, and perhaps nudge these conversations in ways that I think would make them more productive. The main conversation is that of PCS and cultural studies, but there are other pertinent conversations that inform his project. Each chapter briefly outlines these specific conversations that pertain to the empirical phenomena of that chapter. In the next chapter, I attempt to outline the specific conversations to which this dissertation as a whole draws upon, contributes, and synthesizes.

Chapter 2: **Conceptualizing Sporting SMOs: Literature Review**

Before launching into my empirical analysis, it is necessary to explain how I am conceptualizing KYRC: as a Sporting Social Movement Organization (SMO). I define Sporting SMO as *an organization that utilizes its connection to sport or athletes to pursue social, political, or cultural change in a coordinated, strategic, and sustained manner*. In this chapter, I narrate my journey towards choosing this framework and developing this definition. In doing so, describe the influences and assumptions that guide my inquiry through KYRC's various empirical elements. While I do not intend to imply that KYRC is the first or only Sporting SMO, I do argue that KYRC is one of the most high-profile and visible. As such, they are a useful case study for theorizing Sporting SMOs and how they emerged from distinct structural changes in the cultural and political economy of sport. This chapter will outline how Sporting SMOs materialized from the convergence of social movements, athlete activism, sporting philanthropy, and sport-for-development organizations. For this reason, I trace how my study of KYRC is influenced by the literatures of resource mobilization, sport and social movements, and sport for (youth and community) development. I argue that these literatures all provide a partial-yet-incomplete understanding of KYRC, but these literatures are synthesized within the concept of the Sporting SMO. This dissertation is then one of the first systematic explications of the phenomenon of the Sporting SMO, and consequently provides a timely and necessary extension to the conceptual reach of PCS and critical sport studies.

2.1 Resource Mobilization and SMOs

While they originated in the resource mobilization (RM) model of social movement research, social movement organizations (SMOs) have been a focus for scholars within

essentially all strands of social movement research. McCarthy & Zald (1977) famously defined SMOs as “complex [formal] organization which identifies its goals with the preferences of a social movement...and attempts to implement those goals” (p. 1218). SMOs are the central, primary actors of social movements (see Clemens & Minkoff, 2004; Elliott & Earl, 2018). In short, SMOs typically work from the margins to voice their dissatisfaction with some aspect of the perceived status quo, and then to implement their vision of how society ought to be and how people ought to live (Lofland, 1996). They have numerous purposes: they facilitate the collection and distribution of social movement resources (Cress & Snow, 1996; McCarthy & Zald, 1977); they strategize about and contribute to how social issues are popularly framed (Snow et al., 1986); and they assist in the creation and sustenance of collective identity (Polletta & Jasper, 2001). SMOs are also crucial because they coordinate the creation of social networks among various individuals and publics, which strongly influences recruitment into and participation within social movements (Snow et al., 1980). As “the vehicles of collective action” (Tilly et al., 1975), it is important to analyze the specific actions of contemporary SMOs to understand the mechanics of social change in our current era.

Before elaborating on SMOs, it is important to situate them as central to a paradigm of social movement theory research called resource mobilization (RM). Throughout this dissertation, I use RM as a framework for analyzing KYRC. Gaining prominence in the 1970s, RM marked a shift away from the previously-dominant strain/breakdown theory of social movement research, which roughly posited that individuals are driven to mobilize (and thus social movements emerge) when there is a disruption, or breakdown, of the status quo to which those individuals have become accustomed (Blumer, 1951; Smelser, 1962). Much of this approach was interested in the psychology of social movement participation, often assuming that

individuals were acting irrationally or against their own interests when engaging in collective social action (Buechler, 2011).

Rather than dabbling in cognitive psychology and overemphasizing the macro-structural, a resource mobilization (RM) approach instead explains the rise of social movements by focusing on the specific and potential resources available to social movements and organizations (Jenkins, 1983). RM emphasizes factors such as “the variety and sources of resources; the relationship of social movements to the media, authorities, and other parties; and the interaction among movement organizations” (McCarthy & Zald, 1997; p. 1212). Whereas strain/breakdown rarely focuses on the agency of the SMOs and movement actors themselves, RM theories focus on the strategic decisions of social movements and their associated organizations, along with how those dynamics affect recruitment and mobilization (Buechler, 2011). Much of RM operates under the assumption that there is always enough discontent in society to spark a movement, and even that grievances may be defined, created, or manipulated to do so. However, grievances do not always lead directly to mobilization; in fact, they do *not* more than they do. Rather, the central claim of RM is that the success of a social movement depends on the quality and quantity of resources (such as money, labor, outside assistance, facilities, etc.) available to the actors of that social movement (Gamson, 1990). Grievances become movements when resources are mobilized in service of them (McCarthy & Zald, 1977). Additionally, RM also tends to view social movements as institutionalized and social movement participants being those most integrated into society (rather than previous models viewing them to be the ones most isolated/alienated from society) (Oberschall, 1972).

Overall, rather than sporadic outbursts by people on the margins of society, RM scholars paint a picture of social movements as being professionalized, organized, rational, and operating

with an almost-economic logic (McCarthy & Zald, 1977).¹⁸ As such, according to RM, social movements are more often driven by institutional actors than those on the margins; and sometimes, even supported or driven by elites. As Buechler (2011; p. 114) summarizes:

The classical model of movements saw grievances and masses as independent variables leading to movements that then generated leaders and sought resources. The professional model reverses this logic, seeing entrepreneurial leaders and resource availability as independent variables leading to movements that then frame grievances and recruit membership to suit their purposes. Put more succinctly, "the definition of grievances will expand to meet the funds and support personnel available." (McCarthy and Zald 1987: 379)

In the following chapters, I focus specifically on what resources KYRC accumulates, how KYRC accumulates them, how KYRC mobilizes them, and towards what ends KYRC mobilizes them.

Though I “wrestle” (Grossberg, 2017) with resource mobilization throughout this project, the framework is not without its critiques. Buechler (2011) notes that a significant strand of RM research became less concerned with the internal operations of SMOs and more upon the political opportunity structures in which they operated. This strand evolved into what scholars now call political process theory, which analyzes social movements through the lens of long-term social and political shifts, emphasizes the determining role of macro-political structures, understands social movement resources as intricately linked to the broader political atmosphere

¹⁸ RM was the more compelling explanation to the central paradox that arose from grievance-driven models: if social movement activity is directly positively correlated with grievances, then how is it that the rising affluence of the 1950s and 1960s is leading to more social movement activity? There are numerous potential responses to this paradox, but that one offered by the RM approach is that it was “a period in which institutionalized support for social movement organizations became increasingly available and in which life careers in movements were more and more likely to be combined with established professional roles” (McCarthy & Zald, 1987: 358-359). In other words, from an RM approach, social movements escalated because the era’s affluence led to more resources to address the already-existing grievances, as well as more demand for jobs and an expanding social movement sector; essentially, a bull market for the social movement industry (McCarthy & Zald, 1977).

(Buechler, 2011; McAdam, 1982). While not ignoring the importance of resources, Political Process Theory contends that the successful mobilization of those resources relies on the favorable political and cultural climates that allow openings/opportunities for changes to the social order (Tarrow, 1994). Applying a political process approach to KYRC,¹⁹ Chapters 4 and 5 outline the political opportunity structures that have enabled the resurgence of sporting activism and the creation of the Kaepernick Brand.

Another critique of RM is that the paradigm tends to overstate the extent to which social change can be institutionalized and bureaucratized while remaining subversive or consistent with its original goals. The political system is not as permeable or open to change from outside pressure as RM assumes (and neither are elites) (Gamson, 1990). It also can sometimes neglect the idea of grievances, ideology, marginalization, group solidarity, and “cognitive liberation” (McAdam, 1982; Piven & Cloward, 1979); all of which play a larger role in social movements than RM can explain, and do not always lead to the rational action that RM often assumes (Buechler, 2011). Nonetheless, despite these critiques, RM offers a useful framework to examine the internal dynamics of a specific organization. Overall, because the “study of the aggregation of resources (money and labor) is crucial to an understanding of social movement activity” (McCarthy & Zald, p. 1216), the resource mobilization approach is fitting and useful for studying sporting activism and KYRC.

However, resources are not the only potential focus when studying SMOs, and are not my only focus in studying KYRC. In his methodological treatise on SMO research called *Social Movement Organizations: Guide to Research on Insurgent Realities*, Lofland (1996) documented the primary questions and approaches with which scholars have conducted SMO research. His

¹⁹ In my view, the analysis of political opportunity structures in social movement research is highly compatible with the cultural studies approaches of radical contextualism and conjunctural analysis (Grossberg, 2019).

“seven main questions” of SMO research include: 1) what are SMO beliefs? 2) how are SMOs organized? 3) what are causes of SMOs? 4) why do people join SMOs? 5) what are SMO strategies? 6) what are reactions to SMOs? 7) what are the effects of SMOs? (p. 47-51). These foundational questions have been asked about SMOs of diverse form and foci: what Lofland categorizes as political, religious, and personal transformational. KYRC is most akin to a political SMO. However, often within work based on Lofland’s conception, all “political” SMOs are subsumed into roughly the same category. While he acknowledges a distinction within political SMOs between ideologies, goals, tactics, and contexts, they are treated as variables to acknowledge that, nonetheless, can be analyzed with the same foundational approach. This dissertation will show that KYRC is a *radical* political SMO, whose objectives and logics sometimes evade the scholarly attention of traditional social movement paradigms (Fitzgerald & Rogers, 2000). Therefore, it is also important to figure out the logics and strategies of how KYRC operates and pursues its radical goals.

As this dissertation intends to demonstrate, a synthesis of resource mobilization and the sociology of sport can mutually fill gaps within both literatures. Scholars note how SMOs formalize around a certain social cause, sometimes even taking a more proactive than reactive role in defining and promoting the grievance. The question is, then, not whether or not a grievance is deep enough to ignite a movement, but one of what strategic moves actors within a political system make to turn a grievance into a movement (McCarthy & Zald, 1977). Social movement scholars have yet to consider the role of sport – as a universal and ever-expanding cultural form – within this process, or specifically how the use of sport within an SMO enables or constrains the accumulation, deployment, or retention of resources. In later chapters, I describe the material and symbolic resources available to KYRC, and how Kaepernick and the

KYRC organization mobilizes them to attain their goals. Beyond money and labor, I also focus on the relationships/coalitions, external sources of funding, and symbolic power of Kaepernick's celebrity profile that KYRC puts to use to recruit participants, volunteers, and sway potential movement sympathizers (McCarthy & Zald, 1977; Meyer, 1995). Overall, a central argument of this dissertation – and one with direct implications for scholars of sport and social movements – is that KYRC is made possible by the commercial explosion of contemporary sport (Andrews, 2019) combined with the resurgence of activism within sport during the BLM movement (Cooper, 2021) has resulted in an expansion of the social movement industry (McCarthy & Zald, 1977), into which Sporting SMOs have entered and impacted.²⁰ These contextual considerations – specifically, how political and economic contexts influence the flow of resources – is compatible with and can be enhanced by the radically-contextual emphases of cultural studies and PCS (Andrews, 2002; Grossberg, 2010; Hall, 1996).

Studying SMOs such as KYRC then lends insight to the “supply side” of protest (Klandermans, 2004), referring to the materials, framings, messages, and opportunities produced by SMOs (Elliott & Earl, 2018). While many disciplines focus on the “demand” for social movement activity – (meaning grievances, social discontent, or what cultural studies often refers to as resistance) – examining the inner workings of SMOs is important because they offer people a structured and organized way to participate in protest, advocacy, and other forms of political-cultural resistance (Jenkins, 1983; Lofland, 1996). For causes that center identity-based issues

²⁰ KYRC is one of many SMOs aligned with BLM, and subsequently focused on the issues of police brutality and other intersecting forms of structural racism. Social movements with various aligned organizations allow for a greater diversity in ideology, strategy, tactics, and models (Clemens & Minkoff, 2004; Elliott & Earl, 2018). While these differences may lead to a fracturing of movement energy, it also may offer a diverse market that may incentivize potential new recruits to join. KYRC is a large and notable SMO within this market, as its “niche” selling point is not only its direct marketing to youth and its connection to celebrities and athletes, but an athlete (Kaepernick) for whom more people identified as a leader of BLM than the actual founders of BLM (Towler et al., 2020).

(such as KYRC's focus on race), SMOs encourage positive identification with some form of "marginalized" identity status, thus strengthening members' commitment to that shared identity factor, that movement, and to future political activity (Elliot & Earl, 2018; Poletta & Jasper, 2001; Tindall, 2004). Overall, conceptualizing KYRC as an SMO offers the best framework for examining how KYRC pursues their mission to "advance the liberation and well-being of Black and Brown communities through education, self-empowerment, mass-mobilization and the creation of new systems that elevate the next generation of change leaders" (knowyourrightscamp.org; retrieved July 2023).

2.2 Sport, Youth, and Community Development

The phrase "the next generation of change leaders" in KYRC's mission statement (above) is notable. It speaks to another particularity about KYRC: that it is an SMO that specifically targets youth. Scholars note that SMOs are especially important for youth because they provide spaces for political socialization, allow youth to model political activity of adult members (in KYRC's unique case, celebrity athletes that they grew up admiring), and can help youth develop interpersonal skills (Conner, 2011; Delgado & Staples, 2007; Elliott & Earl, 2018; Kirshner, 2008). Despite this importance, SMOs have traditionally done a poor job of organizing and engaging youth (Gordon, 2007). This is the case historically in "offline" organizing but also, surprisingly, with online engagement in the digital age (Elliott & Earl, 2018). Research suggests that contemporary youth are politically engaged and want to be politically active (Elliott & Earl, 2018), but are avoiding traditional SMOs because they feel dismissed by adult members and/or do not feel empowered in social movement spaces (Taft, 2014; Taft & Gordon, 2013). Additionally, SMOs do not tend to frame youth as an important constituency for effective social change. But today's youth are not avoiding politics altogether in the digital age. They are instead

participating in new and different ways (Elliott & Earl, 2018; Kahne et al., 2014), such as through online, interactive, peer-to-peer modalities that do not require adult gatekeepers (Cohen et al., 2012; Elliott & Earl, 2018). Regardless, it is arguably still important for youth to associate with SMOs to sustain political activity. As Elliott & Earl (2018) found, youth who are official members of SMOs are twice as likely to be politically active than non-members.

The lack of literature concerning the connection between SMOs and youth, as well as SMOs and sport, leads us to also locate KYRC within the literature of sport, youth, and community development. Based on both public documents and interview data, KYRC intentionally counters this trend of youth dismissal from SMOs. As declared in their mission statement, KYRC explicitly identifies youth as the agents of change and dedicates their camps to facilitating “self-empowerment.”²¹ Perhaps KYRC centers youth more than other SMOs because of their connection to sport, in which (Black) athletes are commonly touted as heroes and role models of the (Black) community with an unspoken obligation to give back to the community²² (Bryant, 2018; Hoberman, 1997). Whereas most Black athletes do this through (often faceless) philanthropy or the establishment of sporting camps, Kaepernick through KYRC offers an alternative model of “giving back” to the youth through radical education and political development. This focus on youth and community leads us to another key consideration of KYRC: as a (transformative) sport-for-development organization.

While SMOs have had a curious neglect of youth, organizations connected to sport certainly have not. The trend of organizations reaching youth through sport is prevalent, and the models, objectives, politics, and outcomes of these organizations is a common area of study in a field

²¹ Chapters 5 and 6 specifically convey how this promise is enacted with the in-person camps, and as well as within their social media usage.

²² This notion is unpacked further in Chapter 3.

called sport-for-development.²³ These organizations typically mobilize sport to achieve a wide array of ‘positive’ social, economic, moral, diplomatic, and/or developmental outcomes (see Coalter, 2013; Collison et al., 2018; Darnell, 2012; Darnell et al., 2019, Guilianotti, 2010; Hartmann, 2016; Mower et al., 2023; Pitter & Andrews, 1997). Most often, sport-for-development – which some scholars have referred to as a social movement itself (Kidd, 2008) – entails a governmental or non-governmental entity determining a certain developmental need for a community, and creating a program through which sport can be used to attain that goal (Giulianotti et al., 2019). Darnell et al. (2019) explain that sport is used by governments, corporations, and non-profit organizations to these ends “because sport is so frequently positioned as apolitical and non-threatening and because it is understood to have universal, transnational, and transhistorical meanings” (p. 3). Operating under these assumptions, sport-for-development organizations typically facilitate actual sporting games, competitions, or activities for participants (who are typically poor, occupy marginalized identity groups, and oftentimes hail from the Global South) in order to achieve their particular goals (Black, 2018; Darnell, 2012). Through physical participation in sport, sport-for-development organizations often attempt to instill in participants values – such as discipline, productivity, and leadership – that organizers deem desirable and believe to be inherent to the sports they administer (Hartmann, 2016).

In practice, sport-for-development programs typically operate with the following goals and beliefs: they believe in sport as a positive force with social, physical, or moral benefits for those who participate; they encourage government and non-governmental stakeholders to deploy sport to achieve developmental goals on a micro-, meso-, and/or macro- level; and they view sport itself as largely apolitical and isolated from contentious political or social debates (Darnell

²³ Sport-for-development organizations are commonly, but not solely, focused on youth.

et al., 2019). There are two predominant models of sport-for-development programming: sport-plus and plus-sport (Coalter, 2009; Levermore, 2009). Put simply, sport-plus programming entails a focus on creating and sustaining sporting leagues/institutions/practices, with the developmental and/or social justice elements incorporated secondarily. Inversely, plus-sport programming entails a primary focus on a social or development problem, that sport is then deployed in service of (as a method of recruitment, community-building, character-building, or as I will argue in KYRC's case, fundraising and an entry point for critical thinking). Sporting SMOs such as KYRC most closely resemble the "plus-sport" model of programming, but advance some of the model's logics and assumptions.

Most notable of these advancements – discussed in subsequent chapters – is the active (rather than passive) incorporation of sport, administered pedagogically rather than physically. KYRC demonstrates sport's cultural resonance – rather than the assumed virtues of sporting participation for traditional sport-for-development – that constitutes the transformative value of sport for Sporting SMOs. The recent generation of sport-for-development scholars have questioned the core assumption of sport automatically being a positive developmental force. Instead, they understand sport as an "empty form" (MacAloon, 1995) or an empty vessel, in which sport harbors no inherent efficacy and influence and instead depends upon the directions and goals towards which sport is channeled. Overall, as Hartmann (2016) explains, sport should be understood "as a tool for development and social intervention whose influence depends on the ends toward which it is directed, how it is implemented, and the context in which it is deployed" (p. 145).

These ends have sometimes been counter-productive, if not detrimental. Scholars have noted that historically and contemporarily, sport-for-development programming often is

underpinned by Western neoliberal foundations (Darnell et al., 2019; Jeanes et al., 2019; Hartmann, 2016; Levermore, 2010). While they appear to be largely well-intentioned, the focus of many sport-for-development programs promotes individual empowerment or adjustments in behavior as recipes for development over social justice or structural change (Guilianotti et al., 2019). This individualized notion of development does not acknowledge the contextual factors that produce certain behaviors, let alone broader inequality (Levermore, 2010; Pitter & Andrews, 1997). Too often, sport-for-development organizations focus on the body and one's physical choices as a matter of personal accountability, in which one's success or failure is a product of their hard work (or lack thereof) (Darnell et al., 2019).

The overarching goals of sport-for-development in the neoliberal era can sometimes be problematic. Many SPD organizations do not simply provide direct benefit to marginalized people through sport, but instead use sport in a manner that presumably builds their agency and gives them a means to pursue their own success (consistent with the neoliberal hesitancy to provide "handouts" in the political realm) (Darnell et al., 2019). Therefore, sport often promotes "empowerment" that manifests as a thinly-veiled focus on productivity and discipline. As summarized by Hartmann & Kwauk (2011), under the dominant neoliberal form of sport-for-development,

sport-based interventions may be able to help marginalized communities do better in society, but they do little to change the institutions, policies, practices, and more fundamental conditions that have helped to produce and maintain the marginality of the oppressed. As a result, while existing structures and relations of power are (often unintentionally) reproduced, the majority of marginalized youth and young people continue to be subordinated and disempowered. (p. 298)

This is generally how sport-for-development programming has approached and impacted marginalized youth. As will we explore in subsequent chapters, KYRC marks a significant extension by using the cultural and economic centrality of sport – along with the symbolic and material resources that Kaepernick’s sporting career has provided – to develop youth politically and intellectually. KYRC prioritizes context and structural change, while actively critiquing the limits of individualism. Albeit more indirect than direct, sport is central to the youth/community-based political conscientization project that is KYRC.

2.3 Sport and Athletes in Social Movements

Between the literatures of social movements and sport-for-development, there is also a small-but-significant scholarship on the connection between sport and social movements. These studies have explicitly examined the mechanics and logics of how sport has been utilized for broader social change. Despite the apolitical appearance of sport, social movements have always had a rather significant (if hidden, and under-examined) overlap with sport throughout the past century. These include moments of resistive social movements influencing the landscape of sport, social movements that utilize sport in support of their cause, or movements within sport that support or influence broader social movements (Harvey et al., 2014). While the innumerable injustices and discriminations within sport have (perhaps rightfully) garnered most of the critical attention, each of them has been resisted and organized against by athletes, fans, activists, intellectuals, and other figures adjacent to the sporting world (Nauright & Wiggins, 2014).

Despite this, with a few notable exceptions (see Davis-Delano & Crosset, 2008; Harvey et al., 1996; 2009; 2014; Kaufman & Wolff, 2010; Sage, 1999; Wilson, 2007), sport scholars have not had a substantial engagement with the field of social movement theory, nor vice versa. It has been about 30 years since Harvey and Houle (1994) called for more research into sport and

(new) social movements, yet there are still few studies of sport and social movements (Wilson, 2007). One reason for this may be that sport is a rather conservative institution that has long operated under the guise of apolitical, and thus is not an obvious site to theorize social movements (Davis-Delano & Crosset, 2008; King, 2008; Kusz, 2019). Horne (2006) suggests that another reason could be that sport-based social movements have overwhelmingly chased reformist, transactional goals that advocated for narrow improvements to the institution of sport. This trend has largely escaped the attention of critical scholars who tend to advocate for improvement through structural transformation (Harvey et al., 2009).²⁴ Regardless, this project fulfills Harvey et al.'s (2009) call that “new forms of resistance such as global social movements that emerge from the current historical moment need to be explored” (p. 398). It seems that scholars have largely neglected to rigorously investigate whether sport has power to “serve as an agent of change” (Jarvie, 2007; p. 415); or even worse, they have simply taken for granted that it does.

Nonetheless, there are a few studies that have rigorously studied the role of sport and athletes in social movements, specifically using social movement frameworks. The most notable has been Jean Harvey and colleagues (2014) book *Sport and Social Movements: From the Local to the Global*. With a specific focus on globalization, the book generally sets out to answer how social movements are influencing the current sport order and wider social order; how the politics of these movements differ in their reach and goals for change; and how sporting social movements participate or overlap with wider social movements. Harvey and colleagues (2014) are successful in listing a number of examples in which sport has influenced and been influenced

²⁴ Harvey et al. (2009) discusses and provides examples of “reformist” and “transformist” sport-based movements. The subsequent chapters will argue for KYRC as a “radical” SMO, which is essentially the same as Harvey et al.'s conception of transformist.

by broader movements, with varying degrees of intensity and effectiveness.²⁵ In all, Harvey et al.'s (2014) book is a significant introduction of social movement theory to the sociology of sport. However, their analyses predate the rise of BLM and the resurgence of sporting activism in “the Kaepernick moment” (Mower et al., 2017) in which social movement activity in sport has skyrocketed. Also missing from this book are first-hand accounts of sporting initiatives and SMOs themselves, which would lend deeper insight into how Sporting SMOs influence and are influenced by broader social movements. This study of KYRC assists with filling these gaps and accounting for new developments in sporting social movement activity.

Beyond Harvey et al.'s (2014) book, there have been a few other engagements with social movement frameworks within the sociology of sport literature (although with sport generally, rather than Sporting SMOs specifically). For instance, Davis-Delano & Crosset (2008) engaged social movement theories to explain the outcomes of two sport-based social movements: the movement to remove Native American mascots/imagery and the movement to fund (or not fund) sport stadiums with public money. Within their data set, they found little evidence that collective behavior (or strain) influenced the outcomes of these movements in any significant way. They used resource mobilization framework to focus on how the resources internal to these movements – mainly their composition, leadership, tactics, and ideology – affected the outcomes. Additionally, they engaged political process theory to focus on how the external

²⁵ One particularly interesting (and radical) example is the Worker's Sport movement, which aimed to create parallel sporting institutions that promoted labor solidarity and socialist/communist values rather than the bourgeoisie/capitalist values of mainstream sport (Logan, 2016; Steinberg, 1978). The movement was influential among the working class in Europe, the Soviet Union, and the United States from the 1920s to the 1940s. At its height, the movement involved over four million workers worldwide (Riordan, 1996). As both a “sport initiative and a political instrument for the promotion of a post-capitalist society” (Harvey et al., 2014; p. 28-29), the idea of worker's sport was an attempt to disarticulate sport from capitalist imperatives (such as competition, meritocracy, and commercialism) and instead forge a connection between sport and socialist imperatives (such as solidarity, collective cooperation, and the enjoyment of leisure). In doing so, the Workers' Sport movement sought to “remove the class line from participation” and “thereby help to lay the groundwork for a uniquely working-class culture” (Wheeler, 1978' p. 192).

structural forces – mainly allies and relations with business/corporate leaders – also determined the outcomes. Cultural factors – such as community opinion and the opinion of core movement constituents regarding the causes – also played a central role in the outcomes of the movements. The following examination of KYRC utilizes a similar approach to Davis-Delano & Crosset (2008). It provides more intricate detail for Sporting SMOs about the mechanisms through which resources are accumulated and deployed, the perceptions and experiences of SMO associates, and contexts and external factors influences the direction of Sporting SMOs.

Other scholars have been interested in the question of sport’s utility for social movements, but have done so without much explicit engagement with social movement theories. They have made useful contributions, nonetheless. Valiente (2019) argued that sporting achievement can encourage participation among former athletes in social movements. Examining the life of Lili Álvarez in mid-20 century fascist Spain as a case study, Valiente argues that participation in sport can influence the consciousness of athletes by encouraging the idea that goals can be achieved through collective action. Kaufman and Wolff (2010) argue that sporting involvement can spark social consciousness in athletes in numerous ways. First, traveling nationally and internationally for competition allows athletes to experience new and different localities, and thus expand their perspective of the world, reality, and humanity. Second, this experience in and playing with/against athletes from other regions and cultures can help foster a common humanity, and assist athletes with imagining innovative solutions to local issues (Wilson et al., 2015). In all, after interviewing 21 athlete-activists (pre-BLM era), Kaufman and Wolff (2010) argue that “there are inherent qualities of sport and the athletic experience that do indeed suggest an orientation toward progressive social change” (p. 158). They point to four specifically: sport’s ability to raise social consciousness, its appearance of true meritocracy, its ability to promote

responsible citizenship, and the way in which sporting success requires interdependence.

Kaufman and Wolf (2010) also conclude that the qualities that made for athletic success were easily transferable to success in activism (and vice versa); mainly the emphases on discipline, goal-setting, the constant pursuit of progress, and a long-term perspective. These qualities all appear to be present in KYRC, as demonstrated in the following chapters.

Additionally, scholars have argued sporting participation is useful for mobilizing social movement activity. A background in elite sport makes for effective social movement participants because of the publicity, public stature, and social/political connections that often follow former athletes, which can be fruitful for social movements (Valiente, 2019; Wilson et al., 2015). For these reasons, Darnell (2012) found that athletes and former athletes are useful for stimulating fundraising and publicity and sport-for-development and social justice initiatives, especially when they contribute their own labor or participate in social movement activity themselves (Wilson et al., 2015). This insight is key for the concept of the Kaepernick Brand – referring to Kaepernick’s global commercial reputation as a martyred symbol of protest, resistance, sacrifice, and authenticity that has followed his kneeling protest – which I position in subsequent chapters as the engine of KYRC. Historically however, athlete involvement in social justice initiatives has tended to pursue narrow and practical charitable objectives rather than broader – and likely more complex and difficult, yet effective – objectives that challenge the structural roots of injustice (Valiente, 2019). As a radical SMO, Kaepernick and KYRC represent a significant deviation from this reformist sensibility, made possible the recent convergence of radical activism, celebrity culture, and consumer culture (Palmer, 2021; Raphael & Lam, 2017; Wallace, 2024).²⁶

²⁶ I elaborate on this claim in Chapters 3, 4, and 5.

Harvey et al. (2009) point out three main categories of sport-based social movements: 1) sport and social development, which uses sport to advocate for social and community development goals (i.e., sport-for-development); 2) sport and social justice; and 3) sport and social equality (although they do not distinguish between the second and third). Although we need more precise definitions and perhaps distinctions, KYRC synthesizes all three categories in certain ways. Wilson (2007) mentions that the sporting scholar can play a role in movements as well, outlining sport scholar-activist activity that includes: cultural studies-oriented research and writing that is driven by political and social priorities; participation in forms of critical pedagogy community-building practices; and the use of resistance/protest tactics. Crucially for this project, Wilson (2007) follows Beal (2002) in calling for scholars to fill the “scarcity of work that is focused on the relationship between critical analyses of sport-related phenomena (like social movements) and the use of ethnographic methods as a way of attaining insight into the perspectives of social movement members themselves” (p. 469). While this project utilizes in-depth interviews and content/textual analysis to uncover the perspectives of KYRC, future work will look to fill this gap with ethnographic data.

Lastly, another key shift in contemporary sporting social movement/sport-for-development initiatives – with vast relevance to KYRC – is the involvement of athletes in the pursuit of social change. While organizations have traditionally been at the forefront of the sport-for-development sector, athletes themselves have become more involved not only advocating for reforms intended to make the institution of sport more just and equitable, but also to “leverage their profile in sport and the admiration they accrued in the service of social change and the social good” (Darnell, 2019; p. 244). This process is augmented by the “increasingly intense and hyper-commoditized media coverage of sport as well as the marketization of international

development, a process in which global celebrities enjoyed increasingly large profiles and influence” (Darnell, 2019; p. 244). In other words, as athletes have in many ways become celebritized and branded in a manner once exclusive to franchises (Andrews & Jackson, 2002), individual athletes have become more central to the use of sport for social change (Hartmann et al., 2022). Athletes have increasingly taken up their own causes of interest, or have been utilized by teams, leagues, or corporate sponsors for raising funds for, spreading awareness of, and recruiting participants into sport-for-development initiatives. There remain questions of whether elite athlete engagement has had a tangible effect on the outcomes of sport-for-development – if outcomes can be measured at all – as well as whether the athletic engagement is substantive or simply for publicity. For example, many corporations use athletes to promote the sport-for-development programs they fund or organize (Palmer, 2021). However, as Darnell (2019) notes, corporate interest in sport-for-development often is “as much connected to brand equity and shareholder profit as effecting social change” (p. 290). Unsurprisingly then, Levermore (2010) points out that there is very little transparent and substantive evidence that corporate sport-for-development initiatives that feature the brand power of athletes actually work. Although this dissertation will not definitively answer if KYRC “works” – a far more complicated question than it sounds – it will argue that Kaepernick’s brand power has been successful for accumulating symbolic and material resources available for deployment by the KYRC team.

Nonetheless, the assumption remains that sport, and elite athletes in particular, can serve as a “magic pill” for recruiting participants and donors into programs geared towards social change (Darnell et al., 2019). On this point, Darnell (2019) raises questions that still need to be empirically researched, including:

whether sport programs are effective in reaching groups outside of sport's traditional classed and gendered participants and audiences? What are the specific mechanisms by which sport can best contribute to significant social change? And, what are the approaches, circumstances, and practices necessary to make sport-for-development effective? (p. 313)

My data with KYRC moves us toward answering some of these questions, albeit in a specific rather than generalizable manner.

2.4 KYRC as Transformative Youth and Community Development

Thus far, this literature review has positioned KYRC as a Sporting social movement organization (SMO) enabled by the commercial explosion in sport, in which sport is increasingly and more explicitly integrated into pursuits of social change (albeit in various ways, with various politics, and with various objectives). Therefore, KYRC yields insights that could potentially assist in articulating these emerging uses of sport, as well as offer models and lessons for other current and future sporting initiatives that aim to enact social change. Organizations like KYRC have been anticipated by scholars within the field of sport-for-development, but only in theory. Particularly, scholars have attempted to imagine how sport can be used for actual positive youth development in a manner that is not underpinned by problematic assumptions and neoliberal agendas (Darnell & Millington, 2019; Hartmann & Kwauk, 2011; Wilson, 2007). I now outline how Kaepernick and KYRC have fulfilled this call for a “transformative” version of youth and community development, and as such offers scholars a unique opportunity to study the mechanics of their operation.

Overall, a study of KYRC answers the call from Darnell (2010) for a more progressive approach to sport-for-development that would: “consider counter-hegemonic approaches to and

through [sport-for-development] that would engage directly with the political economy and the relations of dominance that produce the need for development in the first place” (p. 71). Rather than trying to socialize marginalized individuals into the status quo, a more progressive sport-for-development programming would use sport in a way that empowers the marginalized to participate critically in creating and implementing their visions for transformative social change (Hartmann & Kwauk, 2011). Darnell & Millington (2019) anticipate KYRC and other radical Sporting SMOs in arguing that sport-for-development programs can more effectively enact social change when they prioritize grassroots justice over charity. In their words:

sport can be a vehicle for social justice when mobilized within a transformative model that is focused on challenging the status quo. Such an approach would move beyond a charitable model of social justice in which interventions are merely directed toward poor, marginalized, and disenfranchised groups, and instead aim to engage with the social structures that sustain and perpetuate social inequalities. (p. 185, italics added)

As Chapter 6 will argue, KYRC’s pedagogy centers structural factors and invites learners to imagine dramatic alternatives to the status quo (such as police and prison abolition), to the point of critiquing the reformism at the center of most youth-based sport-for-development initiatives. Darnell & Millington (2019) also note that the two main circumstances in which sport can most visibly affect social change is through moments when sport connects with social movements and when athletes speak out on social or political issues (as discussed above); although these are typically not centralized or institutionalized actions. KYRC, however, demonstrates a coordinated institutionalized convergence of these circumstances.

Hartmann and Kwauk (2011) echo the necessity of rigorously exploring a wider and more diverse set of sport-for-development programs because “there is very little research on which

programs work (if they work at all), much less an understanding of the mechanisms by which sport would foster development” (p. 285). In particular, they note how most sport-for-development research has studied programs that operate under a dominant model of development, in which fostering development is conceived as assisting the most vulnerable individual – who reside at society’s margins due to the ubiquitous oppressions and discriminations of racial capitalism (Bhattacharyya, 2018; Marable, 2015) – to better adapt to a status quo that works to their detriment. This “resocialization” and “recalibration” of youth identities within this dominant model often functions to maintain power relations and cultural hegemony (Hartmann & Kwauk, 2011; Mower et al., 2023).

To be fair, the literature has privileged the dominant model because the vast majority of sport-for-development programming – as the name suggests – is underpinned by the dominant neoliberal model. However, Hartmann and Kwauk (2011) urge for more examination of sport-for-development programming that engages a transformative model that attempts to expose and address structural conditions. This model of sport-for-development programming would pursue collective liberation through radically reworked rationale, approach, and implementation that can “transform the educational space and experience of sport” with the intention to “harness the energies of sport and direct them toward this more radical vision of development and social change” (Hartmann & Kwauk, 2011; p. 295-296). This transformative model, which scholars have mostly spoken about hypothetically, distinctively matches the premise of KYRC.

Overall, rather than a narrow focus on development, I argue that Sporting SMOs differ from sport-for-development because they prioritize a transformative model of social justice that questions rather than accommodates the status quo. Crucially then, this dissertation’s explication of Sporting SMOs provides an opportunity to answer Darnell and Millington (2019)’s call:

future research would do well not only to evaluate how sport is being used in pursuit of (or as a barrier to) social justice, but also to question and theorize whether and how sport might be able to re-orient social structures – including those that extend beyond sport itself – and to do so in ways that interrogate and foreground power relations with regard to race... If we approach sport as an “empty form,” and consider its long history of being implicated in social change but also in divisive and socially harmful practices, *it is important to consider counter-hegemonic approaches to inequality that run through sport, and to examine whether and how understandings of sport might move beyond notions of social change that are based on neoliberal ideals of individualism and charitable intervention.* (p. 184; italics added)

As evident in the following chapters, KYRC demonstrates how Sporting SMOs deviate from neoliberal paternalist deployments of sport. Its presence urges us to rethink the possibilities of sport-based community outreach. A rigorous study into the program is indispensable for revealing the tactics, benefits, challenges, and limitations of practically implementing transformative social justice programming at a grassroots level. With the conceptual framework in place, we now transition into the empirical analysis of KYRC.

Chapter 3:
KYRC as Black Radical Political Project: Racial Capitalism, the Black Athletic Resistance, and the Ideological Lineage of KYRC

“The idea of the Know Your Rights Camp went beyond just knowing your rights. [Kaepernick and Nessa] put in the 10 Points, which is kind of an homage to the Black Panther Party’s 10 points. We wanted to focus on a more holistic approach, so we wanted to do a history segment. You know, how did we get here, to where we are now? So that young people understand that this system has been in place for many centuries and is working as intended.” (Participant #6, interview, 2023)

In the immediate sense, KYRC emerged in response to rampant Black death at the hands of police in the 2010s. However, as KYRC acknowledges, the contemporary ubiquity of police brutality is just the latest expression of a history of structural racism and racial violence in the United States that spans centuries. Before examining what KYRC does to resist racism, we must begin our empirical analysis with a more fundamental question from which all other elements of KYRC derive: how does the organization understand this history of racism? What does the organization believe about race? In other words, the central question of this chapter is: what is the organization’s underlying political ideology?

Ideology is the starting point for analysis of SMOs. Klandermans (2016) outlines the importance of SMO ideology:

Social movement organizations, then, are carriers of meaning. Through processes such as consensus mobilization they seek to propagate their definition of the situation to the public at large. Social movements do not invent ideas from scratch, they borrow from the history

of ideas. They build on an *ideological heritage* as they relate their claims to broader themes and values in society. (Klandermans, 2016; p. 223; italics added)

In this chapter, I outline the “ideological heritage” of Kaepernick and KYRC. I argue that KYRC situates itself above all as an intervention into the material and ideological formations of race. As such, we must first consider KYRC as a Black Radical political project.

Although the previous chapter previewed the unique ways that KYRC is mobilizing its connection to sport, KYRC’s ultimate aims extend far beyond sport. As associates noted in interviews, KYRC’s mission is not to improve the racial dynamics within the institution of sport.²⁷ Much broader, the objective is to: “advance the liberation and well-being of Black and Brown communities through education, self-empowerment, mass-mobilization and the creation of new systems that elevate the next generation of change leaders” (accessed March 2024). So while it is true that KYRC was made possible by sport, its mission and its organizational culture is more focused on exposing and transforming *racial* formations. As Participant #4 shared with me: “I feel like the overall message is more than just sports... it’s about educating our youth having them be aware of what's going on in their community, and have them become future change makers at that.” While acknowledging the connection to sport, Participant #4 shared a common sentiment among participants that KYRC’s aims were to uplift the collective Black community. Because KYRC is an initiative that “emerge[d] from outside sport, [is] driven primarily by activists from outside sport, and [has] goals far beyond sport” (Davis-Delano & Crosset, 2008; p.116), it is necessary to first position KYRC within the American racial contexts from which it emerged, and to which it responds.

²⁷ Although, as we will see, improving the racial dynamics of sport is included in their programming, specifically the Kaepernick Curriculum.

An ideological examination of KYRC fills a glaring gap in the literature; not only the sport and social movement literature, but the budding literature of Colin Kaepernick. For how much he has escalated the boundaries and expectations of athletic intellectualism, there is a surprising scarcity of work – popular or academic – that engages what Kaepernick actually believes, let alone his ideological development in the years since his initial protest. Based off a close reading of Kaepernick’s published works, as well as KYRC’s Political Education Curriculum, I position Kaepernick and KYRC as an interlocutor within the “Black Radical Tradition”: a lineage of Black scholars, thinkers, and political activists who have engaged and extended radical (and often implicitly or explicitly Marxist) tenets in service of overcoming Black oppression across the Black diaspora (Johnson & Lubin, 2017; Kelley, 2003; Robinson, 1983). Additionally, in order to explore the contextual, strategic, and ideological developments proffered by KYRC, I follow Participant #6’s quote (atop this chapter) to examine the linkages between KYRC and its primary influence, the organization whose spirit and structure it revives: the Black Panther Party. Finally, after surveying the literature about the cultural politics of the Black athlete, I propose that Kaepernick and KYRC urges us to recognize the existence of the Black (Radical) Athlete, whose tactics, ideology, and self-aware maneuvering eschews reformist, reductionist, or individualist “activism” in favor of sacrificial material uplift of the collective Black community.

3.1 The Black Radical Tradition and Sport

Beyond positioning KYRC as a product of the Black Lives Matter moment, I also want to situate it within a specific historical lineage of Black resistance and political activity called the Black Radical Tradition (Robinson, 1983). As this section explains, this tradition serves as both a method of theorizing the causes of racism and a framework for organizing acts of resistance to it. Constituted by scholars, activists, and (as I will argue) increasingly athletes such as Kaepernick,

the Black Radical Tradition has gained prominence during the Black Lives Matter moment (Hillstrom, 2018), most likely because it is an approach that rejects slow-moving reformism and instead aims to overturn many of the structures and institutions central to Western modernity. The Black Radical Tradition is the line of thought most fruitful for understanding the political orientation of Kaepernick and the pedagogical approach of KYRC.

3.1.1 Racism and Capitalism, Race and Class

The Black Radical Tradition highlights how the story of the Black American experience is not defined solely by oppression and victimhood. It also includes resistance and the agentic responses to oppression. Blacks have resisted their oppression in various spheres (such as the political, academic, and cultural), with various goals (such as equality via integration, sovereign Black nationhood, the elimination of race as a meaningful construct), and through various means (such as reformist accommodationism, legal/political/economic advocacy, violent or non-violent confrontation, or cultural expression) (Frederickson, 1995; Johnson, 2022; Johnson & Lubin, 2017; Kelley, 2003; Kendi, 2017; Taylor, 2021; Wallace, 2024). Coined by scholar Cedric Robinson (1983), the Black Radical Tradition refers to how, since their modern African origin, Black people have critiqued, resisted, and revolted against their racialization and oppression in its various contextual manifestations, in ways that challenged the very roots of the social structures that produced racism. This is the “radicalism” of the Black Radical Tradition: the tendency to target and demand transformation of the material and systemic structures responsible for oppression (of both race and class, notably) rather than attempting to passively ingratiate oneself to an oppressive status quo, or merely assuage its ancillary effects (Johnson & Lubin, 2017; Robinson, 1983). In other words, the word “radical” is not used as a synonym for extreme, but to indicate a focus on systems rather than symptoms (Andrews, 2018). The Black Radical

Tradition thus represents a cohesive political and historical consciousness among Black people across the African diaspora that – in many but not all cases – continues to manifest in resistance to the imperatives of Eurocentric society and the overall negation of Western culture (Joseph, 2017).

Outlining this tradition in his book *Black Marxism*, Robinson (1983) traced the ways in which Black radicalism overlapped and engaged with the tradition of Marxism. While drawing insight from Marxism and applying its radical premises to the understanding the race question, Black Marxists extended the perceived Eurocentric bias of Marxism to address the intersections of race and class. Robinson (1983) positioned the Black Radical Tradition as resisting not simply racism or capitalism, but *racial capitalism*.²⁸ By racial capitalism, Robinson refers to the ways that racialization and capitalism are not only linked, but also, from the very beginnings of both of their independent histories, have demonstrated a tendency to cooperate in the reproduction of each other, and in doing so, reinforce both race- and class-based oppression.

How does Robinson (1983) substantiate this key claim? Working through examples of global capitalist accumulation across stages of capitalism, he makes a convincing case that capitalism has always relied upon an underclass – often deemed inferior by way of some arbitrary ethnic, regional, or phenotypical factor – for which capitalists can exploit in terms of labor, land, or resources, and ultimately from which capital (in its various forms) can be extracted. This differentiation could have taken any form, and in some instances has. However, as Robinson shows, what makes capitalism inherently “racial” is that racialization has historically been the preeminent technology through which individuals, groups, and populations have been segmented. Rather than consolidating individuals of disparate backgrounds in relation

²⁸ As we will discuss, this is still a rather academic term that, interestingly, Kaepernick (2020) himself and KYRC in the Political Education Curriculum (2023) is bringing to the popular realm.

to their positionality to capital, capitalism has had a historical tendency “not to homogenize but to differentiate – to exaggerate regional, subcultural, and dialectical differences into ‘racial’ ones” (p. 26). Even differences regarding region, ethnicity, and religion have succumbed to and been included within designations of race, which has served as capitalism’s overdetermining mode of social organization (Burden-Stelly, 2020).

Bhattacharyya (2019) outlines the contemporary operations of labor in racial capitalism, which applies to directly to U.S. sport. Drawing from directly from Robinson (1983), Bhattacharyya argues that:

If one account of the development of capitalism suggests that there is an inexorable trend towards the homogenisation of the labour force... then racial capitalism might be a name for the manner in which workers and working populations are divided and differentiated in the service of capital. (p. 42)

She argues that racial capitalism should not be used as a meta-theory of racism, nor is a way to claim “capitalism as a racist conspiracy or racism as a capitalist conspiracy” (2019; p. xi), but it is useful in allowing one to think through the purpose that racism has served during key moments of capitalist development. These purposes, for all scholars of racial capitalism, has had devastating effects that transcend the economic, summarized by Bhattacharyya’s key conclusion that “capitalism cannot function if we are allowed to become fully human. Dehumanisation seems to be an unavoidable outcome of the processes of capitalist development” (p. x).

Ironically, U.S. sport is one of the clearest examples of Bhattacharyya’s point, as it features predominantly Black athletes being exploited, dehumanized, alienated, and ultimately rendered expendable in service of capital²⁹ (Canada, 2023; Kalman-Lamb & Silva, 2022;

²⁹ Ironically, the same rapidly-increasing sporting capital that, as I argue in Chapter 4, is creating political opportunities for resistance.

Runstedtler, 2018; Turner, 2015). What is unique about the Black Radical Tradition is its recognition of capitalism as the engine of racism and racism as the engine of capitalism, and its radical organization against it. Besides scholars in the academy such as Robinson, Kelley, Stuart Hall, C.L.R. James, late-in-life W.E.B. DuBois, Paul Gilroy, Keeanga Yamhatta-Taylor, and others, the Black Radical Tradition has extended to the political realm with figures such as Angela Davis, Kwame Nkrumah, Malcolm X, Huey P. Newton, Kwame Ture, Ella Baker, and many more (Chari, 2017). In this chapter, I extend Robinson's (1983) work to consider the rise of the *Black Radical Athlete*, referring to those who use their position and platform in commercial sport to radically challenge the structures of racial capitalism. Kaepernick exemplifies the Black Radical Athlete, and KYRC illustrates a coordinated and radical initiative to challenge racial capitalist sport and society.

3.1.2 The Predicament of the Black Athlete

The Black Radical Tradition illuminates the inherent contradiction of the Black athlete (Matlon, 2022). In many ways, the Black athlete is the figurative and literal embodiment of racial capitalism.³⁰ Since the inception of modernity, the very idea of race and its utility for the colonial production of capital has been mapped onto and negotiated within the physicality of those racialized as Black (Fanon, 2004; Weheliye, 2014). It is well documented how the foremost European political leaders and Western canonical philosophers they cited – among them Kant, Hume, Locke, and Hegel – established the modern Western polity on the basis/assumption of natural White intellectual and civilizational superiority (Mills, 1997; 2017; Zack, 2016; 2023).

³⁰ Though I provide a brief overview, a fuller genealogical explanation of the Black athlete's position in racial capitalism is unfortunately beyond the scope of this project. It is perhaps the focus of a future project. In the meantime, see Carrington, 2009; Cooper, 2021; Farred, 2003; 2021; Hoberman, 1997; Rhoden, 2006; Sheppard, 2020 for more expansive perspectives on the Black Athlete.

Yet even as these philosophies erroneously marked the Black body as most suitable (if not biologically and theologically predestined) for physical labor, they still maintained that Blacks were indeed *physically* inferior to Whites (Hoberman, 1997). These racist ideas obviously structured the sporting terrain for Black and White athletes, but their implications reached far beyond sport to provide the ideological fuel for slavery, colonial violence and exploitation, assimilation efforts, and even genocide. Decades of scientific and anthropometric studies premised upon the myth of biological race – categorized today under the label of scientific racism – were conducted by Western scientists to search for the specific mechanisms that would justify the preexisting consensus of White superiority and Black inferiority (Gould, 1996; Miller, 1998). While Black women were not excluded from these dehumanizing tropes in the context of sport, they were more widely weaponized against, and felt by, Black sporting men. As the story goes, it was not until Black American boxer Jack Johnson defeated the “Great White Hope” Jim Jefferies for the heavyweight title in 1910 that Western science was cornered into adopting the stance of compensatory Black physical superiority – still lingering today as the myth of the natural Black athlete – in a dissonant attempt to reconcile Black athletic achievement with retaining the racist biological myths upon which Western modernity was founded (Carrington, 2009; Runstedtler, 2013).

The shock of Johnson’s victory only registered because of the compatibility of sport in the promulgation of the myths of Black inferiority. It is true that sport has historically offered an unparalleled site of corporeal claim-making and freedom of expression, even at times positioning Blacks as ostensibly equal competitors with Whites, generating possibilities for subverting racial domination on an individual or collective level (Wallace, 2020; 2022). However, far more often within the history of sport, the institution has mirrored the broader dynamics of Black

subjugation. Even after eventually winning entry into integrated leagues and being paid relatively well, the position of most Blacks in sport has been as athletes who enact their physical labor power to produce a commodity (a game, an event, or likeness for merchandise) for an overwhelmingly White group of owners and executives, generating unheralded profit for these owners under conditions of exploitation and alienation, controlled and facilitated by an overwhelmingly White conglomerate of coaches, scouts, agents, and even commercial industry professionals whom tend to function as overseers of the laboring Black athletes (Chen, 2022; Hawkins, 2010; Hextrum, 2020; Kallman-Lamb & Silva, 2023; Leonard & King, 2011; Southall et al., 2023; Turner, 2018; Wallace, 2022; Wallace & Andrews, 2022). Thus in late capitalist sport (Andrews, 2019), the Black athletic body is both “reified for its labor power and commodified for its difference” (Matlon, 2022; p. 12).

Granted, many (and an ever-increasing number) of athletes are aware of the parallels between sport and slavery (Edwards, 2019; Rhoden, 2006), even as they continue to participate in sport. Yet a number of factors steer Black athletes back into the fold of racial capitalist sport while disincentivizing any sort of criticism or questioning: the fact that to be a professional athlete one must essentially dedicate their entire lives to training in an effort to gain an edge over competitors (leaving one with little time for critical reflection or political development); the fact that there are hundreds of Black athletes ready and willing to replace a critical Black athlete; a sporting culture and “Conveyer Belt” (Rhoden, 2006) that teaches Black athletes not to rock the boat and punishes those who do; a popular culture that glorifies and celebrities Black athletes while upholding male athletes specifically as the standards of Black masculinity, to name only a few (Bryant, 2018; Runstedtler, 2018; Turner, 2018). These same dynamics exist for Black female athletes, but become even more complicated by their unique gendered experiences.

Because participation in sport is constructed as already incongruous with femininity, they are often expected to act in a grateful manner to those who oh-so-graciously included them in sport, lest they be perceived through racialized-gendered stereotypes so quick to be launched at Black women specifically: difficult, angry, abrasive, or the “mad black woman” (Birrell, 1990; Brown, 2018; Ifekwunigwe, 2009; Razack & Joseph, 2021; Vertinsky & Captain, 1988). Off the field then – either out of ignorance, dissonance, refusal, selfishness, cooptation, fear, or rational calculation of the costs of doing so – the default Black athlete does not challenge the racial capitalist logics of sport.

The resistive consciousness of the Black athlete may be stymied by racial capitalism itself, in the sense that it has come to shape the critical responses of the subjects it victimizes (Matlon, 2022). Because capitalism constructed breadwinning as a traditional register of masculinity, Black men’s exclusion from the economic system and widespread denial of breadwinning has resulted in Black masculine “resistance” being rooted in economic aspiration and consumer capacity (Matlon, 2022). Black male athletes exemplify the “hustle” on a global stage (Spence, 2015), or the willingness to resort to any means to overcome systemic oppression and provide a life for one’s family and future generations (even if that is a subtle euphemism for oneself). This neoliberal “hustler’s mentality” locates Black liberation not as the removal of barriers for “common” Black people, but as the purchase of symbolic consumer goods and flaunting of material commodities. The reward for tacit complicity for individual Black athletes comes with significant material and symbolic cost to the broader Black community. Just as Michael Jordan was positioned as the “atypical” commercially successful Black male that diachronically signified the unworthiness of the unmerited “typical” Black male in Reagan’s America (Andrews, 1996), the Black athlete’s reward for not questioning racial capitalism is

often to be positioned as evidence that racial capitalism a true meritocracy, and thus not oppressive. Matlon's (2022) explanation is worth quoting at length:

...icons of Black manhood appear prominently as skilled entrepreneurs and conspicuous consumers, their celebrity status articulating corporate culture (see, e.g., Carrington 2010, Shipley 2013). Figuring within a long tradition of glorified Black entertainers and athletes when Black people are otherwise excluded from mainstream social, political, and economic life, these icons operate as tropes of Blackness that provide authoritative, mass-mediated counternarratives to racialized dispossession.... As celebrity icons, African Americans are key agents of global popular culture and direct the 'standards, desires and passions' (Gilroy 2001, 100) of Black culture globally. Yet as a demographic, African Americans do not profit from the commodification of Black culture. The 'paradoxical location' (Hanchard 1990, 32) of American Blackness is thus inextricable from histories of capitalist excess and negation. Disseminated across media circuits, it appears simultaneously hegemonic—as American, imperialist, and capitalist, and counterhegemonic—as African, colonized, and resistant if not revolutionary. The latter, in its “stylish opposition” (Ebron 2008, 319), obscures the former. This expression of Blackness neither identifies nor opposes white supremacy as a tool of capital accumulation. A double entendre, American Blackness provides a productive tension for the pursuit of capital accumulation on a global scale. (p. 32)

Therefore, the unavoidable reality is that silent complicity – the default political response by the Black (male) celebrity athlete – is not neutral. To refrain from politics is not to be apolitical. The default impact of silence is being folded back into the corroborating repertoires of racial capitalism. Liberal and reformist tactics that do express resistance in a manner that does not

explicitly challenge racial capitalism, even when packaged as “pro-Black” as Matlon explains, functions to undermine collective Black pursuits of structural transformation. The only antidote to this, for the Black athlete, is radicalism. This is why, I contend, a political consciousness and an affinity for resistance rooted in radicalism should be a standard – not just a choice – to which we hold contemporary Black athletes.

3.1.3 The Black Athlete Today: Progress or Regress?

The obvious rejoinder to my call to Black athletes to act radically is that it is naïve and impractical, if not unfair. With the aforementioned economic explosion of sport, on the surface, it seems like a pretty good time to be a Black athlete. Why, then, would a Black athlete risk their fortune and status by dedicating time to “political development”, or even worse, calling out the same systems that enrich them? Ironically, some scholars hypothesize that political revolution occurs not when things are at their worst, but when things are steadily improving and a “trigger event” (Moyer, 2001) occurs to remind people of just how far there remains to go (Davies, 1962). We can apply this analysis to the state of the Black athlete today.

The structural conditions are crucial for contextualizing the “radical” moments in Black sporting history, from the Civil Rights Era to today. Edwards’ (2016) and Hartmann’s (2003) analysis of the Black Athletic Revolt (detailed next chapter) leans towards the “rise and drop” theory for explaining the emergence of sporting activism in the 1960s. A strain theory explanation would suggest that Black athletic resistance “reached a crescendo” (Wiggins, 1997) in 1968 because it was a low point in the plight of the Black athlete. According to this theory, Black athletes would have been experiencing peak oppression, the frustration for which could only have been communicated through revolt and resistance. There is perhaps some evidence to support this viewpoint. Muhammad Ali had just gotten his heavyweight titles revoked and faced

incarceration for his famous refusal to accept conscription into the Vietnam War (Farred, 2003). Black athletes were becoming the face of increasingly lucrative and prominent sporting institutions such as the NBA and NFL, yet were not receiving requisite value in return.

However, this viewpoint overlooks the overwhelmingly evidence that by 1968 things *were getting better* for Black athletes. Despite the persistence of racism and even segregation in some institutions, Black athletes by the late 1960s were starting to proliferate and reach unforeseen heights in many sports. Led by athletes such as Muhammad Ali, Bill Russell, Curt Flood, and Dr. Harry Edwards (as discussed next chapter), pleas for racial equality in sport was at the forefront of a much broader “athletic revolution” (Scott, 1971) that began to question and challenge the traditional fundamental structure of sports in terms of race, gender, athletic labor, off-the-field rights for athletes, sport media, and emphases on elite competition (Edwards, 1970; DuBois, 2023; Hartmann, 2003; Spade, 1976). Similar to Tocqueville’s thesis that revolts happen not when circumstances are at their worst but when things are getting better (Hartmann, 2003), Davies (1962) offered the “rise and drop” thesis to explain social movements, in which revolts occur when circumstances are steadily improving and then, suddenly, sharply regress. Applied to sport and race, the desegregation of sport in the late 1940s and 1950s steadily opened up new opportunities for Black athletes, but the treatment of Muhammad Ali and numerous instances of overt and covert racism in sport delivered a sudden reminder of how much work still remained for Black athletes to be treated equally (Wiggins, 1997). Rather than previous eras where strict segregation and glass ceilings made it difficult for athletes (and the nation as a whole) to imagine sport as integrated and equal, by 1968, Black athletes had begun to get a taste of equality that made them vigorously hungry for more.

A similar “rise and drop” (Davies, 1962) might be applied to explain the contemporary resurgence of race-based sporting activism that began in roughly 2012. Approaching 50 years later, the myth of the U.S. being a colorblind meritocracy (Bonilla-Silva, 2014) was even more firmly entrenched than in the 1960s, Black culture was becoming more and more integrated and accepted (if not fetishized) within mainstream global culture, and the first Black President Barack Obama had been re-elected to his second term in office (Coates, 2018). In the sport world, new technologies and forms of media facilitated a rapid increase in the valuation of many mainstream sports, Black athletes routinely struck lucrative endorsement deals with myriad brands and corporations, Black athletes were (still) among the most wealthy and visible Black people around the globe, and issues of racism in sport were rarely explicitly discussed by the athletes and the general public (Bryant, 2018; DuBois, 2023). Like the 1960s, a casual observer might declare the 2010s the best time in history to be a Black athlete, if not Black person. Yet the sudden viral murders of Black teenagers by the hands of police (particularly Trayvon Martin in 2012 and Michael Brown in 2014) undercut this surface-level narrative of general Black prosperity. Relatedly, the public reaction to, and institutional treatment of, Black athletes who used their sporting (and sometimes corporate) platforms to speak out on police brutality – most notably, the vitriolic blackballing of Kaepernick, as discussed next chapter – seemingly jolted many Black athletes into realizing how much of their wealth and status is contingent upon silence towards (if not outright complicity with) the violent racism still ubiquitous to 21st century racial capitalism.

These dynamics contextualize the magnitude of Kaepernick’s radicalism. As explained in the next section, Kaepernick’s personal politics – and subsequently the politics of KYRC – are congruent with the Black Radical tradition, and model what the political development and

subsequent political action by the Black Radical Athlete might look like. KYRC is thus unique because it is not simply an initiative dedicated to racial equality or Black liberation, but one whose politics, ideology, and even tactics are based in the Black Radical Tradition. What precisely, however, does KYRC and Colin Kaepernick actually believe? In the next section, I substantiate my claims of how Kaepernick and KYRC's contests racial capitalism from a radical perspective, as evidenced by their connection to the Black Panther Party, Kaepernick's own political and academic writings, and the content of KYRC's Political Education Curriculum (2023).

3.2 The Political Ideology of KYRC

“Another world is possible, a world grounded in love, justice, and accountability, a world grounded in safety and good health, a world grounded in meeting the needs of the people.” (Kaepernick, 2020; para. 24)

This brings us to the politics of Kaepernick himself, which launched his profile as an activist and ultimately led to the establishment of KYRC. The Sporting SMO was formed as the materialization of Kaepernick (and Nessa)'s political and ideological evolution. Discussion of Kaepernick as a “radical” has mostly referred to his tactic of kneeling, which, as we will discuss, was framed and interpreted by many as disruptive and “unAmerican” (Doehler, 2022; Nepstad & Kenney, 2018). Ironically, this seems to have caused the truly radical part of Kaepernick – his ideology – to fly under the radar. It is important to examine Kaepernick's ideology to gain a deeper and more contextual understanding of KYRC and the characteristics we will later explore. Arguably at the center of them all – KYRC's structure, strategies, challenges, objectives, frames – is its ideological commitments. Viewing ideology as systems of belief through which

individuals and SMOs challenge the dominant sociopolitical order and offer interpretations of the world that animate strategic plans (Carley, 2019), Zald (2000) argues that “to describe and analyze specific movements... you must take into account the ideological diagnoses and prognoses that shape movement adherents’ worldview and programs of action” (p. 5). Building from Zald, Carley (2019) posits that ideology and organizations grow symbiotically, stating that: “without organization, no ideology, certainly; not equally, and more significantly, without ideology, no organization” (p. 113). Altogether, these scholars underscore how an SMOs ideology is its centripetal force (also see Moran, 2017; Oliver & Johnston, 2000; Yaziji & Doh, 2013). Importantly though, while it is true that ideology often serves as the impetus for forming SMOs, ideology is not static; it shifts, expands, contracts, and adjusts in correspondence with evolving organizational structures, tactics, and experiences (Miller, 1999). Therefore ideology (this chapter) cannot be studied separately from KYRC’s structure/logics/strategies (Chapter 5) or framing/rhetoric/pedagogy (Chapter 6).

3.2.1 The Radical Politics of Colin Kaepernick

Kaepernick is not only influenced by the Black Radical Tradition, but has been a tactical and ideological contributor. This contribution is visible in the pieces he has written since kneeling, as well as in the academic books he has written with Black Radical scholars (Kaepernick et al., 2023). However, I argue that his primary contribution to the Black Radical Tradition is through KYRC. Even when educating youth, the camps and KYRC’s public materials explicitly cite and reference prominent Black Radical scholars. But at a broader level, KYRC contributes to the Black Radical Tradition tactically by disseminating it; outside the walls of academia, to the youth in marginalized communities, in a manner that is engaging and accessible. Kaepernick’s political orientation is so developed that it does not suffice to only put

him in conversation with past or contemporary sporting activists. To be fully understood, he must also be put in conversation with scholars and activists.

As opposed to many sporting activists who advocate for an optimistic liberalism expressed through civil means (Farred, 2021), Kaepernick channels a pessimism of the U.S.'s history, present, and future that serves as justification for upending the foundational structures by which the country operates. For instance, whereas athlete-activist LeBron James endorsed Democratic presidential candidate Hillary Clinton for the 2016 U.S. Presidential Election and spoke at her campaign events, Kaepernick infamously rejected voting (and electoral politics in general) as a means for overcoming oppression (Marston, 2017). When asked why he did not vote in the election, Kaepernick stated:

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 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. (Maiocco, 2016)

Kaepernick's refusal to vote disappointed many liberal allies who retained faith in voting; even Harry Edwards stated disagreement with Kaepernick on this point (Marston, 2017). Kaepernick also received criticism – and lost some liberal allies – when he wore socks that depicted pigs wearing police hats.³¹ In response to criticism about the socks, Kaepernick stated in an Instagram post:

I wore these socks, in the past, because the rogue cops that are allowed to hold positions in police departments, not only put the community in danger, but also put the cops that

³¹ Police officers have long been insultingly referred to as “pigs” in the Black community.

have the right intentions in danger by creating an environment of tension and mistrust.

(Schilken, 2016; para. 3)

Regardless of one's position on the potential of electoral politics, Kaepernick's politically radical approach that openly rejects liberalism signals a unique shift in the politics of the Black celebrities in general, let alone Black athletes.

There are many assumptions and much confusion about what Kaepernick believes, despite his brief – yet clear and direct – explanations in interviews. One can ascertain an even deeper look into his politics through his political and academic writing, which he has taken up since his estrangement from the NFL. In October 2020, he wrote an essay titled “The Demand for Abolition.” Interweaving analysis from Michel Foucault, Ruth Wilson Gilmore, and Huey P. Newton, Kaepernick (2020) expresses impatience with liberal reformism. Instead, he makes his case for the abolitionism, referring to the vision of society in which police, prisons, and other similar forms of surveillance and carcerality simply do not exist. He writes:

It is not a matter of bad apples spoiling the bunch but interlocking systems that are rotten to their core.

And systemic problems demand systemic solutions...

Despite the steady cascade of anti-Black violence across this country, I am hopeful we can build a future that imagines justice differently. A future without the terror of policing and prisons. A future that prioritizes harm reduction, redemption, and public well-being in order to create a more just and humane world. (para. 3-5).

In a section of the article sub headlined as “Fuck Reform”, Kaepernick revisits his 2016 comments justifying his protests during the National Anthem, in which he initially stated that “There's a lot of things that need to change. One specifically is police brutality. There's people

being murdered unjustly and not being held accountable. Cops are getting paid leave for killing people. That’s not right.” (para. 15). Four years later, he expressed regret for his former reformist mindset, tracing his intellectual evolution from an individual to current systemic mindset: “I had missed the larger picture. The focus on individual punishment will never alter the outcome of a system rooted in Black death. I wanted change.” (Para. 16). Further, after citing Ruth Wilson Gilmore’s (a leading voice in the prison abolition movement) quote that “capitalism requires inequality, and racism enshrines it” (cited in Kaepernick, 2020; para. 17), Kaepernick ties the issue of police brutality and criminal injustice to the broader functioning of racial capitalism. He argues that:

the economies of exploitation, deprivation, and captivity [propel] forward incarceration and the construction of prisons. These economies disproportionately target Black, Brown, and poor white people. *It made me think about how the carceral state is central to the machinery of racial capitalism* (para. 17, italics added)

Citing Foucault’s lamentations against prison reform, Kaepernick offers the solution he now favors: “Reform, at its core, preserves, enhances, and further entrenches policing and prisons into the United States’ social order. Abolition is the only way to secure a future beyond anti-Black institutions of social control, violence, and premature death” (para. 20). As such, the essay sets the stage for his identification as a prison and police abolitionist, positioning himself firmly within the same patterns of thought as the Black Radical Tradition.

A year later in October 2021, Kaepernick released an edited academic book entitled *Abolition for the People: The Movement for a Future Without Policing & Prisons* under Kaepernick Publishing. Described as a “manifesto against policing and prisons”, included in the book’s 38 chapters are contributions from prominent scholars such as Angela Davis, Kimberlé

Crenshaw, Robin D.G. Kelley, Mariame Kaba, Simone Browne, and others. In this book he elaborates on how he conceptualizes abolition, as well as his vision for the world he is attempting to build. In his first-authored introduction to the book, Kaepernick cites contributor Dylan Rodríguez's argument that "abolition is the work of constantly remaking sociality, politics, economy, place, and (human) being against the duress that some call dehumanization, others name colonialism, and still others identify as slavery and incarceration" (p. 15). Furthermore, he endorses contributor Mariame Kaba's view that the ultimate aim of abolition is to "build a society where it is possible to address harm without relying on structural forms of oppression or the violent systems that increase it" (Kaepernick et al., 2021; p. 14). Despite the heavy content matter, Kaepernick takes steps to make the book accessible to a variety of audiences. Each chapter – similar to the Curriculums developed later by KYRC (2021; 2023) – is accompanied by a reader's guide that distills the main points of the chapter and offers discussion questions intended to help readers summarize, extend, and apply the subject matter to their personal experiences and observations. Additionally, the book claims that for each copy sold, Kaepernick Publishing will donate one book to an incarcerated person in the United States (up to 10,000 copies). 100% of the profits from the book are donated to KYRC.

The point of explicating the politics of Kaepernick is to establish him as a model of a Black Radical Athlete. He shows a willingness to not just speak out about social issues, but to understand them with a level of depth and nuance that athletes have rarely broached. Kaepernick's delvings into the world of academia – both in reading academic scholars and seriously engaging their ideas in his own accessible written analysis – marks a fascinating elevation in the pedagogical potential of sporting activists. As a rare combination of athlete-activist-radical-scholar-celebrity, it is surprising that Kaepernick's post-NFL career has received

so little attention to this point. Kaepernick is thus the leading presence in what we might call the Black Radical *Sporting* Tradition. If Kaepernick's writings provide insight into his theory, then KYRC embodies his praxis. In what follows, I outline how Kaepernick's politics were influenced by the Black Panther Party, which came to shape the structure, tactics, and pedagogical programming of KYRC.

3.2.2 From the Black Panther Party to KYRC

KYRC not only models itself after the Black Panther Party (BPP), but openly positions the SMO as a continuation of the BPP's legacy. The BPP was a radical organization that began in 1966, reached its heights in the late 1960s and early 1970s, and was active (albeit in diminished capacities) until the early 1990s. It was led by founder Huey P. Newton, along with his associate and co-founder Bobby Seale. The BPP was the largest Black Power organization of the mid twentieth century, with roughly 2,000-5,000 members at its peak in 40 chapters across 68 cities throughout the United States (Fujino & Harmachis, 2020). Despite its overt radicalism and corollary controversial status within White America and mainstream media, the BPP garnered widespread support among marginalized people. The Black Panther newspaper sold over 100,000 copies weekly. A 1970 poll found that 62% of survey respondents admired the work of the BPP, and a majority of Blacks strongly supported the organizations goals and methods (Fujino & Harmachis, 2020). As such, it is perhaps more accurate to follow Judson (2007) in calling the BPP not just an SMO but "a movement" itself, and Katsiaficas (2001) in his statement that the BPP was "the most significant revolutionary organization in the United States during the latter half of the twentieth century" (vii).

The BPP forayed into electoral politics, but its main focus was the facilitating the uplift of Black communities at the grassroots level. Their actions for Black communities included

providing free breakfast, facilitating self-defense education, creating community schooling, setting up health care services, ambulance services, senior escort services, tuberculosis testing, and other programs that prioritized “survival until revolution” (Hilliard, 2008; Nelson, 2011). Similar to police brutality being the impetus of Kaepernick’s protests and founding of KYRC, the BPP was focused on “ending the multiple violences of the police, poverty, and racism against Black communities” (Fujino & Harmachis, 2020; p. 3). The BPP also emphasized the merging of theory and practice. Beyond openly embracing Marx and his dialectic materialism, the BPP “popularized the ideas of Frantz Fanon, Robert F. Williams, and others about armed struggle in bold tactics that worked to reduce police violence in Black communities” (p. 3). Vehemently rejecting the narrow fragmentations that sometimes result for identity politics (Johnson, 2022; Reed Jr., 2021; Taiwo, 2022), the BPP forged cross-racial and cross-class alliances in seeking uplift for a variety of oppressed communities. They did so while rejecting the middle-class respectability politics sometimes associated with mainstream or religious based civil rights organizations, as well as the regressive nationalisms and essentialisms often proffered by groups such as the Nation of Islam (Andrews, 2018; Fujino & Harmachis, 2020; Hall, 1998; Kelley, 2003). Perhaps most famously, the BPP developed a Ten Point Program of demands (Bloom & Martin Jr., 2016):

What We Want

- 1) We want freedom. We want power to determine the destiny of our Black community.
- 2) We want full employment for our people.
- 3) We want an end to the robbery by the White man of our Black community.
- 4) We want decent housing, fit for shelter [of] human beings.

- 5) We want education for our people that exposes the true nature of this decadent American society. We want education that teaches us our true history and our role in the present day society.
- 6) We want all Black men to be exempt from military service.
- 7) We want an immediate end to police brutality and murder of Black people.
- 8) We want freedom for all Black men held in federal, state, county, and city prisons and jails.
- 9) We want all Black people when brought to trial to be tried in court by a jury of their peer group or people from their Black communities. As defined by the constitution of the United States.
- 10) We want land, bread, housing, education, clothing, justice and peace.

Newton was adamant that the purpose of the Ten-Point Program was temporary survival on a day-to-day level until revolutionary change could occur. He explains the logic:

A Ten-Point Program is not revolutionary in itself, nor is it reformist. It is a survival program. We, the people, are threatened with genocide because racism and fascism are rampant in this country and throughout the world. And the ruling circle in North America is responsible. We intend to change all of that, and in order to change it, there must be a total transformation. But until we can achieve that total transformation. We must exist. In order to exist, we must survive. (1970; p. 173)

This became known as the mantra of survival until revolution.

Making clear its ties to the BPP roughly 50 years later, KYRC developed its own Ten Point Program of rights that Black and Brown youth should know, which includes the following:

- 1) You have the right to be free.

- 2) You have the right to be healthy.
- 3) You have the right to be brilliant.
- 4) You have the right to be safe.
- 5) You have the right be loved.
- 6) You have the right to be courageous.
- 7) You have the right to be alive.
- 8) You have the right to be trusted.
- 9) You have the right to be educated.
- 10) You have the right to know your rights. (Political Education Curriculum, 2023)

Similarly, during interviews, participants spoke about how KYRC's structure reflects the manta of survival until revolution. For instance, Participant #6 told me about the origins of KYRC:

So what [Kaepernick and Nessa] wanted to do was create a one day camp called the Know Your Rights Camp where they would be able to teach young people, 13 to 18 years old, for free. That would allow young people to learn their rights to interact with law enforcement and police within their rights, but most importantly, being able to walk away from that interaction alive. But, you know, when they took a step back, they said 'you know what? It would be really an injustice to our communities, if all we taught our young people was how to stay alive. We got to do more than that. We got to teach our youth and our next generations more than how to survive, but how to thrive'.

Kaepernick himself, in a January 2024 interview, echoed this sentiment. Summarizing the question that guides KYRC, Kaepernick stated: "How do we teach our communities how to thrive, and be well-rounded, and then build community around that?" (#NessaOFFAir podcast, 2024). Though with a slightly different vocabulary and operating in different contexts, the

combination of critical education and rapid response is thus directly inspired by the survival until revolution approach Newton and the BPP.³²

In addition to the material aid in provided, the work of BPP “transformed knowledge of Black history, culture, and resistance, and inspired new cultural expressions that awakened Black pride and undercut the internalization of white supremacist and colonial images of Black subordination” (Fujino & Harmachis, 2020; p. 3). Yet the palpable influence that the BPP has had on contemporary activism and cultural production has far exceeded the attention paid to it within scholarly literature. Beyond just iconic images, references, and esoteric symbolisms, the BPP continues to have a tangible presence in Black and alternative communities (Fujino & Harmachis, 2020; Johnson, 2022). In the domain of sport alone, Kaepernick’s police brutality protests and establishment of KYRC is not the first time the BPP has influenced sporting

³² KYRC’s decision to draw explicit links to the BPP is noteworthy – even if KYRC’s adapted Ten Point Program is not nearly as controversial. The BPP’s openly radical politics resulted in open repression by the state, including the designation by FBI Director J. Edgar Hoover as a terrorist organization (Martin, 2016). The infamous COINTELPRO operation – a “counterintelligence” program by the FBI that in practice surveilled and attempted to destroy leftist political movements – had a large impact in the downfall of the BPP. As explained by Fujino & Harchamis (2020):

“The COINTELPRO was devised to disrupt and destroy left movements through surveilling, harassing and discrediting leaders and members, provoking conflict through the fabrication of false information, and extinguishing the movement through raids, bombings, and targeted killings. The FBI directed its greatest fury and attention on the Black Panthers, implementing 233 of its 295 official COINTELPRO actions against the BPP. The Panthers clearly faced a nearly impossible situation, targeted by state repression and aggravated by the constraints of the times and their own internal contradictions.” Or, as Newton (1980) himself documented in his dissertation: “Within one year of the formation of the Party, the FBI formed a special counterintelligence program dubbed COINTELPRO. The purpose of this program was, in the FBI’s own words, to ‘expose, disrupt, misdirect, discredit, or otherwise neutralize the activities of the Black nationalists.’ A specific purpose of COINTELPRO was to prevent the rise of a ‘Messiah,’ a charismatic Black leader who might ‘unify and electrify’ Black people. Martin Luther King Jr. was named as a potential Messiah in the FBI’s own secret memorandum establishing COINTELPRO, but after the assassination of King in 1968, the FBI shifted its focus to the Party and its leadership, particularly Huey P. Newton. J. Edgar Hoover, then director of the FBI, publicly stated that the Party constituted ‘the greatest threat to the internal security of the country . . . of any organization. Of the 295 documented actions taken by COINTELPRO alone to disrupt Black groups, 233 –or 79 percent – were specifically directed toward destruction of the Party. Over \$100 million of taxpayers’ money was expended for COINTELPRO; over \$7 million of it allocated for 1976 alone to pay off informants and provocateurs, twice the amount allocated in the same period by the FBI to pay organized crime informants. Indeed, while COINTELPRO ostensibly targeted five domestic organizations-the Communist Party, the Socialist Workers’ Party, White Hate Groups, Black Nationalist Hate Groups (e.g., the Panthers), and the New Left-it was Blacks, and the Panthers in particular, who received the brunt of the damage.” (p. 363)

activism. John Carlos and Tommie Smith's Black Power fist in the 1968 Olympic Games was inspired by the BPP and the Black Power movement (Hartmann, 2003).

Ideologically, the BPP's politics derived mainly from those of its leader, Huey P. Newton. There are parallels between Newton and Kaepernick, whose politics similarly influence the direction and instruction of KYRC. Also, like Kaepernick, Newton appreciated and participated in the world of academia. Newton had six core beliefs in his thinking: 1) dialectic materialism, which became the official mode of theorizing for the BPP; 2) Black liberation was intimately tied to the destruction of capitalism and eventual implementation of communism; 3) the oppressed were justified in using self-defense against their oppressor; 4) "revolutionary intercommunalism" for the entire Black diaspora; 5) building coalitions is more important than identity-based purity tests; and 6) the power of the people (see Newton, 2018). Taken as whole, Newton (1967) developed the idea of what we would now call an SMO that prioritizes critical education and rapid community response:

The main function of the party is to awaken the people and teach them the strategic method of resisting a power structure which is prepared not only to combat with massive brutality the people's resistance but to annihilate totally the Black population... The end result of this revolutionary education will be positive for Black people in their resistance, and negative for the power structure in its oppression because the party always exemplifies revolutionary defiance. If the party does not make people aware of the tools and methods of liberation, there will be no means by which the people can mobilize... *The main purpose of the vanguard group should be to raise the consciousness of the masses through education programs and other activities.* (p. 155-156; italics added)

Later:

“The primary concern of the Black Panther Party is to lift the level of consciousness of the people through theory and practice to the point where they will see exactly what is controlling them and what is oppressing them, and therefore see exactly what has to be done – or at least what the first step is.” (Newton 1971a; p. 203)

As detailed in Chapter 6, KYRC almost verbatim applies these logics to its tactics and pedagogy in the present day.

Interestingly, as the BPP gained international notoriety, Newton’s celebrityhood became a point of tension within the group. As Newton’s profile rose during the nationwide “Free Huey!” movement in the late 1960s, Newton interestingly became uncomfortable with the fame. Newton commented that “there was now an element of hero worship that had not existed before I got busted” (cited in Hilliard, 2019; p. 22) that Newton worried was separating his symbolic status from the grassroots orientation of the movement. This bothered Newton not only because he was always more of a theoretician and intellectual than articulate orator, but also because he envisioned the BPP movement as being led by the people rather than any centralized leadership (see Meyer, 1995 for more on the dynamic between celebrities and SMOs). Newton wrote: “Too many so-called leaders of the movement have been made into celebrities and their revolutionary fervor destroyed by mass media... the task is to transform society; only the people can do that – not heroes, not celebrities, not stars” (cited in Hilliard, 2019; p. 22). Newton’s view is an interesting juxtaposition from Kaepernick who, as we will analyze in Chapter 4, embraced the creation of the Kaepernick Brand (Deflem, 2022). Whereas Newton took active steps to mitigate his fame, Kaepernick took steps to amplify it.

What is far more significant than their personal preferences is the vastly different contexts that BPP and KYRC – and thus Newton and Kaepernick – operate within. The

radicalism of the BPP was politically and commercially toxic, as mainstream corporations avoided voicing support for the BPP, let alone forming official partnerships or contributing funding and resources. Additionally, to strike a darker tone, to become a “celebrity” through Black liberatory politics in the 1960s meant FBI surveillance, CIA interference, and unfortunately – as in the case of the two biggest Black celebrities of the time Martin Luther King Jr. And Malcolm X – becoming a target of violence or assassination. Therefore, Black political celebrities in the Civil Rights movement in some ways paved the structures that Kaepernick can (somewhat more safely) operate within today, let alone wield to the strategic advantage of KYRC and Black communities. Overall then, Newton and the BPP – politically, theoretically, and methodologically – served as the precursor and main influence of KYRC’s pedagogy. From this influence, we now turn from Kaepernick and the BPP’s politics to the specific politics of KYRC.

3.2.3 The Radical Politics of KYRC

Out of the many data sources that display KYRC’s radical orientation, it is most vivid in the Political Education Curriculum (2023); a document developed by KYRC to provide educators with a detailed guide to implement a critical, engaging, abolitionist education in high school classrooms, adult education spaces, or community learning spaces across five days.³³ A clear theme of the Curriculum is its radical materialist foundation that emphasizes the connections between racism and capitalism, while organizing on a cross-racial/ethnic basis against both systems of oppression.

The first example occurs at the very beginning of the document, where KYRC provides a list of Key Words. KYRC’s radical perspective is apparent in both their choice of key words and

³³ Details on the Political Education Curriculum, as well as my textual analysis approach to it, were provided in Chapter 1.

the specific and intentional language they use to define them. Along with concepts standard to an introductory pedagogy of racism are many other interesting terms that, I would argue, demonstrate KYRC's radical/materialist outlook on race, policing, and prisons. Such terms include: 1994 Crime Bill, Abolition, Carceral Class, Carceral State, Colonialism, Copaganda, Cultural Power, Defund the Police, Disciplinary Power, Interpersonal Power, Prison Industrial Complex, Reconstruction Era, Reformism, Respectability Politics, School to Prison Pipeline, and Transformative Justice (p. 8-11). All terms include a two-to-three sentence description, often with sources and brief context. An illustrative example of the radicalism within the definitions can be found in KYRC's definition of basic concept of "crime." Whereas the Miriam-Webster dictionary defines crime as "an illegal act for which someone can be punished by the government" (retrieved March 2024), KYRC defines crime as "a socially and politically constructed category whose contours encompass not only morally condemnable acts such as murder and rape but also many acts that are criminalized to justify surveillance and punishment and reinforce prevailing racial, social, and economic hierarchies" (Political Education Curriculum, 2023; p. 9). The staggering difference is attributed to KYRC's consistent emphasis on structures and power relations, which is consistent throughout the Political Education Curriculum. As elaborated in Chapter 7, this radical materialist perspective is more thoughtful and nuanced than many similar attempts to educate about racism, even during and after BLM moment (Johnson, 2022).

The radical foundation of the Political Education Curriculum is most explicit on Day 3, thematically titled "Abolitionist Imaginings" (p. 27). After beginning with Angela Davis' quote that "radical simply means 'grasping things at the root,'" the Curriculum shares with educators KYRC's radical pedagogical philosophy:

Rootwork is a traditional form of healing where the root that is causing harm must be removed. The root work for this day is imagining/dreaming of a society outside of the existing systems of oppression, *thus outside of racial capitalism* and the prison industrial complex, a term we use to describe the overlapping interests of government and industry that use surveillance, policing, and imprisonment as solutions to economic, social and political problems (Critical Resistance). This is an opportunity to redefine labor outside of the structures our society takes for granted and understands as “normal,” and instead as acts of love and resistance that serve as the foundation of abolition. (p. 27; italics added)

Then, the Political Education Curriculum further engages the framework of racial capitalism, presenting it in an accessible and engaging (though no less critical) activity:

Challenge yourself and other learners to contextualize the roots of policing and slave patrols in racial capitalism/anti-Black racism by asking learners to read the article “The True History of America’s Private Prison Industry” (Bauer, 2018) and “No Easy End to Prison Profiteering” (Petrella, 2016). Tell learners that capitalism is recognized as both an economic and political system that involves private ownership (rather than state ownership) of profits. Since capitalism is focused on maximizing profits, this systemically divides workers and utilizes (often uncompensated) labor of communities. (p. 28)

Racial capitalism is also the guiding framework for the Curriculum’s discussion of the creation of “race.” After having learners watch a Public Broadcasting Station (PBS) video titled “The Origin of Race in the United States” (2018), the Political Education Curriculum presents learners with the following comment/question:

The video acknowledges that there was a shift in the 17th and 18th centuries in theories of race due to the rise of global capitalism (backed by slavery and colonialism) and the

Enlightenment in Europe. Over time, how has capitalism created, amplified, or enshrined racism? How have colonialism and/or imperialistic actions impacted power and resources on the U.S. and/or global scale? (p. 20)

Finally, the Political Education Curriculum also recommends learners to engage with Black Radical activists and organizations. Almost the entirety of Day 2 is dedicated towards having learners engage the politics, philosophies, and practical tactics of the Newton and the BPP (especially their community survival programs) and Malcolm X (especially his attempts to coalesce the global Black diaspora). KYRC specifically has learners engage the BPP's fifth point in their 10 Point Program – “We Want Education for Our People That Exposes The True Nature Of This Decadent American Society. We Want Education That Teaches Us Our True History And Our Role in the Present-Day Society” (p. 25) – an updated version of which, I argue, is the entire purpose of the curriculum.

3.3 Constructing the Black Radical (Sporting) Tradition

Before considering KYRC's other organizational aspects, I want to first elaborate on how the organization and Kaepernick represent a dramatic maturation – if not a complete paradigmatic shift – in Black athletic activism. The level of sustained coordination combined with the ideological radicalism compels us to think about KYRC as the convergence of Black athletic activism and Black political activism. In what follows, I attempt to articulate the implications of KYRC and Kaepernick as a necessary intervention and tactical/ideological expansion of Black political-athletic activism. In doing so, I argue that Kaepernick – a contemporary Black Radical Athlete – has forged and modeled a new path that we should demand other Black athletes to follow. In an academic and popular sense, Kaepernick has rendered visible and viable the Black Radical (Sporting) Tradition.

I am not the first to attempt to construct a lineage of Black political activism in and through sport, and my thinking is obliged to the scholars who have taken up this question through similar approaches. Perhaps my closest antecedent is Ben Carrington's (2010) concept of the "sporting Black Atlantic." Noting how sport often gets excluded from textual readings of the cultural politics of film, music, fashion, and so on, Carrington applies Paul Gilroy's (1993) notion of "the Black Atlantic" to develop a diasporic/decolonial reading of sport, inserting Black athletes into conversations most often reserved for Black writers, artists, and intellectuals. Carrington defines the sporting Black Atlantic as:

a complex, transnational cultural and political space, that exceeds the boundaries of nation states, whereby the migrations and achievements of Black athletes have come to assume a heightened political significance for the dispersed peoples of the black diaspora: the sports arena thus operates as an important symbolic space in the struggles of black peoples for freedom and liberty, cultural recognition and civic rights, against the ideologies and practices of white supremacy. (p. 55)

In producing of new forms of Black identity, the sporting Black Atlantic aptly frames both the significance of Black athletic achievement and the stakes of sporting activism. Since its origin with boxer Jack Johnson in the early 1900s, Carrington outlines how the sporting Black Atlantic publicly and visibly undermined the foundations of Western racial science which touted the moral, intellectual, and at times physical inferiority and degeneracy of the Black race, thereby unsteady the international racial-political order with their sporting achievement.

Carrington's account is admittedly far more diasporic and international than my focus is here. While Carrington convincingly politicizes the actions and performances of Black (Atlantic) athletes and situates their *impact*, my focus in constructing a Black Radical Sporting Tradition

concerns the *intent* of Black athletes (specifically in the U.S. context). Perhaps Black athletes' political intentions did not correspond with, or was not relevant for, their ultimate political legacy. Perhaps, throughout most of sporting history, to just be Black and play was transgressive enough. However, we are in a period in which Black athletes are speaking politically, intervening intentionally, and creating their own legacies with ideological specificity.³⁴ They are no longer just happy to here; they are making their mark in unprecedented ways, following in the footsteps of Black athletes such as Muhammad Ali and Kareem Abdul-Jabar who were not satisfied with earning a slice of the American apple pie. The Black Radical Athlete is one who considers how they can leverage their piece of pie before eating it all themselves.

Another insightful path for thinking about Kaepernick and the Black Radical Athlete is as what Farred (2003) described as “vernacular intellectuals”, whom intervene into the most pressing political and ideological debates through the realm of popular culture, thereby producing and expressing a “subaltern or postcolonial voice that resists, subverts, disrupts, reconfigures, or impacts the dominant discourse” (p. 1). He bases his analysis on Gramsci's (1992) concept of the “organic intellectual”, who arises from the social blocs that are typically spoken for and over by the “traditional” intellectuals, coalescing and linking the common-sense knowledge forged from a working-class/marginalized upbringing to emerge as a political actor that speaks back to the dominant social blocs. Yet, for Farred, the vernacular intellectual extends beyond the organic intellectual:

the vernacular intellectual is distinguished from the Gramscian organic by a situatedness within the popular, frequently racialized experience of disempowered constituencies.

While the organic is rooted in communities, the vernacular articulates an equivocal

³⁴ This results from and reflects the increase in player-led media (see Manning et al., 2021).

relationship to hegemony, a complex negotiation with the dominant group that is characterized by a self-conscious difference and defiance. The vernacular is defined by its immersion in the language of the popular, the particularities, idiosyncrasies, and distinctness of vernacular speech; the vernacular is marked by its ability to speak popular resistance and popular culture to power. (p. 12)

By analyzing the vernacular capacities of Muhammad Ali, Bob Marley, Stuart Hall, and CLR James, Farred traces a lineage of Black cultural icons whose intellectual labor is produced and communicated beyond the confines of traditional academic knowledge production; such as the boxing ring, the music studio, or in our case, the football field. Writing over a decade prior to the resurgence of sporting activism, Farred (2003) anticipated the Black Radical Athlete mobilizing the vernacular “as a mode of linguistic expression, a repertoire of representation, a politics of being, particular to a racialized, ideologically marginalized constituency” (p. 17), and thus forcibly commencing a globe-altering political and intellectual reckoning, on one knee.

A similar antecedent comes from Joseph Cooper, who traced a more comprehensive *History of African-American Activism and Resistance in Sport* (2021). The most recent history, and written within and during the BLM moment, Cooper brings together a range of disparate actions, tactics, ideas, and impacts of Black athletic figures in and around sport into one coherent narrative. He traces a history of how Black athletes and figures have used sport for resistance and mass-mobilization in ways that “express their humanity, preserve their cultural heritage, empower themselves and their communities, project political views, and pursue freedom, equality, and justice” (p. 2). Situating each within its social context, Cooper defines and differentiates the expansive range of mechanisms – symbolic, scholarly, grassroots, mass mobilization, economic, legal, media, music, art, and military – through which Blacks via sport

have influenced their own historical epochs while catalyzing future actors. Furthermore, Nauright and Wiggins (2014) edited a collection on sport and revolutionaries, outlining the lineage of those individuals and movements that reclaimed sport as oppositional forces where critical thought could be nourished. Numerous scholars have also diagnosed the implicit and inherent “maleness” of many accounts of Black athletic activism, thereby drawing attention to the ways that Black sporting women have resisted oppression through sport in ways that often overlap with, though sometimes diverge from, the tactics of Black male athletic activists (Brown et al., 2024; Calow, 2023; Everbach et al., 2022; McClearen & Fischer, 2021). These academic contributions unpack the inherent politics of mundane and spectacular Black athletic action.

Within popular press, Howard Bryant (2018) developed what he called “The Heritage”, referring to a historical lineage of Black athletes who recognized their power and wielded it in disruptive, socially-conscious ways. From speaking out to show their dedication to the American project in the early 1900s, to using sport as a platform to indict America and highlight its hypocrisy in the mid-1900s, to saying whatever they needed to say to collect the biggest check in the late-1900s, Bryant traces the success and disappointments of Black athletic advocacy. Interesting, he characterizes much of the 2010s sporting activism as Black athletes playing the role of peacemaker; with one exception: Colin Kaepernick. Instead of hosting publicity stunts or throwing money at the problem of the week, Bryant commends Kaepernick for showing his face in poor communities, especially “as a member of a league whose players were often better known off the field for their luxurious lifestyles or arrest records” (p. 15). He places Kaepernick as the culmination of The Heritage because of his substantive sacrifice rather than performative speeches, which ultimately is the reason he was blackballed and made to pay the price of past

Black athletes who eschewed the role of peacemaker. This sacrifice is a characteristic of how I distinguish the Black Radical Athlete from the run-of-the-mill Black athletic philanthropist.

The above analyses offer much-needed contributions that historicize Black protest and resistance in, through, and beyond sport. The Black Radical Sporting Tradition is an addendum to these traditions; not a correction or replacement, but rather a subcategory derived from an urge for refinement made necessary by social and cultural developments in sport and activism (that we will discuss next chapter). These scholars, and others, have led to our field of critical sports studies winning the argument of the sport is an arena of resistance that matters, specifically and most vividly as it relates to issues of race and gender. Admittedly not all, but certainly most, reasonable thinkers have recognized and accepted that Black athletes can be, have been, and most likely need to be more than an athlete. The next step is to critically explore the influences, ideologies, and tactics internal to Black athletic activism. In other words, I am not sure if the Black athlete has been fully humanized, but it has been humanized enough that it is time to take Black athletic activism seriously enough to productively criticize. This means demarcating the internal contradictions and tensions within Black sporting activism in an attempt to guide and encourage structurally transformative activism. This means tracing the Black Radical (Sporting) Tradition.

What the above analyses have in common is that they properly politicize the actions of Black athletes. The Black Radical Sporting Tradition *politicizes itself*. It recognizes the power of symbolism (Marston, 2021), while being forthright enough in its politics to be the agent making the politics clear and explicit, rather than waiting on academic and popular contextualization to do it for them. This is not better or worse than the symbolic activism, but it does exist (as evidenced by KYRC), and it unique enough that it must be analyzed on its own terms rather than

swept up into the same category of Black sporting liberals, Black sporting reformists, apolitical Black sporting pioneers, or Black sporting conservatives (Farred, 2022; Wallace, 2024). Scholars do not have to outline the political implications of the Black Radical Sporting Traditions because the Black Radical Athletes do it themselves.³⁵ Like vernacular intellectuals (whom certainly overlap), the Black Radical Athlete:

 speak[s] differently, self-consciously so, but this does not mean that they fail to grasp the importance of the political concern voiced by mainstream intellectuals; they know how to translate the interests of the populace into, and as, metaphors of the popular. Vernacular intellectuals understand that the dominant discourse is not tone deaf, that it can hear protests—and the resistances encoded therein—in many timbres (Farred, 2003; p. 22)

The Black Radical Athlete exudes a form of self-aware agency, that which only has developed because of the political effects of Black sporting activists before it. In short, the Black Radical Sporting Tradition operates with an understanding of its own potential.

Carrington (2010) argues that Jack Johnson’s exploits in the ring not only “reconfigured the political arena” regarding race in the early 1900s, but also “[expanded] the boundary of possibilities for Black selfhood” within and beyond sport (p. 18). Over a century later, Kaepernick can be read as again expanding the boundary of possibilities for Black selfhood in his time. The logical follow-up to Kaepernick’s kneeling protests (discussed next chapter), the establishment of KYRC can be read as explicitly articulating the Black/athletic identity with grassroots activism and radical politics. The intervention is one that has flipped the logic – accepted historically even by many Black athletes (Bryant, 2018; Hartmann, 2003) – that one’s

³⁵ A close reader may notice how, throughout the rest of this dissertation, the quotes of KYRC require barely any contextualization. This is ironically because of how politically developed Kaepernick and KYRC already are. As such, most of my analysis of KYRC’s quotes are commentary on their significance and the contexts to which they are responding.

athletic and political identities must remain separate to maintain the legitimacy of each.

Kaepernick offers and models how the Black Radical Athlete can transform from an ontological contradiction to a theoretical possibility to a practical reality. In doing so, he is remodeling – if not forging anew – the historical, political, and vernacular identity of the Black athlete.

3.4 The Possibilities of the Black (Radical) Athlete

The contemporary Black Radical Athlete is a product of the intertwining legacies outlined in this chapter. To this point, we have discussed the precarious and position of the typical Black athlete in Western modernity, along with the mechanisms of both sporting culture and racial capitalism more broadly that constrict the Black athlete's political imagination. In this section, I consider the new terrains represented by KYRC for the ideological potential of Black athletes, and how they might make unprecedented interventions into symbolic and material racial progressions. I attempt to articulate the structural shifts that have enabled a shift in Black athletic political consciousness back to one of radical progressivism after roughly 50 years of apolitical conservatism (Bryant, 2018; Wallace, 2024). While clearly not all athletes share this radical perspective or know how to manifest it, I argue that KYRC's model of community activism (discussed in Chapter 5) and pedagogy (discussed in Chapter 6) offers a potential blueprint.

To be clear, I refer to the Black athlete conceptually, as a phenomenon. Rather than any specific Black athlete, Carrington (2010) explains:

The 'black athlete' is a construction made from the repertoire of colonial fantasies about Blackness that find their fullest expression in the shape of sporting negritude: the angry, wild, uncontrolled and almost uncontrollable, and ungrateful sporting subject that owes its success to innate animalistic physiology and that often requires a white male overseer to channel the naturally aggressive Black body (male or female) towards disciplined,

productive sporting ends; the white coach or trainer providing the necessary intelligence lacking in the inherently lazy but potentially dangerous Black subject. (p. 81)

The Black Radical Athlete explodes previous conceptions of Black natural athleticism. Ironically, it is still a “potentially dangerous Black subject”, but its danger lies not with the myth of animalistic physicality, but with weaponized structural critique that could destabilize the racial-capitalist foundations of Western sport, and even Western society. The White male overseer’s role for the Black Radical Athlete of today is an intellectual rather than physical shepherding; one that is not as concerned with the exertion of Black physical agency as they are with policing the boundaries and potentials of Black political consciousness.

3.4.1 Collectivist Goals and the Modern-Day Talented Tenth

What I see as a feature of the Black Radical Athlete is the intentional use of sporting activism for collectivist (rather than individualist) goals. In other words, what makes the activism called for by Edwards and implemented by Kaepernick “radical” is the way in which sport is exploited to uplift the Black community as a whole, despite personal sacrifice. During the “revolt of the Black athlete in the 1960s (Edwards, 2019), Hartmann (2003) recounted that many Black athletes, whether or not they agreed with radical Olympic Project for Human Rights (OPHR) leader Harry Edwards politically,³⁶ wanted to become involved with 1968 Olympic boycott for the feeling that they were contributing to the cause of Black liberation. However, many of them were severely moderated, if not stymied altogether, by the personal costs of engaging in any form of activism at that time. For many of the Black athletes who did ultimately support the boycott:

³⁶ To retain the racial focus of this chapter, I position KYRC within the history of sporting activism in the next chapter, where I engage Edwards’ (2016; 2019) work and actions more substantively.

The newfound political consciousness or "militancy" of most black athletes in fact did not result from broad interests in the African American community taken as a whole; rather, the resistance of most black athletes was more about their rights and freedoms as individuals – the very ideals many, more progressive black activists (like those in the OPHR) were trying to move beyond. (Hartmann, 2003; p. 119)

As the institution of global sport has exploded in the 50 years between Edwards and Kaepernick, athletes in the contemporary era face exponentially higher economic stakes for engaging in activism. I understand why most Black athletes steer away from “politics”; beyond the enticement of personal riches, it is the safest route. However, I argue that the existence of KYRC demystifies “apoliticism” and the protection of personal gain as the only choice, or even the common-sense choice. My view is bolder and more idealistic: the acknowledgement of Kaepernick and other Black Radical Athletes who have chosen structural uplift – for both the broader Black masses *and*, ironically, fellow Black athletes – at the cost of personal gain should urge us to hold accountable influential Black athletes who eschew politics altogether. KYRC allows us to imagine more, and thus demand more.

In social movement literature, scholars have marked the presence of an inner social and inner moral obligation that often leads to political mobilizations, wherein people are motivated to participate in collective action because they feel obligated to represent an identity group that they belong to, or to act on behalf of a marginalized or downtrodden group (Klandermans, 2016; Stürmer & Simon, 2009). As scholars within the critical sport literature have alluded, it is Black athletes that perhaps best corroborate the power of social and moral obligation as a mobilizing factor. Wiggins (1988) argues that, during the revolt of 1968, not all Black athletes were informed of the issues of racism in and beyond sport, nor in agreement with Harry Edwards, nor

were even passionate about social justice or rectifying the Black plight. The main reason that many of them joined or voiced support for the movement was a sense of obligation; or, to put it less charitably, guilt. Many felt that their success as a Black athlete ascribed them the duty of giving back to the Black community in some form, and they were certainly reminded of such by community members and activists (Hartmann, 2003).³⁷

The obligation to “give back” to the Black community for Black athletes has been contentious, theoretically and practically. It has now been over a century since DuBois (2015; originally published in 1903) wrote his infamous “Talented Tenth” thesis, arguing that a viable strategy of collective racial uplift was to support and invest in the success of the most ostensibly-naturally talented 10% of the Black community,³⁸ whose success would then hopefully lead to breakthroughs for the entire Black community. Perhaps more than any other category of “Tenther”, athletes have demonstrated the conceptual flaws of the now-discredited Talented Tenth thesis. More and more athletes getting richer and richer has only resulted in, largely, more rich athletes. The fame and fortune of Black athletes has perhaps led to more infusion of Black culture into the Western mainstream, but not always through imagery that is positive or progressive (Andrews & Silk, 2011; Ferber, 2007; Hoberman, 1997; Wallace, 2020; 2022; 2024). Indeed, many athletes have donated money to support social causes, many of which ostensibly involve racial uplift. Yet Black philanthropy as a strategy of racial progress is limited because of the inherent inability to solve structural inequities by throwing money at them (Cashmore, 2008). I contend that KYRC offers a model for which Black athletes – whether or not we consider them the modern-day Talented Tenth – can follow to contribute to substantive

³⁷ This includes from Dr. Harry Edwards, who reportedly used shame and even veiled threats to get fence-leaning Black athletes on board with the boycott of the 1968 Olympics (Hartmann, 2003).

³⁸ With Blacks segregated in both sport and society during his time of writing, DuBois did not anticipate that the Talented Tenth would soon come to prominently include Black athletes.

racial uplift. Of course, I am not claiming that KYRC is or actually will completely solve structural racism, and neither would they. That standard is impossible. However, the commercial explosion of sport has resulted in a profusion of (Black) athletes with generational wealth and, for many, a moral obligation to “give back” to the community. The Black Radical Athlete is one that mobilizes their unique position in racial capitalism for *collective* Black uplift.

In the next chapter, I discuss how the commercial and cultural expansion sport has created unprecedented political opportunities to this within or adjacent to sport (Andrews, 2019; Rowe, 2011). However, we cannot assume that this political deployment of sport will be progressive or radical. In fact, most is not, historically and today. We must be careful not to romanticize Black athletic activism, as if Black identity guarantees in advance a perspective and obligation to uplift the Black community. Throughout the history of sport, athletes have consciously or unconsciously “given back” through a political range of philanthropic methods. Some of these tactics are fundamentally conservative, such as athletes who have transitioned into conservative politics after retirement, or players who (like the vast majority of sport owners) donate to conservative politicians or super PACs (see ESPN & FiveThirtyEight, 2020). Other tactics are fundamentally neoliberal, such as athletes who use their wealth for philanthropy, or to start their own businesses (Kallman & Clark, 2019; Palmer, 2021). Other tactics are moderately progressive in a manner that is reformist (rather than radical), such as athletes who invest in electoral politics (such as get-out-to-vote efforts) or use their platform/brand image to plead for peace and unity (Bryant, 2018; Marston, 2021). Black athletes indeed are well-represented in each tactical category.

The significance of KYRC, then, is that it models how sport can be deployed in a manner that is radical and progressive (instead of conservative, neoliberal, or reformist). I believe it is

likely that many athletes would be drawn to radical progressive activism if the argument for its necessity were made. It is simply that radical grassroots activism typically does not exist and is thus difficult to imagine within a sporting context. However, KYRC is not alone in this category. The activism of Edwards' and the OPHR (Edwards, 2019; Hartmann, 2003), the 2015 football boycott at the University of Missouri (Yan et al., 2018), and the activism of the 2020 (W)NBA Bubble all offer partial models of radical progressive activism (Williams, 2022). KYRC however offers a model that coordinates these radical impulses into sustained, grassroots, and youth-oriented strategic action. Kaepernick, through KYRC, demonstrates to fellow Talented Tenthers how to use their sporting success to uplift the broader Black community.

Therefore the Black Radical Athlete circumvents not only our traditional conception of Black athletes, but of Black celebrities in general. Cashmore (2008) has argued that the role of the Black celebrity, particularly in the post-racial/Obama-era United States, is to embody for the viewing masses the myths of American meritocracy, individualism, and hyper-consumerism. It is not that their celebrity status has been solely contingent on their agreement to shy away from substantive critical politics, but if they had, their celebrity would likely not reach the heights that it would if they continued to sell mere diversion, amusement, and entertainment (even if mixed with superficial or aesthetic activism). Additionally, the Black celebrity is uplifted to demonstrate the ostensible heights that Black people can reach if they reject the "excuse" of structural inequality and buy into the meritocratic individualism. Particular to sport, Andrews (1996; 2003) argued how NBA phenom Michael Jordan came to embody this hard-bodied Reaganism, while a generation later LeBron James came to embody the commodified and spectacularized identity politics of "authenticity" so coveted in the late-Obama and early-BLM

era United States (Wallace and Andrews, 2022). Black celebrities, especially through sport, become the highlighted exception to post-racialism that, ironically, proves the rule.

Kaepernick, and the Kaepernick Brand (discussed next chapter), both embrace and develop the role of the Black celebrity. Writing about Michael Jordan at the turn of the century, Norman Denzin argued that the Black celebrity is the site through which “race in America today is largely a matter of advertising, commercials, and the media” (p. 6), which cooperate to (re)define signs of Blackness in ways that fold Blackness back into the schemas of a post-racial status quo. Whereas Jordan achieved his symbolic status by allowing his Blackness to be neutered – by signifying something beyond Blackness, positioning himself and being positioned as a celebrity who is not a “Black man” but just so happens to be Black (Denzin, 2001) – Kaepernick has become a sign of Blackness embraced and championed.

Remarkably for Kaepernick, the mixed-race athlete who grew up with his White parents in Wisconsin – this transformation occurred not through embracing what are already considered to be essential signifiers of Black culture (dress, vernacular, “cool pose” [Majors & Billson, 1992]); or put differently, through willingly embodying what the American masses already expect Black men to be. Instead, Kaepernick’s upward symbolic mobility occurred through critical politics, through a (re)definition of the tactical and theoretical boundaries of Black resistance (Deflem, 2022). Certainly his entrance through the lane of sport matters, as a Black quarterback nonetheless (see Reid, 2022). However, it is not that Kaepernick’s athletic legacy is so lofty that mainstream America has been begrudgingly willing to accept his critical politics. This is not to say that Kaepernick’s athletic career was unremarkable. He was widely considered one of the best quarterbacks in the NFL during his roughly five years as a starter. He still holds two NFL records for rushing yards by a quarterback, and was one controversial call from the referees away

from winning a Super Bowl in his first season as a starter (see Berry, 2013). It helps that he was a good player. Rather, I am saying that his stature was ignited by his critical politics, not despite them. One's outlook on Kaepernick became almost the single litmus test upon which observers anchored themselves politically. It is not an exaggeration to say that how one answered the simple question "do you support Colin Kaepernick?" placed themselves on the right or wrong side of history. It is thus Kaepernick's fame – and indeed, controversy – has embodied a form of radical and political authenticity that became *the* defining symbol of an entire political moment.

3.4.2 Merging the Sporting Spectacle with the Grassroots

Significantly, KYRC has channeled Kaepernick's symbolic authenticity to intervene in a grassroots capacity. Cooper (2021) defines grassroots activism as "proximal disruptive counter-oppression actions via organizational efforts within and beyond sporting spaces" (p. 68). Rarely have sporting activists, of any political leaning, utilized an explicitly grassroots approach, wherein the intent is broader social uplift resulting from specific community or organizational impact (Cooper, 2021). As each form of resistance has been determined by the contexts and resources at the disposal of Black athletes (Cooper, 2021), the current conflation of social media, celebrity branding, and the transcendence of the non-profit sector has allowed more opportunities to transfer the resources of sport into grassroots activism. As I elaborate upon in Chapter 7, this is significant because the realm of the grassroots is an emerging battlefield in which politics is being fought, and progressives must engage.

Yet the pivot to the grassroots does not mean that KYRC neglects the politics of the spectacle. Drawing on Debord's famous analysis of the *Society of the Spectacle* (1970), Kellner (2001) notes that contemporary sport has enthusiastically succumbed to and become governed by the logics of "a media and consumer society, organized around the consumption of images,

commodities, and spectacles” (p. 38) that perseveres by extravagant, attention-grabbing, tabloidized events and moments that underscore for the passive consumer the “unholy alliance between sports celebrity, commercialism, and media spectacle” (p. 39). Traditional forms of racial sporting activism have capitalized on the spectacle-based nature of sports for activism. This has been done through numerous tactics: an athlete adorning activist messages on their clothing or uniforms when broadcasted across media; an athlete using the post-game interview or press conference to spread awareness of a social issue; or an athlete incorporating a disruptive or political act within the sporting spectacle itself. KYRC demonstrates an interesting shift from spectacle-based activism towards grassroots activism. By not taking place on the field or in the media-affiliated sphere of sport – and at times even downplaying its connection to sport – KYRC eschews the sporting spectacle by doing its work behind-the-scenes and on the streets of communities. In many ways, the shift to grassroots-based models from spectacle-based activism distinguishes the sustained and organized model offered by Sporting SMOs from the more sporadic and haphazard style of teams, brands, or athletes incorporating social issues into the sporting spectacle as a form of corporate social responsibility. Put differently, whereas traditional sporting activism has occurred on the field, KYRC has shifted sporting activism off the field.

KYRC and Kaepernick still mobilize spectacle, though in different ways. As discussed in Chapter 6, KYRC has increasingly mediated its operations, and trailers/recaps for the camps spectacularize the camps as a space of fun education (or educational fun). They also publicize the donations/endorsements of celebrities. The political messaging of KYRC has increasingly moved beyond the seminars to include podcasts, public documents, and social media. Kaepernick himself has intertwined his activism and radical politics into his commercial Kaepernick Brand, which I have argued is the engine of KYRC. This is not to construct a hierarchy wherein

spectacle is associated with inauthentic forms of activism. It is merely to show how the mediated nature of contemporary sport and society means that even grassroots activism has to, in some ways, divulge in spectacle-based cultural politics.

The merging of spectacle and grassroots allows KYRC to engage different audiences, thus empowering its collectivist politics. Kaepernick is thus taking active and conscious steps to maximize his political platform and commercial brand. As Carrington (2010), Bryant (2018), Rhoden (2006) and other contend, Black athletes have commonly tended to stumble into having a broader political impact. Some of these impacts we might even call radical, which matters more than intent. But there is a paradox in the common discourse about the politics of Black athletes. Many of them thought of themselves or outwardly declared themselves as apolitical, often acted in ways that showed an intention to not involve themselves in politics, sometimes were outright conservative, and most of all collided into political firestorms somewhere along their pursuit of individual glory. For instance, Carrington (2010) does discuss the politics of Jack Johnson – the first Black athlete in his view – briefly. He notes how Jackson’s politics did not neatly fit into any of the Black political ideologies common in that era – call them Washingtonian conservative industrialism, DuBoisian collectivism, or Garveyist Black nationalism. What Johnson himself believed was not clear. But Carrington does note that his actions indicated an individualist and conservatism orientation; one that, for its time, was unabashed in publicly and privately showcasing its Blackness. In fact, in the way that scholars write about Johnson, it is not clear if he was even conscious of his global political impact. What scholars do clarify is that he liked nice cars, dating White women, and living a life of luxury. Carrington expresses that Johnson thought the spoils of his racial triumphs should go to himself, without clear regard for the potential collective benefit (symbolically, let alone materially) that

his triumphs could have across the Black Diaspora. Similar narratives are constructed about the conservatism of Jesse Owens and the apolitical intentions of Joe Louis, as well as the popular admiration for Jackie Robinson's ability to "turn the other cheek" on the racial abuse he faced when integrating the MLB. These are often framed as interesting footnotes that make their political impact even more uncanny. I see them as missed opportunities.

This is not to disparage these athletes. Indeed, the pursuit of individual glory is an unspoken motivating factor for most athletes (even if it collides with the interests of fans or contradicts their team-first platitudes). It is the hero's journey of capitalism itself, shouted even more loudly in the neoliberal age. But what Black athletes understood and acted upon their radical potential? In what ways could they steer the conversations, reactions, and perceptions if they intentionally orchestrated cultural politics? What if the Black athlete – with their already explosive cultural position and political significance – wielded that in service of structural transformation? What if, rather than stumbling backward into igniting change, the Black athlete sprinted forward with a playbook and a gameplan?

3.5 Conclusion

This dissertation does not provide a definitive gameplan, but it hopefully provides a sample or starting point of what one might look like. I have argued that KYRC is a Black Radical Political project that is influenced in foundational ways by the Black Panther Party, grassroots activists, and intellectuals within the Black Radical Tradition. But they are also manifestations of specific conjunctural convergences, which embody and express the unique forms of resistance within the current entanglement of sport, race, activism, and late capitalism. Despite the predicament of the Black Athlete in (racial) capitalist sport, KYRC models a form of Black Radical athletic resistance, based in radical, self-aware coordination for the uplift of the

collective Black community. KYRC exhibits the need, power, and potential of the Black Radical Athlete in a time of neoliberal colorblindness that has, in most instances, had a deradicalizing effect of Black athletes. The establishment of KYRC, then, showed that the “politics” of the Black Radical Athlete can – and I argue, must – extend beyond symbolism. As later chapters will demonstrate, the ingredients are ripe for a radical Black resistance through sport. The resources are available and capable of being mobilized. The donors are willing to fund. The congruent social movement organizations are willing to form coalitions. The scholars and the activists are willing to take athletes – which is to finally take sport itself – seriously enough to invest and support its political output. In the era of athletes whom want to have it both ways – to maintain commercial marketability while being known as someone not afraid to speak truth to power, to protect one’s celebrity-athlete brand while having the political consciousness of someone who is “more than an athlete”, to attain individual success while being known as someone who gives back to their community – Kaepernick through KYRC exhibits how the Black Radical Athlete is not only a viable option, but an urgent one.

Chapter 4:
KYRC as Celebrity Sporting Activism: The Kneel,
the Kaepernick Brand, and the Emergence of KYRC
from Contemporary Sport

Now that we have established KYRC’s radical politics and ideology, we can shift our examination to the specific contexts from which KYRC emerged. Colin Kaepernick established the organization in 2016, in the aftermath of his renowned kneeling protests for racial justice during the 2015 National Football League (NFL) season that ignited a global firestorm and ultimately led to the end of his playing career. This chapter outlines the broader significance of Kaepernick kneeling protests and, on arguably the more positive side, how the protests created the conditions for KYRC’s unique model of sporting activism. Specifically, I argue Kaepernick’s protests – perhaps more accurately, the frantic reactions to them (Bass, 2023; Doehler, 2023; Duvall, 2020; Nepstad & Kenny, 2019; Trace & Smith, 2019) – catapulted Kaepernick into a becoming a branded symbol of racial resistance, authenticity, and personal sacrifice. This “Kaepernick Brand” soon became the engine of KYRC. More broadly, I outline how Kaepernick’s protests were a central catalyst for a resurgence of sporting activism during the 2010s and early 2020s – what Mower et al. (2017) termed “the Kaepernick Moment” – that (re)articulated cultural attitudes towards sport. Overall, I argue that KYRC urges us to reconsider the “emancipatory potential” (Morgan, 1994) of contemporary sport by revealing the political opportunities inherent to the vast economic and cultural ascendance of sport over the previous few decades (Andrews, 2019).

For close to a century, activism within sport has played an integral role in exposing racial injustice and modeling a more liberating path forward (Cooper, 2021; DuBois, 2023; Lomax &

Hawkins, 2024; Montez de Oca & Thangaraj; 2023; Wiggins, 2014). Within the past decade, sport has (re)emerged as an institution at the forefront of a global racial protest (Taylor, 2021), with athletes – most notably Kaepernick – using their platform to advocate for racial justice with a potency and ubiquity unseen within sport since the Civil Rights Movement (Anderson, 2022; Bass, 2023; Edwards, 2016; Evans et al., 2018; Hartmann, 2003). The external conditions are certainly a significant explanatory factor. The two peaks of sporting activism closely follow the two peaks in Black resistance in broader American society; the Civil Rights Movement of the 1960s and the Black Lives Matter movement of the mid-to-late 2010s. However, as Hartmann (2003) states, it is not enough to vaguely attribute these spikes in activism to the “mood of the era.” Scholars must instead critically analyze how and why these spikes emerged, what character they take, and how they are articulated to their exterior components. Just as numerous scholars have done with the activism of the 1960s (Bass, 2004; Cooper, 2021; Hartmann, 2003; Wiggins, 1994), I attempt to map the trajectory from the emergence of (uber) sport (Andrews, 2019), to the Kaepernick Brand, to the creation of KYRC in the 2010s.

4.1 Sporting Activism and the Emancipatory Potential of Sport

The institution of sport laid the groundwork for the emergence of KYRC. While I argue that KYRC taking an SMO approach is a radical innovation, the organization invokes a long tradition of *sporting activism*. While this tradition is also commonly referred to as athlete activism, I prefer Cooper’s (2021) wider conception of sporting activism for numerous reasons.³⁹ First, most scholarship of activism in critical sport studies focuses primarily on activism done by athletes, usually during or surrounding an athletic event. The term sporting activism is more inclusive of the various activisms related to sport, enacted by parties including (but not limited to) athletes,

³⁹ Cooper (2021) used the term “sport activism.” I am adding the -ing, but the meaning of the concept is the same.

coaches, staff, fans, sport industry workers, and sport scholars (Cooper, 2021). Second, previous literature narrowly focuses on symbolic activism at mostly an individual level – such as the actions an athlete chooses to take while in the field, or the political causes an athlete speaks up for in a press conference – rather than other forms of sporting activism, such as grassroots, educational, legal, confrontational, and others (Cooper et al., 2019). KYRC is a prime example of *grassroots* sporting activism that previous literature has not engaged, referring to coordinated counter-oppressive actions via organizational efforts within and beyond sporting spaces (Cooper, 2021). Third, previous scholarship on sporting activism focuses on those surrounding elite/professional sport, often ignoring activism that relates to youth sport, leisure activities, and others. Fourth, previous scholarship has largely failed to merge empirical analysis with theory and context, limiting the validity and applicability of the analysis.

I proceed with Cooper's (2021) definition of activism, which he refers to as:

...engagement in intentional actions that challenge a clearly defined opposition and disrupt hegemonic systems perpetuating oppression, injustice, and inequity while simultaneously promoting empowerment among those historically oppressed, fairness/equity, human dignity, and demands for a shift in power relations in concert with broader social justice movements. (p. 7).

Rather than vaguely defining anyone who speaks on a political issue as an “activist”, this definition is most apt for analyzing KYRC because of its emphasis on opposition and disruption of the status quo, as well as a positive vision of an alternative social order. Building on this definition, Cooper (2021) develops a typology of Black sporting activism that includes the following forms: symbolic, scholarly, grassroots, mass mobilization, economic, legal, media, music and art, and military. Cooper differentiates activism from resistance, which he defines

more broadly as “intentional and/or unintentional actions by individuals, groups, organizations, and/or institutions that challenge oppressive systems and ideological hegemony” (p. 7).

Similarly, he develops a Black sporting resistance typology that includes agency, pioneering, advocacy, hybrid, activism, social movements, revolution/social transformation, and sustained cultural empowerment. This dissertation utilizes Cooper’s descriptions in conceptualizing contemporary sporting activism, which refers to activism as performed or engaged by athletes, coaches, administrators, or others within or adjacent to the world of sport. KYRC is sporting activism because of its founding by an athlete (Kaepernick), its conceptual engagement with sport in its messaging (described in Chapter 6), because of its aforementioned ties to athletes/corporations/figures the sporting world, and because of its emergence due to the platform afforded to Kaepernick by his sporting credentials.

Research suggests that what constitutes sporting activism is conceptualized and manifested differently within the contemporary moment in comparison to past phases of activism. In addition to the pioneering efforts (i.e. Jackie Robinson), collective boycotts (i.e. the OPHR), and demonstrative disruptions (i.e. John Carlos/Tommie Smith and Muhammad Ali), sporting activists in the current moment have expanded their definitions of activism and how social change can be enacted (Cooper, 2021; Agyemang et al., 2010; Kaufman, 2008; Lee & Cunningham, 2019). Slightly before the resurgence of sporting activism during BLM, Kaufman & Wolf (2010) found that athletes define activism as “starting advocacy organizations, engaging in symbolic protests during competitions, and resigning from a team as a form of protest” (p. 158). Studies since have shown how these definitions have changed. Fuller and Agyemang (2018) found that student-athlete activists conceptualized activism in ways that deviated from prior academic definitions. Kluch (2020) found that student-athletes thought of activism as social justice action,

mentorship, authenticity, intervention, and public acts of resistance. Kluch summarizes the ways in which current activism is increasingly woven into the athletes' everyday lives, stating that athletes' activism was often:

the result of carefully organized efforts to leave a mark in their communities rather than participating in overt and impulsive acts of resistance... For these athletes, the image of an activist is not so much that of one walking in the streets anymore but rather that of one using the social power they have as an athlete to promote change in everyday situations such as in conversations, on social media, or in interpersonal settings. (p. 584)

Kluch's analysis matches the argument by Cooper (2021) that activism increasingly includes pioneering acts and personal mentorship intended to stimulate change at the interpersonal micro-level. However, the remaining shift in sporting activism that has yet to be thoroughly examined is the emergence of grassroots organizations that use sport for structural social change *within* communities, such as this study examines with KYRC.

4.1.1 Cultural Theories of Sport

Before describing how KYRC fits in and contributes to contemporary sporting activism, it is necessary to take a theoretical detour into cultural studies literature regarding the broader "emancipatory potential of sport" (Morgan, 1994), referring to the capacity for sport to yield progressive social change. Cultural studies scholars have long analyzed the in-depth the relationship between popular culture and progressive social change (see Adorno & Horkheimer, 1998; Allman, 1999; Berry, 2012; Bloch, 1986; During, 2006; Gramsci, 1992; Hall, 2021; Levitas, 1990; Marx & Engels, 1844; 1846;1848). Based on this foundation, scholars within the tradition of Physical Cultural Studies have used these frameworks to analyze the relationship between sport (as a form of popular culture) and progressive social transformation (see Andrews,

2002; 2008; 2019; Andrews & Loy, 1993; Brohm, 1978; Carrington, 2009; Giulianotti, 2015; Gruneau, 1983; Hargreaves, 1986; Silk et al., 2015).

Sport is a form of popular culture that has a substantial influence on cultures worldwide, especially Western culture (McPherson et al., 1989). As such, it is also a site in which power is negotiated and contested. If “the history of modern sport, as in all areas of popular culture, is a history of cultural struggle” (Gruneau, 1988; p. 20), then deconstructing the intricate politics of sport is a necessary precursor to unleashing its transformative potential. Despite the ubiquity of sport, the mainstream project of cultural studies has not analyzed sport as much as it has other forms of popular culture, such as art, film, and music. Taking seriously the idea of sport as a potent form of popular culture means – as told by Carrington (2009) – recognizing that sport is “a site of everyday domination and resistance; a space of joy and creativity and routine mechanized existence” such that we can “develop ways to conceptualize sport’s potential for (embodied) emancipation and freedom” (p. 16). This study of KYRC thus gives us new details and theoretical directions for articulating to what extent, and with what effectiveness, can the platform of sport can be utilized for progressive social transformation.

Sport has not always been taken seriously by cultural theorists. Early Leftist theorists of sport in the early 20th century viewed it as nothing more than a superstructural derivative of the economic base, meaning that the structure, operation, and function of sport was a direct and unilateral determinant of capitalism (Beamish, 1981; Morgan, 1994; Rigauer, 1981; Steinberg, 1978; Wheeler, 1978). Because these vulgar Marxist scholars – influenced by the Frankfurt School’s rather pessimistic diagnoses of popular culture forms (see Adorno & Horkheimer, 1997; 2019; Berry, 2012; Inglis, 2004; Marcuse, 2013; Thompson, 2013) – saw sport as inherently another tool deployed by the bourgeoisie to create false consciousness among the

proletariat masses and substantiate capitalist logics, they saw basically no point in seriously engaging sport, let alone theorizing how to mobilize it for emancipatory purposes. This view was critiqued and developed in the mid-20th century by Neo-Marxist scholars, who viewed sport as worthy of being critically analyzed, even if it was still ultimately linked to bourgeoisie dictates, and thus incapable of being emancipatory. These scholars commonly analyzed sport as a form of labor and an auxiliary of industrial capitalism; a “prison of measured time” (Brohm, 1978) structured to reflect it and functioning to naturalize its imperatives (Beamish, 1985; Hoberman, 1984; Morgan, 1994; Rigauer, 1981). The only avenue for the improvement of sport, or the use of sport to contribute to the improvement of society, was considered to be the transformation of material (economic) conditions away from capitalism.

The late 20th century saw the emergence of scholars who, frustrated by lack of attention to agency within previous theorizations of sport, turned to Gramscian hegemony theory (Gramsci, 1992). Whereas the “first ‘moment of Marxism’ identified the fundamentally exploitative and ideological nature of sport in capitalist society” then the hegemony theorists were “more concerned with the limits and possibilities of resistance and transformation of these exploitative and ideological structures” (McDonald & Carrington, 2009; p. 3). These theorists viewed sport as both a product and producer of hegemony, in which both dominant and dominated blocs maneuver to create/recreate the social formation and attribute meanings to sport (Bairner, 2009; Gruneau, 1983; Hargreaves, 1986; Ingham & Hardy, 1984; Whitson, 1986). In this conception, sport is envisioned as a “cultural site of class domination ‘from above’ as well as the location for forms of symbolic and material resistance ‘from below’” (Carrington, 2010; p. 25). Rather than thinking of sport as a totalizing social institution, hegemony theorists advocated for thinking of sport as a potentially liberatory social practice in and through which we make our lives, ascribe

meaning, and comprise our worlds on an ‘ordinary’ level (Donnelly, 1988; Gruneau, 1983; Rowe, 2004). Put simply, in this view, sport is not simply made by capitalism and delivered to us; we have some agency in determining what it means, what it does, and towards what social ends it can be wielded. In fact, tracing numerous examples of non-dominant classes appropriating sport for their own ends, Morgan (1994) concludes that “members of the working class and other disenfranchised social groups are quite capable of penetrating the dominant moment of sport and using it for their own purposes” (p. 78). Within this theoretical tradition, KYRC and other emerging coordinated forms of sporting activism appear to illustrate the (re)emergence of the coordinated and strategic deployment of sport for the benefit of marginalized groups.

Investigating the role of football (soccer) in South Africa, Forde (a scholar of sport-for-development) and Kota (a South African activist) (2016) argued that contemporary sport remains a site through which marginalized people critically develop an “educated hope” (Bloch, 1986) that guides their visions for an alternative future and prefigures the world they want to see. The authors concede that more work in this area needs to be done to form a comprehensive understanding of how this process takes place:

Sport...is invariably invoked as an object of hope and a vehicle for building a better world.

However, how hope is conceived by these various actors and institutions, and the better world that they imagine is often left unexamined. (Forde & Kota, 2016; p. 444)

Echoing my conclusions in Chapter 2, these authors also stress that scholars must explore examples of sporting activism that operate outside of traditional (or dominant) conceptions of youth/community development, how groups mobilize sport for social change in alternative ways (such as collaborations with social movements), and how sport is being organized in ways that

reflect more radical outlooks. As this chapter argues, the economic, social, and cultural capital (Bourdieu, 1984) afforded to athletes within the contemporary uber-sport assemblage (Andrews, 2019) has granted them unprecedented (and often unrealized) power to shape/influence social action and enact their own agency for various ends. While it is most often used for increasing wealth and attaining financial security, in some instances – such as Kaepernick establishing KYRC – it is mobilized for emancipatory social justice ends.

4.2 From Harry Edwards to Colin Kaepernick: Historicizing Sporting Activism

With the theoretical foundation established, I now turn to real-world histories of how the emancipatory potential of sport has been put into action. While some have – incorrectly, in my view – claimed that the early 2010s were the first time the politics of race were launched to the forefront of American sport, more astute observers have pointed out that contemporary BLM era of sporting activism is more of a “resurgence” than an “emergence” of explicit political activism in sport (Bryant, 2018; DuBois, 2023; Hartmann et al., 2019; Lomax & Hawkins, 2024; Nauright & Wiggins, 2014). The era in which the politics of race perhaps most forcefully and inescapably overlapped with the institution of sport was the 1960s, concomitant with the Civil Rights Movement. Athletes such as Muhammad Ali, Kareem Abdul-Jabbar, Jim Brown, Bill Russell, Wyomia Tyus, and others used the platform of sport to bring awareness to the plight of Black people, either through explicit activism or implicit achievement and visibility (Cooper, 2021).

Most relevant for the purposes of understanding KYRC and the contemporary “Kaepernick moment” (Mower et al., 2017), I argue, was the activism of Dr. Harry Edwards and the Olympic Project for Human Rights (OPHR) around 1968. As discussed below, this moment has clear and direct linkages to KYRC (for reasons beyond the fact that Edwards has provided direct counsel to Kaepernick, see Kamoji, 2021). Anticipating the messages and tactics of KYRC, the work of

OPHR was the most visible instance of coordinated and organized sporting activism that aimed to exploit the racial politics of sport for the purposes of radical education towards liberation. Although today's sporting activism is much broader and more sustained than ever before (Hartmann et al., 2022), it was 1968 that Wiggins (1997) previously termed the “crescendo” of Black athletic resistance, or the year in which – prior to the current era – it was “hard to imagine a period when racial unrest and African American discontent in athletics was more intensive and widespread” (Hartmann, 2003; p. 176). This era of the late 1960s is the most direct historical interlocutor to Kaepernick and KYRC, and as such serves as a useful and necessary reference point for understanding contemporary race-related sporting activism.

In his book *The Revolt of the Black Athlete* (2019; originally published in 1969),⁴⁰ Edwards recounts his experiences organizing for causes of racial justice in the height of the Civil Rights Movement on his own campus of San Jose State University (where he was a professor) and later extending his activism nationwide. Edwards also describes the wider social context that he argued necessitated the need for Black athletes to revolt. Beyond the racial and economic injustice faced by Black Americans that ignited the Civil Rights Movement, Edwards also describes the unique position of Blacks within mainstream American sport. Interestingly, many of the issues he highlights in the late 1960s still apply to the situation of Black athletes today, including: the exploitation of amateurism, commodification without compensation, stacking, lack of Black management and leadership in sport, lack of resources yielded from sport to develop the Black community, a lack of investment in the intellect of Black athletes, and the mentality that Blacks athletes have little to say politically and should instead just ‘stick to sports.’ Tactically,

⁴⁰ This book also became a foundational text for establishing the sociology of sport in the 1970s.

Edwards organized boycotts of Black athletic labor and staged demonstrations in making demands on college campuses.

The most widely-known product of Edwards' organizing was the Olympic Project for Human Rights (OPHR), which was a movement consisting of protest activities and social networks that most famously attempted to organize a boycott of Black athletes for the 1968 Olympics in Mexico City (Hartmann, 2009). The OPHR had six demands of the International Olympic Committee (IOC): 1) restoring Muhammad Ali's boxing title (stripped for his refusal to fight in the Vietnam War into which he was conscripted); 2) removal of "anti-Semitic and anti-Black personality" Avery Brundage;⁴¹ 3) exclude participation of apartheid nations South Africa and Rhodesia; 4) add at least two Black coaches to the Olympic men's track and field coaching staff; 5) appointment of at least two Black people to policy-making positions at the U.S. Olympic Committee; and 6) the desegregation of the New York Athletic Club (Edwards, 2018; p. 53).

Like Kaepernick almost 50 years later, Edwards encouraged athletes to use the Star-Spangled Banner – the American National Anthem – as the modality of protest, calling it a "monument to the hypocrisy of America" (p. 85). Although the boycott ultimately fell apart, its spirit came to fruition when sprinters John Carlos and Tommy Smith famously raised their fists in a Black power salute during the men's 200m medal ceremony, drawing widespread attention to racial injustice through sport. Carlos and Tommy Smith were influenced by their Huey P. Newton and the Black Panther Party (Hartmann, 2003; Hilliard, 2018), who were active at the same time.

OPHR's impact on the "contested racial terrain" of sport was significant (Hartmann, 2003). As Wiggins (2014) describes, it publicly challenged the notion that sport was a solely beneficial and benevolent institution for Blacks, instead demonstrating the ways in which the

⁴¹ This was Edwards' description of Brundage, the then-President of the IOC.

institution of sport benefits from Black athletes perhaps more so than the other way around. Additionally, the critiques launched by the OPHR cut through the romanticism commonly attached to sport, making much of the public realize that sport encompasses forms of inequality and injustice that mirror those in other social institutions. Nonetheless, the OPHR and Dr. Edwards showcased how the cultural centrality of sport can be leveraged for social change and exposing/altering power relations. Hartmann (2003), commenting on the demonstration of Smith and Carlos, eloquently summarized the impact of this revolutionary moment in sport and the shifts in thinking about race, sport, and society that it inspired:

Smith and Carlos captured, in a single and singularly powerful gesture, the complicated, controversial, and contradictory constellation of racial experiences, ideologies, and political programs swirling around them, in sport and in society at large and in the relations between sport and society. They made race a problem that could not be dismissed or avoided. And, in capturing, without fully commenting upon, the problematic nature of race both in and outside of sport, Smith and Carlos opened a unique symbolic space for dialogue and debate about these issues. (p. 25-26)

It is this space of dialogue created by Edwards, Smith, Carlos, and the entire OPHR project that paved the way for KYRC and the resurgence of sporting activism today.

Despite attempts to diminish Edwards' role in the 1968 Olympic protests, Hartmann (2009) argues that Edwards made three key contributions to 1968, and shaped the political opportunity structure that KYRC operates within today. First, he was adept at using sport as an entry point for education and consciousness raising. Second, he put ideology into action by organizing and facilitating protest activity to address critiques. Third, he leveraged media and mass communications to spread his message and keep the critiques of Black college athletes on

the national agenda. It is true that the success of 1968 relied on the favorable political opportunity structure (McAdam, 1982) in which the OPHR operated. This included the “persistent racism and inequality in society and resurgent African American radicalism; repression and hostility (or at least lack of receptivity) from the leadership in the sports world; a generation of exceptionally smart, well-educated, and well-spoken world-class African American athletes” (Hartmann, 2009; p. 184). Still, these favorable conditions required agents capable of taking action to realize its potential. Edwards was central to helping the public realize not only the way sport can be leveraged for social change, but the symbolic power of sport to force social change itself.

OPHR’s message and tactics of challenging racism in and through sport was perceived as so revolutionary because of sport’s unique position in popular culture, wherein it is perceived as simultaneously sacred and trivial, with both being used as justifications for not “politicizing” it and socially ostracizing those perceived as doing so (Nauright & Wiggins, 2014). Additionally, sport’s perception as a bastion of meritocratic individualism – wherein it is believed that because every sporting participant (sometimes literally) begins at the same starting point, success or failure is solely determined by hard work, skill, and merit – prevents many thinking critically about the external social factors and ideologies that undercut the narrative of sport being “equal” (Cooky & Dworkin, 2013). This “deep cultural structure” (Hartmann, 2019) of sport-as-apolitical-equal-playing-field explains the harsh and punitive reactions to Edwards, Kaepernick, and any athlete perceived as “politicizing” sport. Using sport as a form of protest is often perceived as “an attack on sport itself, on everything sport stood for, everything it supposedly did best and contributed to American society” (Hartmann, 2003; p. 201). By this deep cultural logic,

to expose politics in and through sport is to undermine sport, which is to undermine the project of America.

Just as Edwards and the revolting athletes had done in the 1960s, the activism of Kaepernick and contemporary athletes can be read as an intervention into the sport-as-positive-racial-force ideology (Hartmann, 2003), wherein sport – by way of its interracial participation and ostensibly team-building structure – is unquestionably perceived as an inherent and automatic source of racial progress. Hartmann (2003) explains the mythology upon which this logic rests:

So commonsensical, so natural, so inevitable did the relationship between sport participation and African American advancement seem that most Americans were simply shocked to hear that anyone – much less a group of athletes themselves – would make the claim that *sport needed to be used in a more deliberate, calculated fashion if it were to be a positive force in the movement against racism and for racial justice*. It ran counter to everything they knew and assumed about sport when it came to matters of race.... As far as idealistic boycott critics were concerned, then, sport was thus doubly inappropriate for race-based activism: it was off-limits to non-sport intrusions, and it was an institution that produced positive and progressive racial results.... [This logic] enabled the sporting world to take credit for all positive racial results achieved in and through sport, while allowing that world to disavow the need to engage any controversial racial issues. (p. 74-75; italics added)

More recently, Edwards (2016) recently developed a trajectory of athlete activism, which he terms the Waves of Athlete Activism. In his conception, there have been four waves. The first wave occurred from 1900-1945 and is characterized by Black athletes pursuing legitimacy in mainstream sport. The second wave, occurring from 1945 to the early 1960s, focused on Black

athletes acquiring political access and positional diversity within sport. The third wave, occurring from the mid-1960s to the 1970s, focused on demanding dignity and respect within mainstream sport. The fourth wave, which Edwards argues is occurring from the mid-2000s to the current moment, prioritized Black athletes securing and transferring power via economic and technological means. Optimistic about the current fourth wave, Edwards (2016) points to the power of social media – as analyzed in Chapter 6 – being one of the greatest tools for sporting activism because of its capacity to aid with increasing awareness, disseminating accurate information, relaying counter-oppressive messaging, and providing guidance for stimulated action and sustained engagement (Cooper, 2021).

This fourth wave brings us back to the resurgence of sporting activism in the current conjuncture (Hall, 1996; Grossberg, 2019); beginning roughly in 2012 with the death of Trayvon Martin by the hands of police (see Harris & Tillis, 2014). This era represents a dramatic escalation of protest forms and tactics through sport, both in quantity and quality. It was spurred primarily by the police killings of unarmed Black people in the United States, and as such both reflected and actively contributed to the rise of the Black Lives Matter (BLM) social movement. Kaepernick – and his symbolic act of taking a knee during the National Anthem – became the figurehead, lightning rod, and foremost representative of a sporting era that has seen a revival and reinvention of protest forms and tactics, in relation to a diverse range of social issues. I contend that the extension from activism from the field and the post-game press conference to the community – through Sporting SMOs – can be characterized as a radical extension of the historical form and content of sporting activism, and thus can shed new critical light into the possibilities and potential of mobilizing sport for social transformation. We now turn to a critical

analysis of the Kneel, which catalyzed this “Kaepernick moment” (Mower et al., 2017) within the fourth wave of sporting activism.

4.3 The Kneel: Analyzing The 4th Wave of Sporting Activism

KYRC emerged from the cultural phenomenon of The Kneel. After many allusions to the story of Kaepernick’s kneel, it is at this point worth laying out more explicitly as context for the creation of the Kaepernick Brand, and thus the establishment of KYRC. Kaepernick was a successful starting quarterback for the San Francisco 49ers in the National Football League (NFL) from 2012 to 2016. Prior to sporting events in the United States, the National Anthem is played, and all players and fans customarily stand and place their hand over their heart to ostensibly celebrate America; the military, but by extension, the nation itself. During a preseason game on Aug. 14, 2015, Kaepernick remained sitting down while the National Anthem played before the game. Few noticed as he remained seated during the Anthem in that game and the next, until a reporter saw him seated during a game on Aug. 26th. When asked why he sat during the Anthem, referencing the plethora of recent murders by police in the U.S., Kaepernick stated:

“I am not going to stand up to show pride in a flag for a country that oppresses Black people and people of color. To me, this is bigger than football, and it would be selfish on my part to look the other way. There are bodies in the street and people getting paid leave and getting away with murder” (Boren, 2020; p. 3).

A storm of nationwide controversy ensued. Many supported Kaepernick’s viewpoint and his actions, while many others in all factions of American culture immediately demonized Kaepernick (Dickerson & Hodler, 2021; Niven, 2021; Peña, 2021; Stepp & Castle, 2021).

After meeting with a U.S. Navy Seal to discuss the protest, Kaepernick switched from remaining seated to kneeling, as a sign of respect for the members of the U.S. military who lost

their lives (of whom Kaepernick declared he was not criticizing) (Reid, 2017). Kaepernick stated that: “Once again, I’m not anti-American... I love America. I love people. That’s why I’m doing this. I want to help make America better” (Boren, 2020). Nonetheless, Kaepernick’s protest became one of the foremost stories of the mid to late 2010s, not only in sport but in global politics (Graber et al., 2020; McNeil, 2017). Other athletes – in the NFL and in other sporting leagues around the world – adopted Kaepernick’s kneel in protest of various injustices. Kaepernick’s jersey became the top-selling jersey in the NFL by the start of the 2016 season (Boren, 2020). Though Kaepernick was not the only athlete who used the platform of sport to protest for certain causes in the 2010s, Kaepernick was the central lightning rod of criticism. This is perhaps because of the unapologetic radicalism of Kaepernick’s stance, exhibited by Kaepernick calling for justice whereas other athletes called for peace (Zirin, 2021).

The criticism culminated in 2017, when then-President Donald Trump called for NFL owners to fire any player that kneels during the Anthem to advocate for injustice. At a rally, Trump theatrically stated: “Wouldn’t you love to see one of these NFL owners, when somebody disrespects our flag, to say, ‘Get that son of a bitch off the field right now, out. He’s fired. He’s fired!’ (Gottlieb & Maske, 2017). The criticism remained intense, even as Kaepernick backed his words with actions such as donating millions to community organizations and creating his own organization (KYRC). Kaepernick subsequently was not offered a contract by any NFL despite his success; a clear instance of being blackballed. Executives called him a “traitor” and vowed never to sign him, as well as threatening to do the same to any other athletes that kneeled (Belson, 2017; Bondy, 2016). As of 2024, despite still remaining in shape and being open to resuming his NFL career, Kaepernick has not been offered a contract. Still, after Kaepernick was

ousted from the NFL for his actions, he remained a symbol of either courageous activism for progressives, or scornful ungratefulness from reactionaries.

4.3.1 The Kneel as a Symbol

Kaepernick's kneel was a form of symbolic activism that was effective in what symbolic activism does: grab headlines and draw attention to a certain issue. Its effectiveness is perhaps best evidenced by how widespread Kaepernick's method – the Kneel – became as a protest display. For years in the wake of Kaepernick, athletes around the world, at all levels of sport, adopted the Kneel as a symbolic form of protest (McNeil, 2017; Mueller, 2022; Zirin, 2021). Most kneelers protested race-related issues within local contexts, although the kneel was also adopted as a symbol against other injustices as well (Feinstein, 2021; Marston, 2021; Trimbur, 2018). For instance, #TakeAKnee trended on Twitter internationally in 2017, engaged and utilized by many social and political actors whom did not even know its origin, nor anything about American football (Willingham, 2017). It even extended beyond sport into the realm of politics, as evidenced by the surreal viral photo of U.S. Democratic Congress leaders Nancy Pelosi, Chuck Schumer, and other politicians kneeling in African garb during BLM protests in the summer of 2020 (McEvoy, 2020). The popular magazine *GQ* named Kaepernick "Citizen of the Year," and in December, the Associated Press named NFL protests the top story in sports of 2017 (Nepstad & Kenney, 2018). In general, it has become common for scholars, commentators, and activists alike to associate the action of a kneel with political demonstration that conjured the radical spirit of Kaepernick.

However, symbolic activism is common, even within sport. There is a tendency – even among critical scholars of sport like myself – to romanticize Kaepernick's kneel and/or other forms of symbolic protest in sport (Hartmann et al., 2022). While we are often excited by the

proposition of sport being used for social change, we must remain cautious to how symbolic protest rarely translates directly to more sustained and concrete structural transformation, and may be just as likely to provoke backlash and opposition as it is to provoke sympathy (Hartmann et al., 2022). Such is the difficulty of attempting to empirically outline factors such as awareness, ideology, and cultural shift, qualitatively or quantitatively. Nonetheless, in what follows, I attempt to synthesize what the literature has put forth regarding the impact of Kaepernick’s kneel and the general milieu of this resurgence of sporting activism in this fourth Wave (Edwards, 2016). This literature highlights the external factors – particularly the political shifts occurring within sport as a direct result of Kaepernick – that paved the way for the emergence and sustenance of KYRC.

4.3.2 Donald Trump’s America

First, we must outline the politically-charged atmosphere that was – perhaps still is – Trump’s America. In my final chapter, I position KYRC more firmly within the conjunctural shifts in contemporary America, but for now it suffices to mention that Kaepernick’s kneel became so monumental because of the unprecedented manner in which Trump brought sport to the center of cultural-political debate (Andrews, 2019). Almost all presidents have merged their politics with sport in a manner that supports their political vision and ostensibly speaks to “everyday” blue-collar Americans (Andrews & Carrington, 2021). This has been particularly seamless and effective for conservative politicians, perhaps due to the long-standing conservatism inherent to many Western sporting leagues and structures (Duvall, 2020; King, 2008; Serazio, 2019; Silk, 2013). Whereas politicians have mostly done this in a manner intended to spark multicultural unification, Trump is unique in how he invokes sport to create fiery division. Important to consider for our purposes here (and in Chapter 7) is the way in

which, as Andrews & Carrington (2021) put it, Trump strategically wields sport as a modality for an “authoritarian populism” (see Hall, 1988). Through sport, Trump advocates for his vision of the American populace and presents himself as the antidote to enemies from within (the “Deep state”, liberals obsessed with “political correctness”, and kneeling athletes) and enemies from without (terrorists, immigrants, and often non-White Americans) that have ruined America for the true patriots (everyday conservatives, white male nativists, athletes such as Tom Brady) (Andrews & Carrington, 2021; Kusz, 2017; 2019; Serwer, 2021). Trump’s America is described by Andrews & Carrington (2021):

Driven by its blithe and enabling racism, sexism, and misogyny – in conjunction with its crass and unifying embodied masculinity (Carian & Sobotka, 2018; Gökarıksel & Smith, 2016) – Trumpism functions as a coalescing White-male dissonance machine (Page & Dittmer, 2016), tapping into, or perhaps more accurately stimulating a White working-class male resentment toward the perceived loss of inalienable privilege and authority within society. (p. 187)

Black and Brown athletes are routinely demonized by Trump in ways that articulate Whiteness as the normative center of America society. Perhaps most central to Trump’s strategy is the rhetorical demonization of Kaepernick. Leibovich (2018) explains that “it was only a matter of time before Trump served up Kaepernick, the vegan quarterback, as red meat to his base. Kaepernick was a Trumpian villain straight out of Central Casting—big ’fro, swarthy skin, and a San Francisco jersey” (p. 229). Trump versus Kaepernick, in many ways, became a shorthand for negotiating the conjuncture in the late-2010s.⁴²

4.3.3 Reactions to the Kneel: Media, Players, and Detractors

⁴² This point regarding the relations between KYRC, the American culture wars, and authoritarian populism is elaborated in Chapter 7.

Regardless of the framing of Kaepernick from Trump and the Right, his kneeling was framed differently for the rest of America. Perhaps surprisingly, Boykoff and Carrington (2020) found that there were many instances of positive media framing to Kaepernick's protests. Most commonly (45% of stories included in the sample of print media), Kaepernick was portrayed as a patriot for his critical dissent, although stories framing him as a traitor to the country were close behind (43%). This is despite the disappointing fact that the group afforded the most voice to speak on Kaepernick were "honchos", referring to team owners, coaches, or administrators (27%), followed by fellow NFL athletes (21%). Activists (4%) and scholars/experts (3%) – who were most appropriate for contextualizing if not voicing support for the Kneel – were barely consulted. Social media, especially Black twitter (Sharma, 2013), also generally helped increase support for Kaepernick (Boykoff and Carrington, 2020). Still, much of the media coverage of Kaepernick's protest focused on the method of his protest rather than the substance of his message, which functioned to distract and deflect from Kaepernick's core critiques of American racism. As Coombs et al (2020) summarizes:

by framing stories around Kaepernick himself, presenting the nascent movement as being individual actions rather than part of a broader whole before having to acknowledge the virality of the protests, privileging official sources that have power and influence, and highlighting the professional risk that the athletes were facing, coverage managed to talk a whole lot about what Kaepernick and other athletes were doing and whether or not that was a "good" or "appropriate" thing, without having to engage in real discussions around race and social justice. (p. 331)

Still, both Boykoff & Carrington (2020) and Coombs et al (2020) suggest that there was much more support for Kaepernick than one might have anticipated, especially given the perceived

“disruptiveness” and “incivility” of his method, along with the (relative) radicalism of his message (Marston, 2021).

Doehler (2023) examined the media framing of Kaepernick in 2020 – four years after his initial protest and in the aftermath of the death of George Floyd, which was another significant moment in the trajectory of BLM that sparked re-examination of the nation’s racial politics (see Johnson & Edgar, 2024). Doehler’s findings contrasted with that of Boykoff and Carrington (2020). Where Boykoff and Carrington (2020) found that media framing of the 2016 protest was largely favorable to Kaepernick, Doehler (2023) found that the sample media explicitly or implicitly denigrated Kaepernick. Specifically, Doehler identified four common frames from 2016: an emphasis on the *how* rather than the *why* of Kaepernick’s protest; a centering of the military and their feelings about the protest; a debate over patriotism vs freedom of speech; and general moral outrage. Similar research from Coombs et al. (2020) and Grober et al. (2020) found results compatible with these frames. Unsurprisingly then, in interviewing mostly White college students, Chaplin and Montez de Oca (2019) found that students rarely explicitly addressed race when explaining their support or opposition to Black athletes kneeling during the Anthem. Regardless of position, instead of discussing race or the stated reasons for the protest, participants instead framed the discussions through the lens of patriotism and/or (Black) deviancy. Indeed, the popularity of Black NFL players declined after the protests, whether or not they had participated (Lacina, 2020). Regardless of tone or sympathy, research has shown that media framing largely avoided a substantive discussion about racism and police brutality – the stated cause of Kaepernick’s protest.

However, in the aftermath of George Floyd’s murder four years later, Doehler (2023) found that Kaepernick was largely venerated by the media. Doehler found that stories about Kaepernick

in 2020 entailed media either apologizing or avoiding blame for their unsympathetic framings from 2016 (including many of the same individual media figures), as well as exalting Kaepernick as a revolutionary who was ahead of his time and urging for the structural changes that Kaepernick suggested. This sympathetic shift has happened to many Black revolutionaries who were deemed degenerately radical in their time (Andrews, 1999) – such as Martin Luther King Jr., Muhammad Ali, Tommie Smith and John Carlos, and even Harry Edwards – but it is remarkable how quickly the same happened with Kaepernick.

Beyond (but certainly connected to) the media framing, there have been a few studies that have attempted to empirically examine the public support and impact of contemporary sporting activism in the wake of Kaepernick’s protests. Intravia et al. (2018) found that 90.2% of Black respondents agreed or strongly agreed with kneeling as a form of protest (compared to 37.7% of non-Blacks), while 100% of Black respondents agreed or strongly agreed that players should not be punished for protesting (compared to only 24.8% of non-Blacks). Towler et al. (2020) found that those who strongly approved of Kaepernick’s protest engaged in politics at elevated rates. Speaking about a potential “Kaepernick effect” that can inspire broader political action, they explain that “activism by Black professional athletes matters to Black political action... our work demonstrates that this Black celebrity interaction has the potential to mobilize Black Americans to political action” (Towler et al., 2019; p. 122). The visibility of Kaepernick’s kneel launched him to the forefront of the movement (whether or not Kaepernick intended to do so). In the wake of his kneel, one-quarter of Black Americans identified Colin Kaepernick as their top choice to lead the National Black Lives Matter Movement – ahead of the movement’s cofounders Alicia Garza, Patrisse Cullors, and Opal Tometi – indicating the strong association between the visibility of sport and associated social movements (Towler et al., 2019).

However, this does not mean that the Kneel changed political attitudes. The literature suggests that opinions on athlete activism mostly reflect pre-conceived biases and political orientations (Hartmann et al., 2022). Additionally, research by Mueller (2022) suggests that support for kneeling Black athletes may be overstated in previous research and public opinion polls due to social desirability polls, especially among Blacks. However, Towler et al.'s research (2019; 2020) does suggest that the Kneel had a mobilizing effect, if not an ideological effect, on Black politics. Another possibility is that if the Kneel did not change minds, it may have provoked dialogue (outside of echo chambers) and thus became a popular entry point for political evolution. This perspective is supported Eschmann et al. (2021), who found that Kaepernick's kneel was a rare cultural event that stimulated "concessions" among disagreeing parties on Twitter. This suggests that, when discussing Kaepernick on Twitter, some users were able to display civility, consider alternative perspectives, and find common ground with users who disagreed with them in a manner that is not typical of Internet discourse. If one does consider the objective of symbolic sporting activism to start a conversation, this data suggests that Kaepernick at least provided an effective entry point.

Edwards and Thorpe (2019) argue that reactions to Kaepernick's kneel were centered on how people constituted his identity. Those who perceived Kaepernick's primary identity as a professional athlete were more likely to criticize his protest, whereas those who perceived his identity as a Black man first were more likely to support his protests. Perhaps the causality is reversed, or there is only a correlation. Regardless, this research supports the notion from Hartmann (2003) that there is a deep cultural structure that shapes our expectations of sport and athletes, in a way that for decades has not been compatible with race or politics.

Beyond framing and public opinion, what effect did Kaepernick's Kneel have on other athletes? To what extent did it change the protest landscape of sport? At the height of the protests, 73% of NFL players were involved in some sort of racial demonstration (Houghteling & Dantzler, 2020). Most of these were "low risk" demonstrations that were sort of a middle ground between kneeling and standing hand-over-heart for the Anthem, such as locking arms while standing or laying a hand on the shoulder of a kneeling athlete (as opposed to the "high risk" activism of kneeling or sitting during the Anthem) (Houghteling & Dantzler, 2020). Black NFL players and elite NFL players (those in the top quintile of earnings) were slightly overrepresented among the kneelers, while White and non-elite athletes were slightly underrepresented. This suggests to me that Black athletes and high-profile athletes either believed most strongly in Kaepernick's cause, or felt more pressure to take a stand because of their heightened cultural notoriety. However, quantity and intensity of activism declined from roughly 2018 to early 2020 (Houghteling & Dantzler, 2020).

With Kaepernick's symbolic activism still fresh on the mind of the nation almost five years later, athletes continue their activism in the aftermath of George Floyd's murder. They even did so in ways that – at least somewhat – moved beyond the symbolic. In the summer of 2020, after months of league shutdowns to prevent the spread of COVID-19, the NBA and WNBA returned to complete their playoffs in "The Bubble", as it was colloquially called. Activism within the NBA is more anticipated and thus less explosive than that of the NFL, given that the modern NBA has always been widely understood – with some truth and some romanticism (see Wallace, 2020) – as a "Black" league, with a more developed history of social consciousness among some of its star players (Manning et al., 2021; Smith, 2009). Even today, many NBA players outspokenly reject the post-racial colorblind vision of society and the deeply ingrained/expected

sport-politics divide (Manning et al., 2021). Similarly, the WNBA is widely known for incorporating social justice into their league operation, at a quantity and intensity unmatched by other sporting leagues (see Cooky & Antunovic, 2020; Foltz, forthcoming; Williams, 2022); even as activism by women, queer, and trans athletes does not receive the same quality or quantity of coverage as cis, straight, male activism (McClearan and Fischer, 2021).

From the outset in 2020, WNBA players demanded that their Bubble incorporate social justice commentary that made clear their allegiance to BLM and protesting racism (Williams, 2022). The NBA followed suit, including the following measures: allowing players to wear (league-approved) slogans on the back of their jerseys in place of their names (such as “Vote”, “How Many More”, and “Say Their Names”); painting Black Lives Matter on the courts in a manner visible to national television broadcasts; allowing players (along with coaches and referees) to lock arms and kneel during the National Anthem (Kimble, 2020). Players even refused to answer basketball-related questions in media sessions, instead demanding to talk about police brutality and demanding justice for the death of Breonna Taylor at the hands of police in Louisville, Kentucky (Manning et al., 2021).

Shortly into the 2020 NBA Bubble playoffs, there was another viral shooting of an unarmed Black man by police. Jacob Blake was shot seven times in the back in front of his children in Kenosha, Wisconsin, not far from the stadium of the #1 NBA seed Milwaukee Bucks (see Morales, 2021). Details emerged about the shooting shortly before the Bucks were scheduled to play their playoff game against the Orlando Magic. At the last minute, the Bucks decided not to play. They spoke with the Magic, who agreed to boycott the game. Almost overnight, there was a work stoppage in the NBA, with no certainty about how long it would last, or if the players would even return for the playoffs at all. In a heated and contentious meeting, players met to

discuss their next moves. They ultimately decided that they would not play until the league backed their vocal support with concrete action (see Wharton, 2020). In addition to symbolic action already present in the Bubble:

the NBA also agreed to convert some of its arenas into polling locations for the election to allow ample access for people to cast their votes in the election. Finally, the agreement included the establishment of a social justice coalition to ensure that sustained actions by the players and league would lead to meaningful criminal justice and police reform (Deb, 2020). The coalition will exist in addition to the USD \$300 million in funding focused on economic empowerment in the Black community, spearheaded by the NBA Board of Governors (Todisco, 2020). The boycott by NBA players has seemingly paid off, as the NBA was forced to listen to their demands if the season were to resume. (Williams 2022; p. 271).

The “boycott” only lasted for one game, as players ultimately decided to resume play shortly after. In the aftermath, many debated whether the slogans were signs of progress or corporate cooptation, whether the players gained concrete social justice wins or gave in before real change could occur, and even wondered whether the players demanded arguably (neo)liberal solutions based in on voting and economic philanthropy at the expense of more structural radical solutions (Farred, 2022; Taylor, 2021). Regardless, the move shifted the NBA towards a more dialogical model of governance, in which the players (as opposed to solely the league executives) were able to shape the league’s priorities, economic investments, and political commitments (Williams, 2022). Following the symbolic protests, the activism of the Bubble demonstrates the potential of player solidarity combined with labor tactics. The workers seemed to realize that they produce the value, and how that dynamic – truer today than ever – can be leveraged for political progress.

Kaepernick clearly shifted the political landscape of sport, sparking tangible increases in protest activity in comparison to the previous five decades. Although this dissertation largely focuses on the positive and progressive functions of the Kaepernick Brand, the downsides were significant as well; if not outright dangerous. This extends far beyond Kaepernick losing his job in the NFL as a result of naked collusion. Scholars have also identified the new forms of backlash that accompany the resurgence of sporting activism headed by Kaepernick (Park et al., 2020). Sanderson et al (2016) found that, even slightly prior to Kaepernick's kneel, Black NFL players who walked onto the field with the "hands up, don't shoot" pose (a show of solidarity for Michael Brown in 2014; see Norwood, 2016) experienced racial abuse on social media, as well as boycott movements against their team the St. Louis Rams. Many athletes who kneeled or participated in any form of disruptive protests lost sponsorships and endorsement deals (see Garcia & Dotson, 2016). Data from Jepsen & Jepsen (2023) found that kneeling/protesting during the Anthem may have negatively affected players' future employment and earnings in the NFL, although results were not statistically significant. Data from Niven (2020) suggests that other protesters faced professional penalties as well, such as lower salaries and decreased salary growth comparable to players similar in performance.

Duvall (2020) found that kneeling Black athletes (Kaepernick specifically and most intensely) served as a key figure through which – by way of intense criticism – the far-right (or Alt-right) coalesced to form community. Through explicitly racist or "dog-whistle" insults, Kaepernick became a figure onto which conservatives projected their wide-ranging cultural grievances. Kaepernick was invoked by the far-Right to not only confirm their prior worldviews and reassert conservative identity, but also tied to other culture war issues of the time (often tying them all together to paint a wide-ranging "woke" liberal conspiracy that was responsible

for the destruction of traditional Western civilization) (Goldberg, 2023). The specific insults outlined by Duvall (2020) are revealing of contemporary right-wing attitudes to race and sport. Among many, some common themes were that Kaepernick was: a race traitor who was insufficiently grateful to the White family who adopted him and general proximity to Whiteness; an emasculated thug operating under the spell of his girlfriend Nessa (co-founder of KYRC) who identifies as Muslim, and a spoiled celebrity loser who is unworthy of his fame and has never faced “real” hardship.

Much of this criticism was based on the premise that Kaepernick – as well as other non-White and women celebrities – was inadequately grateful for the “privilege” of fame, and it was up to everyday right-wing culture warriors to stop him. Duvall (2020) summarizes:

For far-right audiences who perpetuate the online desecration of Kaepernick’s celebrity, fame is treated as a privilege bestowed upon the quarterback through no genuine talent, but by the grace of audiences who have the right to expect his political silence in return for his status. (p. 273)

Criticism of Kaepernick, and even questioning of Kaepernick’s identity, was not reserved to just conservative-leaning White people. Even Rodney Harrison, a Black former NFL player and current commentator who is largely apolitical in his football coverage, said of Kaepernick that “he’s not Black” (Disbrow, 2016). Smith and Trace (2019) confirm these inclinations, suggesting (slightly more sympathetically) that disapproval of protesting Black athletes was strongly associated with national attachment and patriotism. Disregarding the debate between whether the backlash to the anthem protests were motivated by racism or difference in political ideology, Niven (2021) suggests that it is both. If we even can empirically prove a distinction between the two, it is not meaningful. The anthem protests have become another “dogwhistle” for White

grievances; a rhetorical euphemism that clearly conjures a discussion of race without invoking it directly (Wetts & Willer, 2019). In other words, whether detractors frame their opposition as related to patriotism or the military or the sanctity of sport – everyone involved understands that the core issue is Black athletes protesting racism (Niven, 2021).

Similarly, examining with social movement frameworks, Nepstad and Kenney (2018) examined the protests through a lens of delegitimation and relegitimation strategies. They aimed to find the ways that actors have attempted to “tactically neutralize” kneeling by undercutting its symbolic power, as well as how the kneelers strategically negotiated the opposition to sustain their movement. The authors found that detractors of the kneeling athletes – including fans, politicians, league officials, and conservatives more generally– aimed to delegitimize kneeling through various tactics. Discursively, detractors tried to stigmatize protesters’ character (such as depicting them as “unAmerican thugs”); questioning the rights of Kaepernick to represent Black people (such as highlighting his biracial “mixed” identity or his status as an adoptee to a White family, implying that he is not ‘really’ Black); emphasizing the harmful consequences of kneeling (such as tying television ratings decreases to kneeling); rearticulating a negative meaning to kneeling (such as claiming it is intended to disrespect the military); imposing costs (such as fan boycotts); and coopting the protest (such as the NFL attempting to end kneeling through donations to Black charities) (Nepstad & Kenney, 2018).

However, these mostly failed to end kneeling completely. This is because proponents of kneeling deployed a range of tactics that relegitimized the protest, undermining the detractors from opponents. These relegitimation tactics include: promoting the protesters’ strong character (such as highlighting Kaepernick’s millions in donations to causes consistent with his protests); intensifying identification with Black people (such as Kaepernick growing out his Afro and

taking classes in Black Studies); emphasizing the positive consequences of kneeling (such as how it has stimulated an unprecedented focus on race and police brutality in the context of sport); reaffirming the original meaning of the protest; imposing oppositional costs (such as protest supporters threatening to boycott after Kaepernick was blackballed); and exposing the clear efforts of cooptation (Nepstad & Kenney, 2018). Overall, kneeling was a tactical and contested terrain.

Synthesizing much of the research on race-based sporting activism in the Kaepernick era, Hartmann et al. (2022) argue that such sporting activism likely does not result in concrete change. It does, however, serve as a key venue for symbolic and communicative displays of protest that can catapult social issues onto the national agenda – across political ideology, outside of “echo chambers” (Eschmann et al. 2021; Fisher, 2022) – in ways that few other cultural institutions can. KYRC is the product of a contemporary moment in which athletes have more tools for activism at their disposal than athletes of the past. Beyond symbolic activism on the field (such as the Kaepernick Kneel or Smith & Carlos fist) and messaging in traditional media (such as Harry Edwards and OPHR), athletes in the present day raise awareness for social issues through clothing, social media, a vastly expanded sport-media landscape, and even athlete-owned media outlets such as podcasts or The Players Tribune (Antunovic, 2022; Hartmann et al., 2022; Rowe, 2011). This leads to more resources, agency, and power with which to launch social justice items into the national agenda. Taken all together, Hartmann et al. (2022) explains the power of sport:

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. (p. 561)

The power of sport is that it offers a venue for athletes such as Kaepernick to explicitly intervene in the “contested racial terrain” of sport through these unique sets of resources offered by contemporary uber-sport (Andrews, 2019; Hartmann et al., 2022; see also Carrington, 2010; Hall, 1994; James; 2013). As detailed next chapter, these resources are put into action and transferred into community uplift by the KYRC team.

4.4 From the Kneel to Know Your Rights Camp

Crucially, what I have been calling the resurgence of sporting activism might more succinctly be called “the Kaepernick Moment.” Mower et al. (2017) describes this as both a contagious act of defiance and a moment shaped by the new global structure of sport:

this is the Kaepernick moment: a confluence of economic, cultural, and political forces, enabling the emergence of twenty-first century Black athlete protests, realised through the hyper-visibility of what are richly commodified and highly spectacularised sport celebrity-advocates, and rooted in a critical response to both recent events of highly publicised police violence against people of colour, and the more general persistence of institutionally and informally wrought race-based discrimination. (p. 132)

This quote gestures towards how the most significant impact of Kaepernick’s kneeling was the subsequent acts of sporting activism that it immediately catalyzed (including KYRC). Engler and

Engler (2017) provide a framework for understanding the trajectory of social movements that I argue is useful for understanding the exponential effect of Kaepernick's kneel. The symbolic protest arguably started what Engler and Engler (2017) call a "whirlwind" of transformative activism in sports. A whirlwind is used to describe a scenario in which a public event sets off a flurry of related activity (Engler & Engler, 2017; p. 177). Whirlwinds are generally sparked by what Moyer (2001) calls a trigger event, referring to a "highly publicized, shocking incident [that] dramatically reveals a critical social problem to the public in a vivid way" such that "overnight, a previously unrecognized social problem becomes a social issue everyone is talking about" (p. 54). A trigger event can be some event or social phenomenon that spontaneously mobilizes people to call for social change, and can also be an act of protest that resonates with the public in a manner that builds sympathy for a social cause. In our case, it was both. The BLM movement included numerous trigger events that stimulated flurries of nationwide and sometimes global protest; Trayvon Martin's death in 2012, Michael Brown's death in 2014, and George Floyd's death in 2020, to name but a few examples. Within just sport, however, Kaepernick's kneel for the National Anthem can be considered a primary (though not the only) trigger event for a new wave of sporting activism.

The symbolic act of kneeling was effective because of its disruptive power. As Piven (2006) argues, in circumstances where long-term incremental organizing is ineffective or unfeasible, a potent strategy for bottom-up change is disruption of routine. Ordinary people may be powerless to institute wide-sweeping policy change or transform structures, but they are able to – sometimes singlehandedly – disrupt comfortable order, and thus interrupt business as usual. She argues that this disruptive power can "coalesce quickly, draw in participants not previously involved in organizing, and leave established elites scrambling to adjust to a new political

landscape” (cited in Engler & Engler, 2017; p. 32). Similarly, Sharp (1973) argues that “obedience is at the heart of political power... Rulers or other command systems, despite appearances, [are] dependent on the population’s goodwill, decisions, and support” (cited in Engler & Engler, 2017; p. 91). Commercial sport relies on the obedience and orderliness of its athletes to sustain business as usual. Despite having no effect on gameplay, the act of kneeling disrupted the ritualized monotony that accompanies sporting events, thereby exposing how the seemingly-apolitical status quo in sport itself is constituted by political logics. While Piven (2006) prefers the mass mobilizing potential of disruptive power to social movement institutionalization (such as the formation of SMOs), she goes on to argue that the role of SMOs is to formalize and legalize the successes won through disruptive mobilization (Engler & Engler, 2017). Through this thinking, the shift from kneeling to KYRC can be understood as the evolution towards structured organizing to educate on the social issues raised by Kaepernick’s initial kneeling disruption.

Kaepernick’s kneel and formation of KYRC is also unique because of its strategic divisiveness. While the majority of sporting activism highlights liberal-coded appeals to unity and peace – such as the toothless cliches that we all need to “come together” or “start a conversation” (Bryant, 2018) – Kaepernick’s message rejects this safe and malleable message by instead explicitly calling out that police are in the wrong, and Black lives specifically need to start being protected. It is a message that not everyone can contort into an interpretation that perceives themselves as one of the “good” ones. It also involves specific calls to action. Drawing on Piven (2006), Engler and Engler (2017) characterize this strategy as polarization, and note that it has been wielded effectively by social movements for decades. They write:

By taking an issue that is hidden from common view and putting it at the center of public debate, disruptive protest forces observers to decide which side they are on. This has three effects: First, it builds the base of a movement by creating an opportunity for large numbers of latent sympathizers to become dedicated activists. Second, even as it turns passive supporters into active ones, it engages members of the public who were previously uninformed, creating greater awareness even among those who do not care for activists' confrontational approach. And third, it agitates the most extreme elements of the opposition, fueling a short-term backlash but isolating reactionaries from the public in the long run. (p. 200)

Kaepernick's kneeling produced all of the effects listed in the above quote, and KYRC's messaging carries on with this disruptive and active framing.

However, while the whirlwind sets of a sharp increase of passionate activism, the energy for the movement typically slows down. As Tarrow (1998) outlines, movements go through cycles of increased and decreased activity. Without structured escalation and institutionalization to promote a cause, the leverage of the protest activity dies down. In this case, Kaepernick's kneel provided the symbolic entry point that drew attention to both police brutality and the passive militarization of sport. What makes KYRC unique, however, is that it is one of the few cases of escalation and institutionalization within sporting activism (arguably since Dr. Harry Edwards). The key point is that KYRC is the continuation of The Kneel. It functions as an organized campaign to more systematically disseminate the message that the Kneel was intended to embody.

4.4.1 Critiques of Contemporary Sporting Activism

While acknowledging the obvious benefits of these contemporary shifts in sporting activism, some scholars share the perspective that sporting activism in the Kaepernick Moment lacks the substance that many ascribe to it. In outlining his concept of “The Heritage,” Bryant (2018) challenges the idea that sporting activism of the contemporary moment exemplifies an increase in radicalism. Bryant argues that the role of contemporary Black athletes such as LeBron James is to be racial reconcilers rather than racial agitators, prioritizing starting “conversations” and bringing “both sides” to the table with the objective of peace and unity rather than justice or compensation. This position is consistent with Cashmore’s (2012) argument (and my argument in Chapter 3) that the role of the Black celebrity in the neoliberal age is to persuade the Black masses that the status quo is salvageable, and thus functions to defuse revolutionary energy. In doing so, Black athletes remain compatible with corporate America in a manner that rarely significantly impacts their brand value.

Marston (2021) extends this line of thinking in arguing that the activism of (and inspired by) Kaepernick reveal of how even much of sporting activism functions to reproduce what David Theo Goldberg (2009) calls “racial neoliberalism,” referring to how structural racial inequalities persist through cultural and economic means, even as the salience of race is popularly denigrated as a constitutive factor in individuals’ lives. Within racial neoliberalism, the emphasis by political officials, commentators, and even many resisters on the concept of “civility” conceals the subtle violence and oppression (indeed, the *incivility*) of structural racism. Marston (2021) contends that Kaepernick’s kneeling – along with strong reactions from Trump and other conservatives – resonated because they deviated from commonplace standards of civility (for both protest and reaction to protest) that are expected within mass-mediated commercialized

sport. Kaepernick (2020) himself acknowledged this point, tweeting in response to the protests surrounding the death of George Floyd in the Summer of 2020:

When civility leads to death, revolting is the only logical reaction. The cries for peace will rain down, and when they do, they will land on deaf ears, because your violence has brought this resistance. We have the right to fight back! Rest in Power George Floyd.
(cited in Marston, 2021; p. 211)

Yet, Marston (2021) argues, even this radically-tinged rhetoric was soon folded back into the precipice of racial capitalism/neoliberalism. From his perspective, this occurred with Nike leaching from Kaepernick's activism in their BLM-era advertising campaigns (see Hoffman et al., 2020), as well as the NFL reacting to Trump's attacks on the league by prioritizing unity rather than justice. For Marston (2021), by aiming to restore civility such that the mirage of sport as a postracial meritocracy can continue to be sold, these performative acts "reveal the inherent shortcomings of racial-neoliberal, global-capitalist sport as a venue through which systemic racism may be challenged" (p. 212). Yet, in considering the racial neoliberalism is an assemblage that is never totalizing and always in flux, he concedes that these actions have dramatically shifted the landscape of what modes, methods, and messages of resistance are possible through sport.

In this context, it is interesting that KYRC in 2023 explicitly critiques reformism. Declaring it as one of the Political Education Curriculum's (2023) key terms, KYRC defines reformism as:

the ideological and political position that fixates on reform as the primary (if not exclusive) driver of social change/justice. Reformism avoids and even criminalizes people's efforts to catalyze fundamental change, instead employing simplistic mandates of

“nonviolence,” incrementalism, and compliance with the law as the only legitimate ways to protest or seek to undo unjust systems. Incrementalism involves implementing small changes to policy over time. (p. 10)

This alternation between reformist and radicalism, in many ways, has intensified in contemporary sporting activism. In his book *Only a Black Athlete Can Save Us Now*, Farred (2022) analyzes the activism of the 2020 NBA “Bubble” to theorize the contemporary moment of Black sporting activism. Somewhere in between the optimism of Edwards (2016) and the pessimism of Bryant (2018), Farred characterizes the contemporary Black athlete as oscillating between reform and revolt. While he admires some athletes for their demands for more equitable racial representation and smoother integration into the institution of sport itself, he also recognizes that “a greater slice of the pie is not the answer. The nature of the pie is such that it will never be equitably sliced” (p. 48). In all, previewing my aforementioned call for the Black Radical Athlete, I believe Farred (2022) accurately concludes that:

it is not enough to campaign for reform. It is only, paradoxically, through reorganization of society that the black athlete – that all athletes – is released into the freedom to simply play. When it will no longer be necessary for a black athlete to save us. (p. 54)

The tension between reformism and utopian politics is one that may always coexist, but, as argued in Chapter 3, KYRC locates itself firmly on the radical utopian end of the spectrum.

Lastly, scholars have noted the unequal gendered dynamics of contemporary sporting activism. This includes both the leadership and neglect of Black female athletes specifically. Harkening back to Edwards, one of the main critiques of OPHR and the 1960s sporting activism was the lack of inclusion of – if not outright shunning of – Black women (Carter-Francique, 2017; Hawkins et al., 2017; Rhoden, 2006). Many scholars have noted how, in the broader Civil

Rights Movement, the Black women's labor, struggles, and perspectives were overlooked (Kelley, 2003; Taylor, 2021). Black women were involved in the movement, but were relegated to background roles, in which they were tasked with doing the invisible labor to prop up the revolutionary men who occupied the public sphere. The fate of Black sporting activism at that time was not different. Scholars argue that the lack of inclusion of Black women was a primary reason that the Olympic boycott was unsuccessful (Hartmann, 2003; Smith, 2014). Black female athletes at the time – such as sprinter Wyomia Tyus, the most heralded Black female Olympic athlete in the world – were ready and willing to join and support the OPHR movement. But when they approached OPHR, they were shunned. The Black male athletes, who were relatively radical in their perspectives on race and sometimes even class – largely did not think reflexively about the oppressions of patriarchy as well (Smith, 2014). As such, they came to reproduce the gendered divisions that plagued the broader Civil Rights Movement, and failed to capitalize on the unique perspectives, insights, and labor that Black female athletes could have provided. Despite being marginalized by this activism, Black female athletes still stood in solidarity and conducted protests of their own.

In the contemporary era, Black female athletes are once again at the forefront of in terms of frequency and radicalism of sporting activism (Brooks & Knox, 2022; Cooky & Antunovic, 2020). Unlike previous eras, they are conducting activism in the public eye, via their increased (though not yet equal) access to commercial media. Similar to how the BLM movement has seen far more female and queer leadership than past Black movements (Taylor, 2021), female athletes in the WNBA, U.S. soccer, tennis, and other sites have harbored some of the most frequent, risky, collective, and overall biting forms of activism (Cooky & Antunovic, 2020; Coombs & Casillo, 2017; McClearen & Fischer, 2021). For instance, in 2016 players and teams stood in

solidarity as they protested in support of BLM via uniform modifications and media statements, continuing even as the league fined players and teams for these acts of protest. Still, as Cooky & Antunovic (2020) observed, protest from women athletes were either ignored or framed as derivative of protests from male athletes (despite their difference in scale, intensity, and risk). Additionally – and similar to male sporting activism – when it comes to activism regarding issues specific to female athletes, advocacy targeting inclusion and reform of existing structures (such as equal pay) is deemed more palatable, thus has been more visible, than advocacy targeting structural change aimed at eliminating the roots of patriarchy (Banet-Weiser, 2018; Cooky & Antunovic, 2020). In sum:

while the WNBA’s activism gives visibility to the BLM movement and uses the platform of sports to center marginalized voices, the visibility of this activism was obscured by narratives that situated the players’ response to the league as itself a protest. Moreover, sportswomen’s voices as expressed through their activism on and off the court were marginalized through the centering of men’s voices and sportsmen’s activism. (Cooky & Antunovic, 2020; p. 706)

Though the tide is slowly changing and the Kaepernick Moment has been slightly more inclusive of the issues and perspectives of women and queer people, their quantity and quality of activism remains neglected and marginalized.

4.5 The Kaepernick Brand and Celebrity Activism

These aforementioned shifts in sport and activism provide context for a key concept of this dissertation: the Kaepernick Brand. With its roots established, what exactly is the Kaepernick Brand’s relation to KYRC? What is the role of celebrityhood within activism? What

specific changes to the political opportunity structure have enabled the Kaepernick Brand, and thus, KYRC?

The Kaepernick Brand is the underlying engine of KYRC; the catalyst from which all else (detailed in subsequent chapters) proceeds. The key term refers specifically to the way in which Kaepernick himself, after his kneeling protest, has become a global symbol of authentic protest, resistance, rebellion, repression, and sacrifice. As detailed in this chapter, Kaepernick's signature kneel has become a symbol of protest in general (beyond race or sport) (Feinstein, 2021; McEvoy, 2020; McDonald, 2020; Trimbur, 2018). Most of these kneels correspond with some sort of antiracist protest, but many have utilized the kneel to draw attention to non-race-related political issues; indicating its status as a general signifier of resistance rather than a specific and calculated show of deference to the U.S. military while refusing to participate in honoring the National Anthem, as Kaepernick intended (Boren, 2020). The widely-accepted consensus that Kaepernick's kneeling protest resulted in his blackballing from the NFL has also rendered the Kaepernick himself as a symbol of defiance in the face of repression; signaling that the kneeler is channeling the spirit of Kaepernick. The Kaepernick Brand, in short, is one defiant, radical, commercial activism that extends across sport, advertising, publishing, and organizations (such as KYRC).

In *Becoming Brands: Celebrity, Activism and Politics*, Raphael and Lam (2017) outline the somewhat peculiar process of how the transformation of humans into branded commodities in the contemporary era has been not only accepted and naturalized, but expected. Through branding, the (celebrity) human is converted into a flexible and affective form of economic value that – for themselves or in service of other brands – becomes capable of selling commodities and effecting/affecting connections with consuming audiences. Not all celebrities use this in the same

way. Trotman (2017) has outlined the emergence of the “Super-Celebrity Activist” who mobilize their branded celebrity, political connections, and resulting partnerships to effect real change. Others, however, have argued that the public associations between celebrity and social justice functions as a “double-edged sword” that “subsumes the cause into the celebrity’s broader public persona rather than focusing attention on the issue” (Raphael & Lam, 2017; p. 5). Relatedly, celebrity involvement in SMOs have tended to deradicalize SMO messaging, as the celebrity defuses the goals or demands of an SMO to become more compatible with consensus-based politics (Meyer, 1995). These dynamics stem from the inherent contradiction between the ontological concept of a celebrity – whose amassed fame and fortune is a product of a particular sociopolitical formation – and altruistic and substantive efforts to structurally transform the social conditions that vaulted them atop the socioeconomic ladder (Cashmore, 2014; Meyer, 1995).

Despite arguably being evidence of the totalizing marketplace under the cultural economy of neoliberalism, Marshall (2017) challenges the notion that branding is a regressive force. He argues that the pervasiveness of branding, while often solely self-serving, has nonetheless unlocked new opportunities for celebrities and associated institutions to utilize their celebrityhood pragmatically and strategically, as long as the celebrity activists are perceived as authentic (Deflem, 2022; Whitmer, 2021). As such, Marshall (2017) argues that branding has become a bridge for what he calls “industrialized agency”, referring to how branding facilitates the movement of ideas, affect, and commodities in a manner that reconfigures the individual “into a strategic public entity and identity that can be used – and deployed by others – for particular goals and outcomes” (p. 3). Both a product and producer of the contemporary attention economy, branded celebrities have begun to demonstrate a willingness – increasingly, an

obligation – to mobilize their branded value to direct audience attention to issues of social justice. KYRC embodies the fruits of this cultural evolution towards the strategic deployment of (sporting) celebrityhood.

The Kaepernick Brand, the catalyst and engine of KYRC, was created through the processes described in this chapter. Trends of celebrityhood in the BLM era specifically underwent subtle yet significant changes. Far beyond functioning as intentional or inadvertent idols of consumption, celebrities routinely capitalize on their platform and presence within mass media to influence public opinion (Atkinson & Dewitt, 2019; Wheeler, 2013); and in the BLM moment, are increasingly expected to (Allen & Miles, 2020). Deflem (2022) argued that, during the racial justice protests of 2020, “racial justice itself [became] an object of celebrity culture” (p. 63). The COVID-19 pandemic also happening during this time:

accelerated a process whereby today’s news media are more likely than before to treat celebrities who engage in advocacy favorably, without (m)any of the risks they once faced from being outspoken (Duvall & Heckemeyer, 2018). Even though today’s media spend more time reporting on the celebrity activist rather than their causes (McCurdy, 2013), they are also more likely to embrace the terms in which those causes are phrased and present them as valid. (Deflem 2022; p. 79)

As such, more athletes than ever have eschewed the “stick to sports” doctrine that has tacitly restricted political commentary from athletes (Towler et al., 2020), and are instead using interviews, written articles, and social media to speak out for progressive social causes. Kaepernick is arguably the most demonstrative example of this, even outside of KYRC.

As has been the case with many athlete-activists, the rendering of Kaepernick’s identity in becoming a symbol of contemporary resistance was in large part due to external forces. It relied

on global media – most forcefully broadcast news and social media virality (Boykoff & Carrington, 2020) – to intentionally or unintentionally construct Kaepernick as a high-profile symbol of political resistance, ensure his protest remains on the (inter)national agenda, and disseminate Kaepernick-related images and discourse to global audiences (Andrews & Jackson, 2002; Mower et al., 2017). Additionally, corporate sponsorships such as Nike and Beats Headphones used marketing and advertising to construct an image of Kaepernick that associates their branded products with social consciousness (Montez de Oca, 2022). While this process has been true for many athletes and activists, there are several differences that reveal the changing contextual landscape of sporting activism. First, the speed at which Kaepernick’s protest disseminated to global audiences – and become such a central story for the NFL and other sporting leagues during the peak of kneeling – was unprecedented. Second, the ubiquity of social media facilitated a wider broadcasting of alternative readings to Kaepernick’s protest than that which traditional media, with its entrenched status quo bias and reliance on the “protest paradigm” when framing activism (McLeod and Hertog, 1999; Peña, 2021) – would have been able to communicate. Third, while many transgressive figures within and beyond sport were widely perceived negatively and in subsequent decades were exonerated and widely beloved (Andrews, 1999; Deflem, 2022), the speed with which this happened to Kaepernick reveals the expedited processes of commodifying activism in late capitalism.⁴³

Yet, in considering agency amidst these structures, it is important to note that Kaepernick *established his own* brand of political radicalism through his active decisions and partnerships. As participants in interviews clarified for me, the idea and planning for KYRC occurred in 2015 (specifically sparked by the death of Mario Woods in San Francisco), after Kaepernick had

⁴³ I only briefly define The Kaepernick Brand here to preview a discussion of its practical functions. In Chapters 4 and 5, I launch into a deeper examination of its meanings, implications, and the conditions of its emergence.

began to kneel but while he was still regularly playing in the NFL. Especially after playing his last NFL game in 2016, Kaepernick leaned into his highly-politicized disruptive persona across sponsorships, foundations, and media ventures. This includes his aforementioned corporate brand partnerships, such as Ben & Jerry's, for which they created the "Change the Whirled" ice cream flavor that features a picture with Kaepernick, in his afro, wearing a KYRC signature "I Know My Rights" shirt (see Jackson, 2020). Perhaps most notoriously, Kaepernick participated in the *Dream Crazy* campaign with Nike. The campaign produced a viral video commercial that entails Kaepernick, as the narrator, offering various quips that instruct the audience to follow their wildest dreams. In the middle of the commercial, turning around to reveal himself as the narrator in front of a waving American flag, Kaepernick delivered the famous tagline: "Believe in something, even if it means sacrificing everything", to both tremendous adulation and backlash (see Hoffman et al., 2020).

As this campaign filled the airwaves, Kaepernick was appearing on magazine covers, including Men's Health, Time, Ebony, and GQ (where he was awarded Citizen of the Year). Shortly after, Kaepernick established *Kaepernick Media*, which describes itself as "a multidisciplinary company that provides a platform to showcase the work of Black and Brown directors, producers, creators and storytellers" ("Home", retrieved Jan. 2024). One of these ventures includes literature. In 2019, Kaepernick established *Kaepernick Publishing*, which, by publishing books about race and liberation, "strives to elevate a new generation of writers with diverse views and voices through the creation of powerful works of all genres that can build a better and more just world" ("About Us", retrieved Jan. 2024). Through his company, he published four of his own books: an edited academic collection called *Abolition for the People: The Movement For A Future Without Policing & Prisons* (2021); a children's book about race

and identity called *I Color Myself Different* (2022); a young-adult graphic novel and memoir called *Change the Game* (with Eve L. Ewing; 2023); and an edited academic collection called *Our History Has Always Been Contraband: In Defense Of Black Studies* (with Robin D.G. Kelley and Keeanga-Yamahtta Taylor; 2023). Moving into television, he collaborated with director Ava Duvernay to create *Colin in Black and White* (2021),⁴⁴ a Netflix show about his own high-school coming-of-age, interspersed with critical discussions from adult Kaepernick about race, identity, Black culture, and Black history. Additionally, he served as headline executive producer of a Hulu docu-series called *Killing County* (2023), about the corrupt Bakersfield, California police department. In 2022, Kaepernick Media announced the production of a multi-part documentary on Kaepernick for ESPN Films, directed by Spike Lee (“Updates”, retrieved Jan 2024). Kaepernick even expanded into video games, partnering with Sabre Interactive to release a game called *Wild Card Football* in October 2023, for which Kaepernick is an advisor and the cover athlete (“Wild Card Football”, retrieved Jan. 2024). On [Kaepernick7.com](https://www.kaepernick7.com) (his official website), viewers can find the CK7 High School collection of apparel that features Kaepernick-branded clothing with slogans such as “Trust Your Power.” Ironically, even as I have argued that KYRC is a product of the Kaepernick Brand, it also can in some ways be considered a further producer of it. To summarize this exhaustive list, Kaepernick has merged his football career with his political activism to create a brand as a defiant idealist dedicated to Black liberation and social justice.

However, it is also true that the Kaepernick Brand could only take shape within a specific set of sociocultural ingredients. Just as Andrews (2001) argued that Michael Jordan’s global celebrity is as much a product of the sociopolitical contexts in which temporally happened to

⁴⁴ The basis for The Kaepernick Curriculum analyzed in Chapter 6.

emerge as it was his individual athletic exploits (as the story so often is told), Kaepernick's global celebrity too is the serendipitous combination of his radical political activism and a rapidly shifting political, cultural, and sporting climate. If Michael Jordan's celebrity "graphically exteriorize[d] a late capitalist order defined by the convergence of corporate and media interests" (Andrews, 2001; p. xv), then Kaepernick emerged from and immersed himself within the political and cultural fissures produced by the breakdown of late capitalist neoliberal hegemony. His ascension to the frontlines of global political discourse by way of a simple kneel says more about that specific sociopolitical conjuncture than it does that actions or personality of Kaepernick himself. Kaepernick is not the first athlete to harbor such incisive structurally-focused politics, nor is he the first to act upon them in such a publicly-declarative manner within the context of sport. He is not even the first athlete to use the National Anthem as a primary venue of protest, only to find himself blackballed from his respective league in the aftermath (see Uitti, 2022 for the story of Mahmoud Abdul-Rauf).⁴⁵ In other words, it is not that Kaepernick's tactics or message was so defiant that they singlehandedly defined a political era. It is that Kaepernick's tactical and ideological boldness gave expression to sentiments – conservative and progressive – that were latent beneath the surface, waiting to be ignited by a metaphorical match. Therefore this chapter, and this dissertation as a whole, is an attempt to theorize and articulate the conditions that produced the Kaepernick Brand.

4.6 The Political Possibilities in Contemporary (Uber) Sport

The creation of the Kaepernick Brand is also uniquely tied to burgeoning models in the delivery of sport. The Kaepernick Brand would not and could not exist without particular shifts

⁴⁵ Also see Abdul-Rauf & Chiles (2022) for the autobiography of Mahmoud Abdul-Rauf, ironically published by Kaepernick Publishing.

in the economic and cultural stature of sport that facilitated, if not demanded, the conversion of athletes into branded celebrities. Andrews (2019) used the term “uber-sport” to define the new forms and functions of sport in late capitalism. The phrase uber-sport captures the way in which contemporary sport around the globe has come to reflect the pervasive influence of corporate capitalism, neoliberalism, nationalism, and consumer culture. Expanding on the now-cliche recognition that sport is big business, Andrews (2019) outlines how the uber-sport assemblage has hijacked sport as little more than an engine meticulously designed to generate mass audiences and markets, and thus realizing and multiplying profits. Specifically, elite sporting formations in the contemporary late capitalist moment – which includes American organizations such as the National Football League (NFL), National Basketball Association (NBA), English Premier League (EPL), Major League Baseball (MLB), Professional Golf Association (PGA), National Collegiate Athletic Association (NCAA), and many more – are expected to operate by producing revenue through the following primary methods:

replicative *corporatization* (institutional and management reorganization designed to realize profit-driven structures and logics); expansive *commercialization* (sport brand diversification and non-sport brand promotion across multiple sectors); creative *spectacularization* (entertainment-focused delivery of popular sport spectacles, realized through a combination of structural reformation and cross-platform mass mediation); and intensive *celebritization* (sporting contests constructed around, and a site for the embellishment of, specific public persona). (Andrews, 2019; p. 8-9)

While one can debate the impact these processes have had upon the production and consumption of sport, for our purposes, it is necessary to point out that the expansion of sport’s global influence through these means has resulted in the congruent expansion of opportunities for

sporting activists such as Kaepernick, whom capitalize on the centrality of sport's economic, cultural, and political influence as leverage for their pursuits of social transformation.

Ironically then, Kaepernick and KYRC correctly identifies what late capitalist industry has long recognized: that sport is a powerful cultural practice that has come to garner far more significance than being an isolated site of physical competition. However, Kaepernick and KYRC offer a key innovation that, I argue, defines the contemporary era of sporting activism. Where media conglomerates, cultural intermediaries, and other neoliberal actors behold the *economic* potential of sport's cultural embeddedness, Sporting SMOs see *political* potential. This strategic realization has sparked not only a new path to sporting celebrityhood, but also ingenious efforts by athletes, activists, and organizations like KYRC to mobilize the social prominence of sport as a vehicle of critical pedagogy and political counter-reification (Lukács, 1971; Giroux, 1988; Gunderson, 2020).

The effectiveness with which KYRC can use sport as an entry point for critical pedagogy is contextually contingent. The strategy relies on how contemporary sport is uniquely situated as a cultural phenomenon that is interwoven into the fabric of everyday social life. Ironically, the mobilization of sport for radical transformation is made possible by the way “sport’s popular cultural centrality and prominence [has] been commandeered, and increasingly exploited, by the preoccupations and prescriptions of contemporary capitalism” (Andrews, 2019; p. 5). The way corporations have rendered sport a near-ubiquitous commodity to be consumed at all times – creating a “complex enterprise, an ecosystem ... designed to generate mass audiences/markets, and thereby popularity/profits” of elite commercial sport (Andrews, 2019; p. 7-9) – has escalated the relationship between sport and the public. Commercial forces have morphed sport into a mass entertainment product that is always near the top of our minds, constantly vying for our

attention, if not personal identification as devoted athletes or fans. While this translates to profit and market share for avaricious corporations, on a progressive note, it has provoked new opportunities for those who seek to capitalize on this ever-expanding sporting ecosystem for transformative political ends. As the unprecedented manifestation of this insight, KYRC then offers a model for how Sporting SMOs can use sport to inspire hope, encourage solidarity, and uplift marginalized communities.

KYRC realizes the potential that contemporary scholars have offered mostly in theory. Drawing on Farred (2003), Mower et al. (2017) states of Kaepernick and other emergent Black vernacular intellectuals: “imbued with the power of unparalleled commercial centrality, compounded by unparalleled levels of mass and socially mediated public visibility, today’s Black athletes possess the potential to invoke more political intent and influence than their predecessors” (p. 137). The ironic twist of realized by Kaepernick and embodied by KYRC is the potential to co-opt uber-sport’s reliance on celebritization to generate revenue (Andrews, 2019) by using contemporary sport’s capability to create celebrities out of athletes in service of social justice. The “confluence of individual wealth, celebrity status, and anew social technologies that exponentially connect the individual athlete to a vast global audience” (Mower et al., 2017; p. 143) has sowed the seeds for not only the Black Radical Athlete (discussed in Chapter 3), but an unprecedented mass dissemination of sporting activism.

However, one should be careful not to overstate the effect of athletes or celebrities “speaking out.” Indeed, it is difficult to measure in qualitative or quantitative terms how effectively a celebrity influences public opinion on an issue. Plus, celebrity activism has been accused of being performative, inauthentic, out of touch, and simplistic (Deflem, 2022; Johnson et al., 2020). Still, celebrities – and professional athletes especially – often become role models

for children, and as Johnson et al (2020) states, “can become living heuristics across a wide variety of decisions individuals might have to make in life” (p. 3). Therefore it is a realistic probability that a professional athlete speaking out in favor of social issues can have tangible political effects as the comments find inclusion into one’s interpretative schema of world events. This effect is especially pronounced if the athlete speaking out is popular, likable, perceived as authentic, and is speaking out because they *want* to and not because they *have* to (Johnson et al., 2020). This criterion applies to Kaepernick. Echoing the spirit of the Black vernacular intellectual (Farred, 2003), Towler et al (2020) applied Street’s (2004) concept of a “celebrity politician” to Kaepernick, referring to “entertainer who pronounces on politics and claims the right to represent. . . causes, but who does so without seeking. . . elected office” (cited in Towler et al, 2020; p. 112). Towler also found that Kaepernick’s activism had a positive effect on Black political activity *beyond* the act of voting (which Kaepernick, uniquely and controversially, did not advocate for). Overall Towler found support for the notion that “professional athletes like Kaepernick may serve not only as national voices for justice but also as important links between social movements and heightened political engagement” (p. 122). The Kaepernick Brand, to summarize, has had real-world political effects.

The effects of the Kaepernick Brand also reconfigured our cultural expectations of who is an intellectual, who can do politics, and whose critiques can be deemed legitimate enough to initiate serious discourse. It was not until decades after the prime of Muhammad Ali’s boxing career that a Black athlete could be considered intellectual, or at that, *an* intellectual. Neither could Harry Edwards – even as a scholar and professor – be considered beyond his supporters a credible intellectual, let alone one who can establish a brand from that reputation. While the platform is sport for political purposes is a continuity, the current broader brandification into an

intellectual – as Kaepernick has done – in the process is a contrast from previous eras.

Interestingly, OPHR somewhat separated itself from the personality of Edwards himself, despite him being the clear leader of the movement (Hartmann, 2003). This is because of Edwards’ reputation of being a radical, whereas many of the athletes had (or wanted to be perceived as having) a more moderate critique that was easier to negotiate with (or might be more compatible with sponsorships). As we have seen already, KYRC uplifts the Kaepernick Brand in its camps and throughout its public promotion, leaning into his radical posture and seeming to identify its strategic utility.⁴⁶ By self-consciously enacting and directing his own branding, Kaepernick embodies and extends the lineage of the “Black vernacular intellectual”, whom:

are oppositional public figures who use the cultural platforms and spaces available to them, but not ordinarily accessible to their disenfranchised communities, to represent and speak in the name of their communities. *Celebrity status, acquired in the "nonpolitical" realm, empowers minority athletes to pronounce on an unexpected range of subjects in the civic*

⁴⁶ This is implicit throughout the dissertation, but here I want to point out that another unique similarity between the “Revolt” era and the “Kaepernick” moment is its overlap with academia. The Revolt era intersected with academia in two explicit ways. The first is the centrality of Harry Edwards, who – prior to 1968 and during the Revolt era – was a professor of sociology at San Jose State. (It was largely his insights of athlete activism of the 1960s and corollary publications in the 1970s that spawned the sociology of sport as an academic field of study. He is still active in the field today). Edwards’ sociological perspective shaped his motivations and critiques of the racial dynamics in and beyond sport, which in turn structured the aims, messages, and tactics of OPHR and similar activist projects. Secondly, and related, it was the radical education provided by Edwards that motivated Smith and Carlos’ famous podium protest, as well as their activism more generally. The two credit their time in Edwards’ class on “Black Leadership” as awakening them to the realities of racism in and beyond sport and the unique opportunity/duty Black athletes had to rectify it. Similarly, education plays a central role in KYRC and the activism of Kaepernick that was so fundamental to the contemporary forms of athlete activism. Kaepernick himself reads and writes academic literature on race, and has collaborated with numerous prolific academic scholars on race with his publishing company. As discussed in Chapter 6, these intellectual intersections between academia and Kaepernick structure the messaging, promotion, and experience of KYRC. Both Edwards and Kaepernick approached who they identified as agents of change through sport. For Edwards it was the college students that would represent America on the global state. For Kaepernick it is the youth that may become the athletes – but more importantly, the community members and citizens – of tomorrow. We can conclude with an important yet rather overlooked aspect of both eras: it was a radical education based in critical pedagogy that ignited the Revolt of the Black Athlete, and also seems to be igniting the activism of the Kaepernick Era, for which the impact and possibilities are still unfolding. In its terminology, arguments, and even citational politics, Kaepernick unapologetically positions KYRC and its message itself within the academic left. It does so without reverting to a framing that upheld the purportedly “sacred” view of sport.

domain; they are able to produce articulations for a public that far exceeds their narrow professional base – the arts or the academy or the sports arena. Ideologically mobile, these figures move back and forth between the popular and the political realms. *These icons can be, simultaneously, cultural producers or political activists, speaking metonymically for themselves or their constituency* – that body of subjects deliberately excluded from the formal public debate. (Farred, 2003; p. 23; italics added)

The Kneel alone had (re)established sport as a clear vernacular language with which to engage in serious politics; KYRC has demonstrated the political boundaries of sport mobilized with emancipatory intention.

4.7 Conclusion

To situate KYRC within a more expansive history of sporting activism may seem peculiar given that the organization does not explicitly incorporate sporting participation into its programming. Aside from its tie to Kaepernick, its inclusion of some athletes, and its use of sport as a pedagogical entry point, there is no physical sporting activity in the camps, as there typically is in more traditional “sporting” organizations dedicated to social causes. Some KYRC associates during interviews even distanced the program from sport. For example, Participant #4 told me that:

I do see sports in it, but we don't like really talk about sports or really do anything sports related, which is probably something that could be another good aspect to the camp. Like do a little sports activity. But I really feel like it follows the messaging of his action. I think the camp really just upholds what he stands for, which is serving black and brown people.

Given the critical content and the rapid response strategies, it is reasonable to view sport as tangential to the core essence of the camp.

However, as I have argued in this chapter, it is sport that has provided the conditions of KYRC. Central to the possibility of the Kaepernick Brand, and thus KYRC, is the potency of branding and celebrityhood in contemporary popular culture. As this chapter has established, this unique convergence of branding, sport, and political activism are the product of particular changes in the political opportunity structure (McAdam, 1982). These changes include the commercial explosion of sport, the politicization of popular culture, and the increasing corporate obligation to at least acknowledge social injustice, and the intensification of celebrity branding. It is therefore because of sport – in its specific contemporary form and function – that the Kaepernick Brand can lead to the resources, connections, and strategies utilized by KYRC (discussed next chapter). In this sense, KYRC brings to life McDonald’s (2009) argument that “sports radicalism lies in exploiting the opportunities given by its cultural centrality to raise awareness and consciousness of political issues outside of sport” (p. 45). In pursuing its aims, KYRC capitalizes upon the social-cultural-commercial phenomenon of sport to resonate with, educate, and materially serve its target audience of Black and Brown communities. KYRC as an organization thus hinges on the distinct assemblage of Kaepernick’s athletic success, the contested aura generated by his protests during the National Anthem, the continued prevalence of police brutality, and the revered celebrity status granted to the commercial athlete by late capitalist (uber) sport culture (Andrews, 2019). In the next chapter, I move from the macro level to micro/meso level to detail how KYRC, enabled by these contexts, conducts its grassroots activism.

Chapter 5:
KYRC as (Sporting) Social Movement Organization:
Institutional Logics, Strategies, and Tensions of KYRC's Model

With the historical, political, and cultural contexts of KYRC established, we can now launch into a deeper empirical analysis of KYRC's model of activism. In this chapter, I draw upon in-depth interviews with KYRC associates to describe the organization's camps, initiatives, and overall model. In other words, now that we have discussed why and in what contexts KYRC emerged, it is necessary to focus our attention on what precisely what KYRC does and how they do it, from the perspectives of the people doing it. Guided by Fitzgerald & Rogers' (2000) model for analyzing radical SMOs, I particularly focus on the "institutional logics" of KYRC, which Larson and Lizardo (2015) describe as the "combinations of issues, tactics, and targets that provide social movement organizations with a focus of attention, a source of meaning and identity, and a vision of how to 'do' contention" (p. 58). For nonprofit organizations such as KYRC, institutional logics embody and express the ideologies that organizations deem desirable, around which organizational norms, values, messaging, and meanings orbit (Kallman & Clark, 2019; Thornton & Ocasio, 1999). In speaking with staff and volunteers, I was particularly interested in how they conceptualize KYRC's objectives, strategies, influences, and tensions/challenges. Rather than presenting these categorically, I organize the interview data into a narrative, based on themes that appeared across participant interviews (Clarke & Braun, 2006). Below, I highlight the data points that were most interesting, surprising, and insightful for understanding the essence of KYRC, and how its institutional logics might move us towards a more general understanding of Sporting SMOs.

Based on this data, I argue that KYRC's version of sporting activism is in some ways a replicable model, but in other ways is enabled by contexts and ingredients that are unique to

KYRC. The most exclusive of these is the Kaepernick Brand (detailed in the previous chapter), which allows KYRC to hurdle many of the main barriers to social justice organizing faced by other SMOs while smoothing the facilitation of KYRC's strategic mission. However, it is the coordination of the entire KYRC team that is crucial for mobilizing the symbolic and material resources provided by the Kaepernick Brand in service of the organization's two primary objectives: educational empowerment and rapid community response. Nonetheless, there are still some tensions that arise from the ambitious goal of balancing the national notoriety of Kaepernick and KYRC with a grassroots non-profit orientation that aims to meet the needs of marginalized Black and Brown communities. Aware of these tensions, I share how KYRC associates attempt to overcome them. Taken altogether, the data accentuates the interplay between Kaepernick's celebrity profile, the realities of critical youth education, and the on-the-ground mechanics of carrying activism from the symbolic to the grassroots.

5.1 A Model for Theorizing Radical SMOs

Chapter 2 established my conceptualization of KYRC as a Sporting Social Movement Organization (SMO): an organization that utilizes its connection to sport or athletes to pursue social justice in a strategic, sustained, and grassroots manner. This chapter picks up on that discussion, analyzing KYRC with a resource mobilization approach. As Chapter 3 established, KYRC is also radical, meaning that its objectives are transformist and structure-oriented rather than reformist. As such, guiding the inquiry of this chapter is Fitzgerald and Rogers' (2000) foundational model of theorizing *radical* – as opposed to traditional – SMOs.

The distinction is significant. Fitzgerald and Rogers (2000) offered a productive critique that resource mobilization and other prominent social movement paradigms examine SMOs with the implicit assumption that SMOs are reformist, professionalized, and aim primarily for

incorporation into mainstream social institutions. Resource mobilization also tends to apply a utilitarian logic to SMOs, sometimes going as far as assessing the “success” of SMOs based on sheer quantity of resources gathered. Radical SMOs, on the other hand, “tend to be organized nonhierarchically and to adhere to an antibureaucratic structure, are often ideologically anticapitalist, and have goals that are radical and emancipatory rather than reform oriented” (Fitzgerald & Rogers, 2000; p. 573-744). Some radical SMOs, which tend to be more grassroots than bureaucratic, do not prioritize the accumulation of resources, or even eschew them altogether. The tactics of radical SMOs can also differ. For instance, scholars have argued that considering SMO tactics as mere rational instruments – deployed as a strategic means to a concrete end, and thus evaluated by SMO scholars based on how effectively those ends are met – neglects the ways that tactics, for some SMOs, serve as means of *expression* (Carley, 2019). In other words, some SMOs use tactics to declaratively assign meaning to the world around them, for both external demonstration and internal consolidation. Tactics can then be thought of more expansively as transformative practices that “convert ideas into action and, sometimes, actions into broad mobilizations” (Carley, 2019; p. 1). While not neglecting the instrumental and strategic actions of radical SMOs, this is just an example of how analyzing radical SMOs solely as instrumental actors is substantially limited.

Because of these distinct analytical assumptions, preexisting theoretical models have not been able to comprehensively capture nor faithfully explain the structures, logics, ideologies, and effectiveness of radical SMOs. Even the attention to SMOs within the field of organizational theory – from where I borrow the term institutional logics – tends to assume formal, bureaucratic hegemonic structures (Davis et al., 2005). Even worse, preexisting theoretical models have then labelled radical SMOs as ineffective or misguided, based on holding them to a reformist standard

to which that radical SMOs largely do not adhere. As a result, Fitzgerald and Rogers (2000) conclude that “Radical SMOs need to be studied on their own terms rather than have such external definitions of success or failure imposed upon them” (p. 577).

In response to these limitations of social movement approaches, Fitzgerald and Rogers (2000) generate a model for theorizing radical SMOs, who aim to critique or transform political/economic relations through radical restructuring rather than incremental reform or accommodation. To summarize, this model adjusts five standards – internal structure, ideology, tactics, communication, and assessment of success – to better fit the aims of radical SMOs. Fitzgerald and Rogers explain the five “ideal type” characteristics distinct to radical SMOs:

1. Internal structure – nonhierarchical leadership, participatory democratic organization, egalitarian; “membership” based upon involvement, support indigenous leadership
2. Ideology – radical agenda, emphasis on structural change; flexible ideology; radical networks; global consciousness and connections; antimilitaristic stance
3. Tactics – nonviolent direct action; mass actions; innovative tactics
4. Communication – ignored/misrepresented by media; reliance on alternative forms of communication (music, street theater, pamphlets, newsletters)
5. Assessment of success – limited resources; may be purposefully short-lived; substantive rationality; contribute to larger radical agenda; subject to intense opposition and government surveillance

The specific ways in which KYRC demonstrates, deviates from, or extends these characteristics is weaved into the empirical analysis below.

Because of KYRC's organizational-wide radical ideology and pedagogical focus,⁴⁷ this chapter examines KYRC through a lens that combines with Lofland's (1996) guide for (traditional) SMO research with Fitzgerald and Rogers' (2000) model of radical SMOs. This is not a perfect fit, as no theory is. As I will discuss, in some rather significant ways, KYRC exhibits characteristics more akin to traditional SMOs, especially by way of their professionalization, focus on and (relative) abundance of resources, and coalescence around a central leader (Kaepernick). In other ways, however, it is more faithful to KYRC's grassroots model to examine them as a radical SMO. These reasons include their radical messaging that emphasizes structural change, (relatively) horizontal organizational structure, reliance on alternative forms of communication, and connections to larger radical networks and social movements. Following the recommendation of Fitzgerald & Rogers (2000), before applying any mode of external examination to KYRC, this chapter deploys a "bottom-up" methodological approach that first attempts to understand KYRC from the point of view of those who shape it. As such, the data for this chapter is derived from in-depth interviews with six KYRC associates, all of whom either work for or volunteer with KYRC.⁴⁸

5.2 Mobilizing the Kaepernick Brand

In the previous chapter, I argued that the Kaepernick Brand is the underlying engine of KYRC. The Kaepernick Brand, as a reminder, refers to Kaepernick's status as global commercial symbol of protest, resistance, rebellion, repression, and personal sacrifice. In some instances *despite* – and in other instances *because of* – Kaepernick's embodiment of authentic radical resistance, an array of external parties (commercial, political, celebrity, organizational, and even academic) has vicariously aligned themselves with Kaepernick and his signification of radical

⁴⁷ KYRC's pedagogy is the focus of next chapter.

⁴⁸ Methodological details and procedures for these interviews were provided in Chapter 1.

activism. This dynamic has led to a rather unique set of resources, relationships, and coalitions for KYRC. While I will use the Kaepernick Brand to discuss the specific example relative to this project, the phenomenon more broadly reflects the contemporary ways that activism – substantively, aesthetically, or somewhere in between – has evolved to possess an increasing amount of productive social, cultural, and political currency (McGuigan, 2006; Montez de Oca, 2022). It is in these rather novel contemporary contexts that the Kaepernick Brand and KYRC can exist in the forms that they do, while simultaneously it is the actions of people like Kaepernick and organizations like KYRC that have engendered this evolution.⁴⁹

In what follows I consider how the Kaepernick Brand has been the engine of KYRC, and as such sheds light on what the confluence of sporting celebrityhood and commodified activism offers to SMOs. I argue that the symbolic capital accrued by Kaepernick’s celebrity-activist ascension has generated unique pathways for grassroots organizing, even if converting that brand power into material community uplift comes with its own challenges. In other words, I document both the benefits and tensions that the Kaepernick Brand brings to KYRC. One of the more interesting findings was that, on the one hand, participants spoke to how the Kaepernick Brand made KYRC run. On the other hand, they also spoke to how KYRC as an organization is much more than “Colin” (as they called him), describing an atmosphere and organizational culture that deployed a genuine team-based approach to its various endeavors. First, I document how Kaepernick Brand uniquely positioned KYRC to overcome many of the challenges faced by traditional (non-sporting) SMOs, particularly recruitment, funding, publicity, narrative control, and attendee enthusiasm.

⁴⁹ Outlining the Kaepernick Brand is an argument that I have developed based on research of public information and interview data. Participants did not ever use this term outright. However, I believe this interpretation is supported by the perspectives they shared with me, and authentically captures how they view KYRC.

5.2.1 Recruitment

The most valuable resource for SMOs is people (Lofland, 1996). Although it sounds simple, one of the main challenges for SMOs is recruiting and retaining people. For most SMOs, the easy part is determining a passionate cause and developing appropriate messaging to promote that cause. The more difficult part is the tasks that follow: getting people to first hear the message, then engage with the message, then engage with the organization promoting the message, then attend organizational programming (such as a protest, community action, or in this case an educational seminar), and then finally joining the organization as staff/volunteer or a participant in organizational programming, thereby growing the numbers of the organization (Lofland, 1996). Each of these steps is difficult for traditional SMOs (specifically radical ones) who typically lack publicity, institutions to disseminate messaging with their preferred framing, and personalities who might attract staff and participants (Fitzgerald & Rogers, 2000; McLeod and Hertog, 1999).

Although certainly not automatic, KYRC has an advantage in these processes because of the Kaepernick Brand. In plain language, people seem to want to work alongside Kaepernick, and participants seem to want to attend programs in which they can engage with Kaepernick and his associates. His stature alone functions as a symbolic resource for KYRC – perhaps the organization’s most important resource – that exponentially leads to other material resources. For instance, KYRC’s connection to Kaepernick has helped with recruiting staff and volunteers for KYRC programming. None of my participants explicitly stated that working with Kaepernick was their main reason for joining. In fact, the majority were clear that their passion for serving marginalized Black and Brown populations and making a difference in the community was their main reason for working with the organization. However, most participants began to work with

KYRC because they had a prior tie to Kaepernick, or his partner and co-founder of KYRC Nessa Diab (commonly known as Nessa). For those who did not have a prior tie, the prospect of working with Kaepernick was appealing to them. For instance, Participant #5 mentioned that they believe KYRC is unique among social justice organizations because of “its tie to Colin.”

They continued:

Of course I was aware of Colin and the kneeling, but also didn't even have all of the context for everything behind his mission, and everything that he had done and his story before coming on board here... and within that research, I started to understand how big of an impact a program like KYRC could really have.

Similarly, referring to Kaepernick, Participant #2 stated that:

what really gets me excited is that *I get to make an impact on the shoulders of a giant*. If I did this much work in my own capacity in any other space, I never had the opportunity to impact it the way that I can being put in the position that I am in with KYRC.

While previous literature has identified creating meaningful frames and positive emotions as key processes in recruiting and sustaining participation (Powell, 2011), my results suggest that links to prominent figures can help expedite, or even bypass, the arduous process of recruiting members for SMOs.

Beyond staff recruitment, my data suggests that the Kaepernick Brand also assists with attaining attendees; although accomplished in a manner far different than most SMOs. In our case, SMO participants are youth from Black and Brown communities, who attend the camps and are the target audience for KYRC's education and empowerment. To convey this point, it is necessary to explain one of my more interesting findings that contextualizes both the benefits and tensions of celebrity-driven grassroots activism. When I initially began this dissertation, I

was interested in learning how the presence of a celebrity-activist-athlete such as Kaepernick impacted the quantity and meanings associated with SMO participation. In other words, I was interested in rather rudimentary questions along these lines: were youth showing up to the camps to learn about structural racism, or get a selfie with Kaepernick? Regardless, are these two motives in contradiction? Do the motives even positively or negatively influence the effectiveness of the camp? However, in interviewing KYRC associates, I found that these questions were obsolete for one main reason: they do not publicly “recruit” participants (at least in the traditional manner). For context, most SMOs have a participation problem, insofar as their effectiveness is correlated with its ability to grow the organization, in terms of both general outreach (persuading the public to adopt SMO messaging) and more formal recruitment (getting people to join the SMO in an official capacity) (Lofland, 1996). To accomplish this, most SMOs turn to grassroots organizing: advertising via posters, one-on-one conversations to increase turnout, holding public protests aimed at increasing the visibility of the cause and/or associated SMO, and so forth. Significantly, KYRC does not have this problem. In fact, they have the opposite: *too* many people want to show up to the camps.

5.2.2 Strategic Outreach

Because of this, they deploy a unique strategy; one that is counterintuitive to most SMOs, but is sensible given the goals and aims of KYRC (and I argue only made possible because of the Kaepernick Brand). In effect, the camps are invite-only. They do not advertise or promote the camps in advance, and information about each camp is not publicly available until after the camp has occurred. As Participant #6 reported: “we don't do an open sign-up to the Know Your Rights Camp.” Contrary to most organizational tasks for SMOs being dedicated towards increasing public or member turnout, KYRC supplies its turnout via localized partnerships and coalitions.

Fitzgerald and Rogers' (2000) point out that radical SMOs sometimes do not prioritize membership – in other words, quantity of engagement or participation – as the sole measure of success or effectiveness. This is often because they lack the resources and mediums for gaining widespread publicity such that turnout can be substantively increased. Interestingly, none of my participants mentioned that turnout was a challenge. Instead, when discussing the youth, they measured the effectiveness of their programming by more intuitively qualitative measures, such as the extent to which the youth engaged with the education, connected with their peers, and seemed to have fun and feel empowered.⁵⁰ KYRC thus presents a rather unique case: it is a radical SMO that deprioritizes membership/turnout not because it lacks the resources to stimulate it, but because its resources afforded by the Kaepernick Brand – partnerships, publicity, and endorsements – allow them to overcome the grind of rank-and-file outreach campaigns⁵¹.

Participants further explained the logics of this approach. In each city that KYRC hosts a camp, they partner with local organizations, whom have preexisting connections with local youth that they then bring to the camp. Participant #6 explained:

We do reach out to community organizations and schools in the area and just say, 'hey, we're trying to target the areas in need.' And we talk to the community members that work in those areas and in those cities to identify the students.

Rather than hosting a camp, promoting it to all, and hoping as many people show up as possible (as is the model of typical SMOs), the KYRC team works to ensure that both the programming *and* participants coordinated well in advance of each camp.

⁵⁰ Participant quotes reflecting this sentiment are presented later in this chapter, in the “Experiences and Perceptions” section.

⁵¹ This is not to say that building these coalitions is an automatic process, or even easy. As we will discuss below, it requires the dedication coordination of the KYRC team.

The reasons for this distinctive strategy are manifold. First, KYRC staff explained that this strategy is primarily to direct the resources that KYRC has towards the people that most need them, or would receive the most use from them. In short, Participant #6 relayed the justification for KYRC: “I think that part of our approach is making sure that access is not going to be only limited to those people that have the means.” Participant #2 further explained:

there's this clear inverse relationship between the ability to get somebody to our camps and likely the benefit that the camp can serve that individual. And so I think knowing that we identify the organizations and understand the kind of the youth they serve, it makes it clear to us that we are making the most impact with limited space, limited resources, limited time. I think that's one of the main points of it.

Additionally, Participant #6 reflected on the various models, and why KYRC’s model is intentional in trying to reach the students whom public advertising might not reach:

One of the things is that, if we were to do it publicly, probably the easiest and most fair way is to open up for online registration or something along those lines. What we have found in the work that we're doing is that sometimes access to Wi-Fi is still a very real problem, access to software and computers. So sometimes the students that are going to probably benefit the most from this programming are just not going to be able to sign up.

Participant #6 continued:

Part of it is the grassroots approach that you're talking about. We talked to the community members, community leaders that are in those cities to try to make sure that we're servicing the youth that may not get these opportunities. Lots of times those who go to the schools that already have the funding – the schools and the districts that already have the means – they might be the first in line to be able to sign up for Know Your Rights Camp, but they

already have, like, a million resources. So it's like, you don't need it, you know what I mean? So we want to make sure that we get the youth that need it the most into the rooms.

These comments suggest a utilitarian logic to KYRC's strategy, wherein the intentional outreach ensures that the organizations resources are targeted to the youth who would benefit the most.

This strategy, however, hinges on an ability to formulate and sustain organization partnerships.

5.2.3 Strategic Partnerships

Corollary to people, partnerships was a second main resource for KYRC. Participants understood partnering with local community organizations as a way for KYRC to tailor their programming more effectively to the specific needs of each community, in a manner that supplements rather than overshadows the local community work that is already occurring. As Participant #2 explained: "part of the benefits and outcomes of this community organization approach to outreach has been the fact that we can build relationships and stay in touch with these folks." Participant #6 further explained the logics of the on-the-ground approach:

It starts with touching base with community members and folks that are already doing the work in the communities. And how we can come in and help amplify the work that [they're] doing... We try to tap in with local black-owned businesses. We look at it kind of like as a 360 approach as well, right? Like we're going to bring this into your city, but we're also going to try to make sure that we support the community by hiring folks from that community.

This resembles how, for radical SMOs, "the goal of mass action is not just publicity; it also serves as a way to express local concerns and to set up local networks" (Fitzgerald & Rogers, 2000; p. 584). As demonstrated in Participant #6's comment above, participants were acutely

aware of the dynamic between the organization's national recognition and community-orientation. Participant #6 explained how this affected their approach:

I think one of the things that we want to make sure is that, like, KYRC is not just a celebrity-led organization that feels like we can come into your city and say, 'hey, we know everything that's wrong in Baltimore and this is how we're going to fix it.' You know, we understand that before Colin and the protest, there's many predecessors, many people that have been on the ground doing the work already. So our first step, typically when we're planning a camp is we try to tap in with local community members.

The logic of prioritizing partnerships with local community organizations was a way to reconcile a potential tension between KYRC's ties to both celebrityhood and the grassroots.

The conjoined logics of strategic outreach and strategic partnerships are arguably necessary due to the sensitive nature of the work that KYRC does. The Black and Brown populations that KYRC serves are not only already vulnerable (often by race and class), but are also mostly minors under the age of 18. Additionally, the targeted resources model offers protection for the camps: both physically and rhetorically. While to this point I have been discussing the benefits that the Kaepernick Brand lends to KYRC, the logic of strategic targeting also previews the challenges it presents.

As mentioned earlier, the divisiveness of Kaepernick's protest has rendered him a symbol of radical resistance. This is true for most liberals and progressives, who tend to venerate him, and for conservatives, who tend to demonize him. As discussed more in Chapter 7, Kaepernick has thus become a central figure in the culture wars, who has come to embody competing ideological visions for America. KYRC is then an outlet for Kaepernick to articulate a more progressive and radical past, present, and future for the country; a valiant but unfortunately

hazardous task. As participants expressed, to publicly advertise the camps might risk inviting conservative counter-protestors who might disrupt the planned programming, or even worse, commit physical harm. As Participant #6 mentioned, “there’s a plethora of reasons, with safety being the biggest one... the safety of the youth is paramount, and of the attendees.”

The lack of press and publicity also means that KYRC facilitates their own communications. Fitzgerald and Rogers (2000) point out that radical SMOs tend to be cautious and intentional with their communication, as they anticipate being diluted, misrepresented, framed uncharitably by mainstream media. As such, they often prefer to rely on alternative forms of communication to most faithfully disseminate their messages. For KYRC, this entails their newsletters, their website, the KYRC podcast, social media, and the camps themselves. For instance, Participant #6 explained:

we don't publicize it and we rarely have any press or anything like that... we capture all the content ourselves. Put all the content out ourselves. It's a full arm production, all within the kind of KYRC universe or ecosphere, if you will.

The in-house organization, production, and dissemination allows KYRC to present the camps in ways consistent with its public framing.⁵²

In all, supplying participants through networks of partnered organizations alleviates many of these potential problems. On how they go about building coalitions, Participant #2 explained that “there will sometimes be cold outreach, just organizations that we believe align with our views and mission critically.” Yet, here we must note that the Kaepernick Brand also enhances KYRC’s ability to form these partnerships. This cannot be taken for granted, for this too is a process that many traditional SMOs struggle with. Without discounting the hard work of the

⁵² Chapter 6 examines this public framing, and particularly how KYRC uses social media as an alternative form of communication through which they can curate organizational worldviews.

staff, the Kaepernick Brand benefits KYRC by functioning to attract partnering organizations and initiatives, whom are aligned with KYRC's mission of Black liberation and/or supportive of Kaepernick (the person or the symbol). These partnerships result in further material and symbolic resources for KYRC.

5.2.4 Material and Symbolic Resources

Along similar lines, another significant benefit of the Kaepernick Brand is its ability to attract funding. This is a significant benefit given KYRC's status as a non-profit. The rise of the "Third Sector" during neoliberalism (Kallman & Clark, 2019; Taylor, 2010) – in which social problems once alleviated with state resources are now targeted by non-profits, non-governmental organizations, and other public-private partnership organizations who are forced compete for grants and donations – has resulted in non-profits and SMOs dedicating most of their time and effort towards securing funding (Wilson & Hayhurst, 2009). While later in this chapter I elaborate on how KYRC is affected by "the dramatic and increasing presence of the institutional logic of professionalization, at times in conflict with that of activism" within nonprofits/SMOs (Kallman & Clark, 2019; p. 87), I now briefly want to outline one of the more interesting findings in this project: the process by which Kaepernick Brand smoothens the courting of funding for KYRC, thereby allowing them to maintain their activist-minded logics.

Celebrities, organizations, and even corporations associate with – and accrue the corollary benefit of – the Kaepernick Brand through donating to KYRC. Whether or not this has occurred because they truly believe in the mission or as a cynical manner of shaping their image in the public eye, it results in more resources for KYRC to mobilize. Staff was aware of this dynamic. Participant #5 explained their perspective on KYRC's tie to Kaepernick:

I absolutely think that it has helped to form partnerships. Like there are plenty of people who appreciate the name, and marketing is big for a lot. Maybe more of your members might show up to this, or people being willing to work with us so they can put their organization next to the name. Beyond that, I do think there is organizational, or donor-type people that also are willing – they have his name at forefront of their mind. A lot of people have that name at the forefront just because of the kneeling and everything else. So I think it lends itself to partnership opportunities, or otherwise just a platform that wouldn't exist for plenty of other people trying to start a non-profit.

This key quote underscores the significance of “the name” – Kaepernick – for KYRC’s operations.

The Kaepernick Brand has also resulted in – and ironically been further produced through – corporate partnerships. This has led to more physical resources for KYRC to enhance the organization’s programming. These resources have been provided by Kaepernick’s corporate ties and passed along to the youth, through a more engaging camp, an incentive/reward for attending the camp, and as resources to take home with them. For instance, included in the contract for Kaepernick’s partnership with Nike (the same partnership out of which the famous 2018 *Dream Crazy* advertisement campaign was created), Nike committed to donating an undisclosed amount to KYRC (Detrick, 2018; Jackson, 2018). Additionally, attendees to recent camps receive a Nike-clad backpack with, among other items, Nike shoes. In fact, from the perspective of KYRC, these branded giveaways to youth appear to be a key element of the camps, as the moment they are announced is included in the camp recap videos. The recap video for the Los Angeles camp in February 2023 – posted on KYRC’s website, YouTube, and social media (“Los Angeles, California”, retrieved Dec. 2023) – ends with Kaepernick on stage announcing to the youth:

Everyone will receive a backpack. In the backpack for you will be a pair of Beats headphones...’ *pause for audience cheering* ‘...you will also receive The Autobiography of Malcolm X in that backpack...’ *audience cheering* ‘...you will also receive Abolition for the People in that backpack...’ *audience cheering* ‘...everyone will be getting a pair of Nike shoes as well...’ *audience erupts in cheers*

After footage of the youth receiving these gifts, the closing shot of the recap video entails audience members repeatedly chanting “Thank you, Colin!... Thank you, Colin!” In the recap video for the Houston camp in December 2023, a similar scene is shown but with the addition of Ben & Jerry’s ice cream and more books: *Black History Saved My Life* by Ernest Crim (2020); *From #BLM to Black Liberation* by Keeanga Yamhatta-Taylor (2021), and *Our History Has Been Contraband* by Kaepernick, Robin D.G. Kelley, and Yamhatta-Taylor (2023).

Given that KYRC produces these videos, along with their “intentional” approach, it is clear that the combination of popular branded material items with academic books is a strategic mobilization of the resources made possible by the Kaepernick Brand. Here it is important to mention that Kaepernick has sponsorship deals with these brands as well: Beats Headphones (Mochari, 2014); Ben & Jerry’s (established after Kaepernick’s protests; Jackson, 2020); and of course his own collaborations with academic scholars within Black studies, published through his own publishing company Kaepernick Publishing (Kaepernick et al., 2023). Providing these to youth attendees highlights how KYRC more broadly balances both the opportunities – and potential tensions – of Kaepernick’s commercial stature with his organization’s critical approach and radical objectives.

In addition to free products, the Kaepernick Brand has also resulted in KYRC receiving attention from other celebrities and renowned individuals. In this same way that what Kaepernick

represents has incentivized corporations to align with KYRC, a range of celebrities have also become symbolic resources that affiliate with KYRC, which symbiotically raises the local and national profile of KYRC. Celebrities have affiliated through donations and/or physically appearances at the camp. For example, during Kaepernick's "10 for 10 Pledge" in which he would match anyone's \$10,000 donation to an organization working for oppressed communities, Kaepernick visibly sought the donations and platforms of "his friends" (Phillips, 2018; kaepernick7.com; retrieved December 2023). Most external donations included KYRC. Among celebrities who publicly donated as part of this pledge were fellow athletes Kobe Bryant, Stephen Curry, Kevin Durant, Serena Williams, Jaylon Brown, Michael Bourn, and Eric Reid; actors Zendaya, Jesse Williams, Hannibal Burrell, and Nick Cannon; and musical artists J. Cole, Usher, Alicia Keys, Nas, Snoop Dogg, Dr. Dre, T.I., Quavo, Chris Brown, Trey Songz, and Jhene Aiko (see "Colin Kaepernick's #10for10", retrieved December 2023). Additionally, high-profile individuals have attended and engaged youth at the camps. These include people who often simultaneously have national acclaim and roots to the communities the camps served, such as Houston-based rapper musician Chamillionaire, Civil Rights attorney Ben Crump, Baltimore-based athlete-artist Aaron Maybin, to name only a few.

An instructive example of the Kaepernick Brand in action can be found with KYRC's partnership with home fitness brand Ergatta. In 2021, Ergatta announced a partnership with Kaepernick for their first national advertising campaign. Aligned with KYRC's 2nd point of the 10 Point Plan – "You have the right to be healthy" – the partnership includes Ergatta supporting KYRC in numerous ways (Sachs, 2021). First, Ergatta donated 100 rowers (their signature product) to community facilities within KYRC's seven affiliated cities. The company also committed to donating seven "limited-edition rowers featuring Kaepernick's likeness" to the

camps in 2022 (Sachs, 2021; para. 6). Additionally, Ergatta also created consumer-based systems of support, which included a donation to KYRC for every rower sold within a two-month span, as well as an additional donation to KYRC for every user who completed their Kaepernick-inspired fitness program. There is also a promo code available for purchasing through Ergatta listed as “kyrc75”. The commentary from Ergatta’s CEO highlights how the Kaepernick Brand functions to entice corporate affiliation:

Colin is the dream partner and advisor for Ergatta. He is a changemaker who has a way of seeing the future before everyone else does. Coupled with his elite athleticism and passion for fitness, we knew there was a natural alignment. We are thrilled to now have him bring our brand to life and introduce game-based fitness to millions of people across the country. (Sachs, 2021; para. 5).

Whether truly a natural alignment or not, the desire for not-overtly-political commercial companies to align with overtly-radical Kaepernick reveals the dramatic shift in the cultural politics of activism; not only since Kaepernick’s 2015 protests, but in the longer history of how sport advertising only tends to take political stands when it is safe to do so (and well after taking a stance would serve meaningful) (Montez de Oca, 2020). The Kaepernick Brand, then, directly resulted in free merchandise to be used to enhance the camps and enhance the communities.

5.2.5 Enthusiasm

Sequential to all of the above, the last beneficial resource of the Kaepernick Brand is enthusiasm. Put simply, attendees appear genuinely excited to show up to KYRC programming. As apparent in footage of the camps and interview data, the audience of youth far more resembles an audience of an entertainment spectacle than an audience learning about structural racism and the intricate workings of the legal system. This is partially due to all the engaging

elements of the camp – which includes art, dance, games, and other activities – but it also is clear that the giveaways and the speakers spark enthusiasm. While my data set can only support speculation about this point, future ethnographic or participant-centered research could unpack this key point with more detail. However, participants confirmed this enthusiasm during interviews. Participant #3 spoke on their active engagement at camps:

they're always like shouting out answers. [Speakers] will give out incentives are also helpful too, whether sometimes it can be like prizes at the end... I would say people have been really enthusiastic. People have come up to me after, like, thanking me for their presentation, saying that they've learned a lot, that they understand kind of what their rights are now. So I do think that after obtaining the information I do see an empowerment within them to feel kind of more confident in different aspects of the information they learned.

Similarly, Participant #6 spoke about his perception of the youth throughout the day of the camps:

I personally feel like you see a physical transformation from when the youth walk in that day to when they walk out that day. They feel more confident. They maybe feel more open, feel more vulnerable, feel more tapped in with the community, able to share more.

Finally, Participant #2 shared his perspective on the mood of the camps:

I always get the chills... it really is a special kind of space to be in. It is really cool to impact people in this way and it is, you know, great to hear stories of, you know, some of the kids writing their college essays and sharing the best moment they've ever had. Being in that story, with things like this, just... it sits with you.

Beyond the strategic benefit of how enthusiasm helps SMOs retain and establish future programming, the enthusiasm of the youth also had a clear positive effect on the KYRC staff and the meanings they attach to their work.

5.3 But More Than Colin

Thus far, I have argued that KYRC is propelled by the power of the Kaepernick Brand. In this section I outline how KYRC is sustained by far more than just the renowned status of Kaepernick. While the Kaepernick Brand enables the accumulation of resources (symbolic and material), it is the dedicated work of rank-and-file staff and volunteers that channels them into making an impact. Drawing on interview data, all participants viewed KYRC as far more than a standard celebrity advocacy organization. Instead, they describe a culture in which everyone works together as a team to serve the needs of the community. In describing this dynamic, I argue that the blueprint for Sporting SMOs to enact social change is a productive balance between the sporting celebrityhood and grassroots organizational strategizing.

5.3.1 A Team-Based Approach

KYRC's team is central to turning Kaepernick's vision and objectives into reality. The team is responsible for several tasks that sustained KYRC, such as marketing/promotion, communications, coalition building with other organizations, cultivating the curriculum, and running various initiatives. Rather than a group of like-minded people who come together to sporadically host camps, KYRC is a true organization with an office, a regular schedule, and staff with defined positions who are responsible for daily, weekly, and monthly tasks. For example, in 2023, the organization sought to fill the position of Program Director, which, according to the job listing (EIF.org, retrieved February 2023), would be responsible for "overseeing the day-to-day operations of KYRC programs and ensuring they align with the

organization's mission and goals" as well as "developing and implementing program strategies, managing program staff, and evaluating the effectiveness of programs" and "ensuring that the organization's resources are used effectively and efficiently." KYRC also sought a Director of Development who would be responsible for "[playing] a critical strategic and operational role in shaping the [organization's] future in the areas of fundraising, programming, partnerships, and initiative-building" (EIF.org; retrieved February 2023). While the one-day camps are the product and most visible output of the organization, they are made possible by months of behind-the-scenes work from a dedicated team.

This point became vividly clear during interviews, as participants described their tasks and roles within the organization with me. It was also clear that all participants explicitly or implicitly perceived the organization as a collective team rather than a one-man show. Participants conveyed that a focus on making an impact and serving the community was the glue that bound the team together. For instance, Participant #3 stated that:

I think that [Kaepernick] is very determined on the change he wants to make, and also he's doing a lot of learning himself as well... I think that thinking how we can best make an impact is of top priority for us. Knowing that, to make this impact, it's going to take a lot of people. It's going to take support, it's going to take a team, and it's going to take a community.

Similarly, Participant #4 stated that from their perspective: "it's not about the founder, it's not about the co-founders, it's about the people in the cities that we do our research on." To share the specific details of participants tasks would risk identifying them. However, most participants were far more interested in speaking about how their specific contributions fit into the broader organizational goals and impacted the communities. Despite the clear leadership of Kaepernick

and Nessa as well as the defined roles within the organization, participants described a generally egalitarian and democratic structure. While Kaepernick often sets the broad agenda, the collective team horizontally self-reflects on matters pertaining to the camp, including the curriculum, structure, and initiatives. For instance, Participant #3 shared what the organization does after the camps:

There's a lot of preparation that goes into the camps and making sure that it's a positive experience. But we're also trying to improve each camp too. We all ask, what can we do better for the next? So I think there's also this layer of innovation, as well as bringing in new ideas, fresh perspectives. To be able to reflect and really try to grow and expand and, kind of, make each camp memorable for each student.

This horizontal strategizing is a characteristic common to radical SMOs. The very organizational structure of radical SMOs often reflects and embodies the alternative social formations that these organizations aspire to enact, wherein “the emphases on structural changes are interwoven into the very internal structure, ideology, and strategies” of radical SMOs (Fitzgerald & Rogers, 2000; p. 581). The egalitarian and democratic structure also helps radical SMOs to avoid having to sacrifice its radical ethics/ethos in order to preserve organizational funding or membership (Fitzgerald and Rogers, 2000). Still, radical SMOs sometimes are faced with a decision between maintaining their radical ethics or strategically toning down their radicalism in pursuit of mainstream funding. The unique model and ingredients of KYRC avoids this dilemma. Because the Kaepernick Brand assists KYRC to avoid desperation for funding and membership, the organization is to better maintain their radical/ideological integrity and better serve their targeted communities.

Whereas I have tended to use the word strategy, multiple participants preferred to use the word “intentionality” to describe the unifying logic of team’s approach. Participant #6, for instance, shared that:

I think intentionality is kind of one of the things that we really focus on. We try to make sure that we do no harm in our communities, and we really look and weigh into how our decisions are made. So everything – from even like picking the city, picking the venue, the caterers – we always try to tap in with folks on the ground already, people that are already doing the work.

Other participants also used the word “intentional” as a microcosm of KYRC’s strategy. This is consistent across the organization, as Kaepernick described the strategy of KYRC as “intentional.” In a January 2024 interview with #NessaOFFAir, when asked to describe KYRC in one word, Kaepernick said:

Intentional. In the sense of what we’re building, why we’re building it, who we’re building it for. The environment that we create. The volunteers and community that were building with each other. All of these things don’t just happen. We’re very intentional about why we’re building these things and how we are going about building them. We have to be very intentional in what we’re doing because the outcomes matter so much.

As I asked more about how the team perceived the intentions and outcomes of KYRC, it became clear that participants across interviews understand KYRC as serving two primary strategic purposes: *education* and *rapid response*. The educational component – which mostly emphasizes the need to transform rather than assimilate into existing social structures – will be the focus of

next chapters.⁵³ Here, I will focus on the intriguing second point of how participants understood KYRC as rapid response.

5.3.2 *Rapid Response*

While the mission statement and original purpose of KYRC was to educate and empower Black and Brown youth, as the organization evolved, staff found it necessary to pair their education about structural barriers with material relief for those affected by them. Education is foundational for any serious effort to enact social change, but it is not a *lack* of education that is responsible for racial disparities. What is most responsible is structural barriers and a lack of resources. Therefore, KYRC found that simply educating Black and Brown youth was necessary, but not sufficient. They also needed to use their resources for direct community uplift.

Rapid response, then, entailed KYRC mobilizing their resources to materially support communities to fulfill their self-identified needs. Participant #2 described the logic of KYRC's evolution to rapid response:

The camps are kind of what this all started from. Then it's become so big that it's become formalized with, you know, the fiscal sponsors and its full-time staff, things like that. Initiatives being launched. But the rest of it, I just kind of summarize. It's like rapid response efforts. Really, it is about reacting to communities of need and say, 'hey, tell us what you need and how can we serve those needs.'

They continued by sharing an example of how KYRC's national recognition uniquely enables them to serve communities:

Twice in a row now, Mississippi – Jackson specifically – has just been getting destroyed by political disinvestment... and that conjoined with bad weather, and obviously the racial

⁵³ Particularly, Chapter 6 examines KYRC's radical pedagogical messages via social media, while Chapter 3 more precisely explored Kaepernick and KYRC's historical and contemporary radical ideological influences.

issues. The first year we provided grants to local organizations, for things like rooms and things, because that's what they were asking for. And the second year, I think about 5000 gallons of water we distributed – drinkable water, water bottles and stuff – for the community. So what they asked for, we just try to kind of provide from this centralized unique position that we're in, due to our kind of celebrity-led and national recognition. And so it really is about how to translate this into a more grassroots ground-up approach... I just sum it up as rapid response.

As Participant #2's comments demonstrate, the Kaepernick Brand helps to bring in resources that the KYRC team distributes in serving vulnerable communities. As we will discuss shortly, the rapid response approach also helps to alleviate some potential tensions between top-down celebrity-led philanthropy and a more grassroots bottom-up approach to community uplift.

Another key example of this rapid response approach – and the behind-the-scenes work that brings Kaepernick's vision to fruition – can be found in The Autopsy Initiative. This initiative by KYRC offers free second autopsies for victims of a police-related death. As explained by Participant #3: "Initially the goal was to provide immediate relief and comfort... I wouldn't necessarily say that it's comforting, but it's least giving them some answers and the truth, and letting them know that their loved one is cared for." This is a national initiative that is not specific to the communities that KYRC has worked with. Participant #3 continued explaining the origin of the Autopsy Initiative:

what Colin wanted to do is alleviate that financial burden of families who have lost their loved one in a police-related death, so we carefully crafted a program that would ensure that we are being objective within the autopsy process, that high-quality forensics is being

used by the pathologist, and that... we're responding to the families promptly to be able to give them the definitive cause of death for their loved one.

In order to achieve these objectives, KYRC builds coalitions with other aligned individuals and organizations. Participant #5 highlights the behind-the-scenes work necessary to make this happen:

I've done pathologist outreach to try to get more pathologists involved. Also, a lot of attorney outreach. We tried to gather resources to be able to connect our applicants or the people who participate in our program with attorneys, where they don't have attorneys, so just a lot of outreach in that regard with attorneys. We've been able to work with the National Police Accountability Projects. That was sort of a starting partnership there, to be able to get some resources from that organization who does a lot in the policing space. Another thing we're working on is medical partnerships with possible hospitals and other health care organizations that sometimes have similar programs... I'm just trying to work on strategic partnerships to really solidify our foundation and grow our program across the board.

Here Participant #5 demonstrates how partnerships and coalitions are a resource that the KYRC team mobilizes to enact Kaepernick's vision. Participant #3 summarizes the impact of the Autopsy Initiative:

Overall it's been going well. We have served over 55 families in about a year and a half, I would say. But because we're a new program and we know that unfortunately police related deaths are continuing to occur on a large scale, we are looking forward to grow our program to the point where it almost automatic, where a police-related death occurs and people know to reach out to us.

This strategy is geared towards establishing KYRC as a long-term resource for communities nationwide. The approach also mirrors that of the “Survival until Revolution” mantra of the Black Panther Party (Newton, 1970), in which social programs do what they can to keep communities afloat while knowing that structural reform – or even revolution – is a long-term process. Participant #5 demonstrates this perspective in considering the impact of the Autopsy Initiative: “I think that it will take time to have, say, significant, maybe systemic impact, but at least people are looking and paying attention and getting some answers in the process.” The Autopsy Initiative thus illustrates how the KYRC team – powered by the Kaepernick Brand – offers rapid response to community needs.

More broadly, this collective rapid response approach highlights the evolution of sporting activism. Fitzgerald and Rogers (2000) argue that “in embracing a more diffuse, collectivist type of organization and radical goals, [radical] SMOs differ from the more moderate SMOs in that they do not want or need validation from the power structure” (Fitzgerald & Rogers, 2000; p. 581). The combination of the Kaepernick Brand and the collective team-based approach of KYRC does not totally evade the power structure (here being commercial and corporate entities tied to sport). However, it does perhaps indicate how the power structure can, at least partially, be wielded to support consciousness-raising and substantive progressive action. While the vast majority of activism within sport has been symbolic and aimed at spreading awareness for social justice issues (Cooper, 2021), KYRC demonstrates how the platform and resources afforded by sport can be mobilized for both pedagogical *and* direct material activism.

5.4 Tensions and Challenges

Thus far, this chapter has described the logics and meanings that participants attached to KYRC, and I have characterized the organization as propelled by an interplay of the Kaepernick

Brand and a dedicated team. With favorable ingredients, the model that emerged from the data is one that I believe can be useful to other Sporting SMOs, as well as SMOs more broadly.

However, there are a number of tensions that arise from this model of activism. Specifically, the Kaepernick Brand leads to questions of localized commitment, motives from attendees, and the realities of non-profit work. These tensions were touched upon by participants, who also mentioned the steps they took to alleviate them.

5.4.1 Maintaining a Community Focus

The first tension is that between KYRC – a celebrity-led organization with national recognition – and Black and Brown communities often lacking in both resources and public attention. Essentially, KYRC associates were attuned to the dynamic of advocacy groups and traditional SMOs – even those who do not have celebrity leadership – operating in a top-down manner to offer “solutions” that that community did not seek (see Welch & Plaxton-Moore, 2019). In other words, KYRC did not want to appear as a celebrity organization moving between cities, working with them temporarily, and then moving on to the next city as if the structural issues have been alleviated. Nor did they want to appear as an organization telling communities what they need instead of listening to them, or even embracing each city/community with a one-size-fits-all approach that ignored contextual specificity. This, partially, is the impetus for the rapid response approach that developed to accompany KYRC’s original pedagogical intentions. For instance, Participant #5 speaks to this tension:

Know Your Rights Camp is involved in a lot... and also has the stance as a response type. Like, you're not necessarily just telling people what you have to provide, and they're coming you for this to find this service. It's also that you're willing to have this

conversation around figuring out what's best for the community and how can they best be served. Like is it a food drive? Is it shoes? But it's not just like a one-stop shop.

Similarly, Participant #4 even differentiated this approach from “activism” as commonly construed:

I don't want to use the word activism because I feel like it's very broad. I want to say we do more grassroots work. Like, we're on the grounds. We're providing hot food, we're providing books, we're providing clothes, we're providing shoes. We're providing DNA ancestry tests.

Grassroots, then, was understood as a more specific model of “activism”, broadly-construed. Participant comments overwhelmingly demonstrated Fitzgerald and Rogers’ (2000) claim that radical SMOs differ from traditional SMOs by their emphasis on direct action and grassroots input.

Admittedly, the rapid response approach advances – and in some ways, challenges – my argument that KYRC is an SMO. Most traditional SMOs dedicate their resources to raising awareness for a cause and/or increasing membership to do so (Buechler, 2011), while even radical SMOs that do not prioritize membership or resources just accept the challenge of operating with limited resources and attempt to compensate by confrontational disruptive action (Fitzgerald & Rogers, 2000). It is not that SMOs – traditional or radical – do not value material relief in this “rapid response” manner; it is that they typically do not have the resources to implement it consistently. The Kaepernick Brand partially allows KYRC to bypass this dilemma.

Interestingly, when SMOs do have the resources for material relief – such as the Black Panther Party (BPP), KYRC’s primary influence – providing direct community uplift through free programs and response has been more effective in building support, fostering receptiveness

to education, and integrating SMOs into communities in a manner that the people perceive as authentic (Hilliard, 2008; Pope & Flanigan, 2013). It is thus helpful to think of KYRC as a radical SMO more in the model of the BPP, but one that also exists within different contexts as previous radical SMOs. KYRC perhaps demonstrates the new possibilities for radical SMOs, based upon increasing compatibility between radical outlooks and the accumulation of resources from mainstream commercial institutions. While this peculiar model is theoretically possible through any tie to popular culture, it is perhaps most feasibly imagined by the global mediated platforms afforded by sport.

As alluded in Chapter 3, the BPP began to face challenges within the communities they served as the national and celebrity profile of their leader Huey P. Newton expanded (Hilliard, 2008). With Newton present, the micro-scale community outreach events attracted interest from an array of external parties – supportive, unsupportive, or otherwise – in ways that sometimes distracted from prioritizing the community before anything else. Kaepernick is much more widely-known than Newton was during his time, and KYRC is certainly much less polarizing (and less widely-known) than BPP was in its time. However, similar to its historical predecessor, KYRC’s dedication to a community-first approach at times potentially collided with its celebrity associations.

To alleviate this tension, KYRC prioritized maintaining connections with communities even after hosting the camps. An example of this can be found in KYRC’s operations during the COVID-19 pandemic. According to participants, in early 2020, KYRC was in the midst of planning the next camp when the world shut down. The team deliberated about how to keep up KYRC’s momentum as an organization, as well as how to keep serving communities. After discussing ideas such as hosting a virtual camp and others, KYRC decided to dedicate its

resources to responding to community needs. Participant #6 describes the organization's "pivot" to forming initiatives such as the COVID Relief Fund:

we actually pivoted to start our COVID-19 relief fund, within two weeks of the NBA shutting down. And through that fund, we were able to help a lot of businesses make it through... we looked at communities that need food and then we looked at Black-owned businesses that needed business. So we would buy food from like a Black-owned business to be distributed in a community of need. We also distributed a lot of micro-grants to a lot of community organizations that were on the ground through our various networks. We had this network of all the cities that we had already done camps in. So we reached back out to the community leaders like how can we be helpful right now? How can we help you like get through COVID?

A few months later in May of 2020, the viral murder of George Floyd by police officer Derek Chauvin in Minneapolis, Minnesota sent the world into a summer of protest, while reigniting many of the conversations about police brutality and racism in the criminal justice system that KYRC had been educating about for years (Johnson & Edgar, 2024). KYRC responded by forming another initiative called the Legal Defense Initiative. This initiative paid the bail money of those who were unjustly arrested for protesting for Black lives in the wake of George Floyd.

As Participant #6 describes:

Right after the protest really started – within I think 48 hours – we got our Legal Defense Initiative started, where we are offering free legal services to freedom fighters that were detained or arrested or, you know, placed in various jails. Lots of times without even notifying any family members, with undue processes and violations of civil rights... so we got that up and running. That was kind of our pivot where you know we weren't able to do

in-person physical camps, but we were trying to help and make sure our communities would continue to thrive.

In addition to community uplift, the pivot during COVID demonstrates KYRC's strategic balance of rapid response and radical pedagogy. It also is a case study of the power – and utility – of the Kaepernick Brand. Unlike many SMOs with similar attentions, the Kaepernick Brand helped propel the Legal Defense Fund towards immediate national attention. Kaepernick's tweet about the Fund to his 2.2 million Twitter/X followers has received 7,600 retweets and 24,000 likes, while his Instagram post to his 3.6 million followers has received 196,000 likes and 4,000 comments (@kaepernick7, as of January 2024). Because Kaepernick's national profile renders him "newsworthy," the establishment of the Fund immediately became national news, with coverage from a wide variety of sources (sport and non-sport): New York Times (Jefferies, 2020), Washington Post (Russell, 2020), CNN (Asmelash, 2020), Wall Street Journal (Beaton, 2020), Los Angeles Times (Loumena, 2020), Yahoo Finance (Haring, 2020), Men's Health (Ellis, 2020), Sports Illustrated (Pickman, 2020), Bleacher Report (Daniels, 2020), Fox Business (Barrabi, 2020), Revolt.TV (Tamantha, 2020), IMDb (Haring, 2020) and many others. CEO of Twitter, Jack Dorsey, even tweeted to his 6.4 million followers that he donated \$3 million to the Fund (TMZ, 2020). Again, the reach of the Kaepernick Brand was mobilized to directly bail protesters from jail, and indirectly support resistance to injustice.⁵⁴

5.4.2 Motives for Attendance

Returning to the camps, the Kaepernick Brand also produces another tension for participants: the motive for attendees and communities to engage with KYRC. While, ideally, the youth would be enticed by the prospect of learning their rights and receiving a critical pro-Black

⁵⁴ And on a far less important note, as I shared in the introduction, this whirlwind of coverage on the Legal Defense Fund sparked the idea for this dissertation.

education, participants seemed aware that this was likely not the case. Instead, it is possible they just wanted to interact with Kaepernick. It was not clear if KYRC staff viewed attendees only being driven to the camps by the prospect of meeting Kaepernick as a benefit or a problem, nor do I have enough data to definitively support a stance myself. In some instances, participants expressed concern. For example, Participant #6 explained:

we don't want kids that just want to meet Colin. Although that's great, you know what I mean? But, as our profile has grown a bit too – like kids know that they're going to get a backpack of goodies, with shoes, with headphones, school supplies, and things of that nature – it's like we don't want that to be the only reason why someone's signing up.

This tension also offers context to some of KYRC's strategies discussed earlier. By not having an open sign-up for attendees, KYRC somewhat avoids the issue of attendees being only those who, as Participant #6 says, "just want to meet Colin."

In other instances, participants seemed to acknowledge the obvious benefit of Kaepernick's presence. Participant #6 mentioned:

You get the feedback from the youth... At our last camp in Los Angeles, one of the young people stood up and said 'it just is amazing to me that someone like you, Colin, at your status or stature would care about us.' And it was like heartbreaking, but also inspiring.

Still, participants acknowledged the strategic benefit of the Kaepernick Brand, and how it functions to make organizing a bit smoother. In Participant #6's logic:

We're working with youth and minors lots of times. And so sometimes in the beginning stages, when we were purposely vague, it's kind of like 'what is this event that you're doing?' Like, you don't have the credibility. Even if we didn't want people just to show up because Colin was going to be there, and we don't mention the part of the celebrities... but

then it's just like, okay, *how do you get people there without, you know, kind of like, the biggest draw?*

More details on specific motives of camp attendance cannot be offered by my data set, and will require further qualitative research with attendees to draw insight into the motives, meanings, and impacts of KYRC attendance. Yet it is clearly a point to be considered by all SMOs, particularly those with connections to celebrity.

However, it is important to note that participants also spoke about how Kaepernick himself alleviated some of these tensions. Many radical SMOs consciously reject a symbolic leader, as they fear a movement or its appendages may depend on the strength, longevity, and in modern times the branded reputation of its leader (Fitzgerald & Rogers, 2000). As seen above, participants expressed an awareness of the challenging dynamics that Kaepernick's leadership can potentially present. Ironically, they noted how these tensions were primarily eased by Kaepernick's intentional efforts to decenter himself from the KYRC production. For instance, Participant #2 implied an awareness among Kaepernick about what his celebrityhood provides to KYRC:

Colin is not the type to center himself, but center the movement. And basically contribute to it what he can contribute, which was a platform, messaging, conviction, empowerment. And because of this kind of sincere approach, I think the downriver outcomes are authenticity, direct connection, that excitement we were talking about, and kind of just this wide support.

It is necessary to note that participants unanimously spoke highly of Kaepernick and his presence in the organization. They noted that Kaepernick worked to maintain this authenticity by contributing to the behind-the-scenes work with the team. Participant #6 mentioned that:

Colin is actually very hands on... He sat through every single curriculum meeting that we did to refine the curriculum to really kind of shape it into what it really is, him and Nessa's vision. The team, like – people are surprised about that. They'll come to a camp and we're setting up. And he's literally pulling up banners and putting stuff up and, like, straightening things, stuffing backpacks, moving boxes himself. And I mean, you know, the Super Bowl quarterback, perfectionist... He definitely has an attention to detail.

Summarizing the dynamic between Kaepernick and the team, Participant #2 stated that: “it’s not like he just shows up day of and leaves, or signs autographs and dips.” These anecdotes are significant not because of what they reveal about Kaepernick himself, but because they reflect the buy-in and awareness among all of KYRC – from Kaepernick to the team to the volunteers – of the unique interplay of the Kaepernick Brand within grassroots organizing.

5.4.3 Realities of the Third Sector

KYRC fits somewhat awkwardly within the distinctive worlds it traverses. Simultaneously, it is basically – but not quite – a radical SMO, a grassroots community organization, a sporting activist initiative, a celebrity foundation, a non-traditional educational program, and a nonprofit. The complex manner in which KYRC amalgamates these worlds is what makes the organization difficult – yet fruitful and necessary – to unpack. Here, and briefly in Chapter 7, I want to take a brief detour to acknowledge KYRC’s complicated positioning within the nonprofit world, as well as how participants perceived and responded to the logics and realities of nonprofit organizational work.

Especially in the U.S. context, scholars have documented a tension endemic to “Third Sector” nonprofit organizations between the logics of professionalization/bureaucratization and the logics of activism (Kallman & Clark, 2019; Samimi, 2010). The conventional nonprofit

follows a similar pattern. Most nonprofit organizations begin relatively small, motivated by a specific social justice cause and pursuing activist goals. They typically begin operating at the grassroots level, powered mostly by volunteers, community members, and maybe a small staff. The organizations that are successful by their own metrics – feeling themselves making an impact in the community via advocacy, expression of identity, or community-building (Kallman & Clark, 2019) – tend to want to expand, either by serving new/growing communities or attaining new resources/services for the same community. As mission and organizational expansion occurs, more staff tends to be added to accommodate the growing organization, at a certain point shifting organizational control from amateur (volunteers, community members) to professional (paid staff and people with more specialized expertise) (Salamon & Anheier, 1996). Additionally, growth in organizational size and profile can necessitate more funding and/or trigger regulatory procedures that increase the organization’s bureaucratic burden.

These changes are not inherently negative, nor necessarily indicative of major shifts in an organization’s culture or institutional logics. In fact, they can often be just minor additions that allow them to make a stronger impact, and thus are justified by the organization’s amplified effects. However, they can also pose significant tensions. The realities of work in the Third Sector poses a common dilemma for organizations who formulated around and are motivated by social justice imperatives (radical or otherwise): maximizing the resources and operating power – and therefore social/community impact – of an organization requires establishing organizational legitimacy in the eyes of state and non-state funders/grantors, which is a process that often requires an onerous amount of time and esoteric expertise (if not more money and professional staff) to keep up with increasingly-competitive impact metrics and standards of evaluation, which in turn distracts from or reduces the capacity for achieving the community-centric activist-

minded social objectives that the organization was created for in the first place (Fox & Turner, 2016; Kallman & Clark, 2019; Mananzala & Spade, 2008).

The ever-intensifying metrics of measurability, transparency, and quantification – while well-intentioned and strengthening the accountability of organizations that work with already-vulnerable populations – have begun to mimic the operating structures of the private sector (Dichter, 2003; DiMaggio & Powell 1983). Nonprofit compliance, monitoring, and evaluation has become an entire industry, which critics argue siphons time and resources away from the organizations that are being evaluated (Ebrahim, 2005). This means that even if the lofty social justice goals of Third Sector organizations (i.e. “Black Liberation and the elevation of the next generation of change leaders” as listed in KYRC’s mission statement) can be properly quantified, measured, and evaluated, the effort required to do so would severely hinder its own realization. A nonprofit leader quoted in Kallman (2013) explains the catch-22:

[In the U.S.] they want to know; what is the objective [of a project], what are the results.

The emphasis is much more on results that you can measure, and for that reason it is much more difficult to seek funding, for example, for peace. With an economic project you can say, "these chickens will lay twenty eggs a week", but the question of peace is a question of values, of change, of mentalities, of activities, and it's difficult to subject it to a measure.

(p. 57)

From a more radical viewpoint, scholars argue that the “non-profit industrial complex” that emerges from professionalization, bureaucratization, and corporatization of the Third Sector is counter-productive (if not outright hostile) to radical social movements (Incite, 2007; Fox & Turner, 2016; Mananzala & Spade, 2008; Samimi, 2010; Samimi, & DeHerrera, 2021). The arguments against the nonprofit industrial complex include: its tendency to transfer focus from

grassroots organizing to professionalization and fundraising; the strings that often come attached to the donations that sustain social justice non-profits; how they provide the government an alibi for prioritizing war and punitive violence over social services; and overall encourage reformist solutions to radical objectives (Ahn, 2007; Dunning, 2022; Rodriguez, 2007). Additionally, because the non-profit world is largely reliant upon rich donors (who very heavily skew White), SMOs run by people-of-color, whom are often without the social ties to rich White donors, are disadvantaged, as are the race-based causes that they are likely to focus on (King and Osayande, 2007). As Jones de Almeida (2009) writes:

We are too busy being told to market ourselves by pimping our communities' poverty in proposals, selling "results" in reports and accounting for our finances in financial reviews. In essence, our organizations have become mini-corporations, because on some level, we have internalized the idea that power-the ability to create change-equals money ... our activism is held hostage to our jobs... many of us spend over half of our staff hours struggling to raise salaries instead of creating real... alternatives to the institutional oppression... Meanwhile, the imaginative and spiritual perspective that would allow us to question the "givens" dictated by neoliberalism begins to erode. (cited in Kallman & Clark, 2019; p. 58)

As a result, some organizations end up sacrificing community voice for professional dictates, as well as suffering from “mission creep,” wherein an organization’s mission evolves, changes, or becomes diluted because of its dependence on external funding for survival (Kallman & Clark, 2019). Though reconciliation is certainly possible, the logics of professionalization are often in conflict with the logics of activism.

How KYRC navigates this dynamic, with its unique positioning, is especially illuminating. KYRC's non-profit designation is also more akin to traditional SMOs than radical SMOs, whom often lack any sort of institutional or professional attachments (for better or worse) (Fitzgerald & Rogers, 2000). Interestingly, despite not having a background in non-profit work, participants from KYRC harbored some explicit and intuitive awareness of the issues present within the nonprofit space. For instance, Participant #6 stated:

We talk to community members to build out a camp, that we felt would be beneficial to the youth. And *as we became a more formalized organization, you do realize that there is some red tape within the kind of nonprofit space* and things like that.

This “red tape” presumably refers to the bureaucracy associated with non-profit organizations as described above. Similarly, Participant #5 expressed that sometimes the organization's connection to Kaepernick leads people to overlook the substance and quality of the work that the KYRC is doing:

I think this sort of arena, of nonprofit space... sometimes people, it's like they want the fame element, or a favor.... we [KYRC associates] think that our service is stand-alone. It's not like Colin needs to come sit next to us to talk about these services. But it's just that being a *celebrity nonprofit*, I imagine, is an art in itself, beyond being a regular nonprofit.

This points to an awareness by the KYRC team of the unique dynamics presented by the Kaepernick Brand.

An important caveat in this discussion, and particularly relevant for our case, is the role of *charisma* within this tension between SMO professionalization and activism. Across numerous cases and contexts, what scholars have termed “charismatic leaders” have been a key symbolic and material asset for social movements (Burns, 2012; Gusfield, 1966; Morris & Staggenborg,

2004; Weber, 1947). Beyond how charismatic leaders are “tasked with being both ‘mobilizers,’ who inspire participants, and ‘articulators’ who link the movement to larger society”, they are also highly attractive to donors, funders, and supporters (Kallman & Clark, 2019; p. 56). In this way, charismatic leadership to some extent allows SMOs to reconcile the tension between professionalization and activist logics. This is especially true in KYRC’s unique case, in which the charismatic leader of the SMO is also a celebrity who serves as a global symbol of authentic activism (Deflem, 2022; Meyer, 1995). Put simply, the charisma of a leader – or, adapted for our specific context, the symbolic and commercial attractiveness of aligning with an SMOs leader – can help to acquire funding, freeing up staff, volunteers, and other organizational entities to more faithfully maintain their original activist goals. To be clear, I am suggesting that the Kaepernick Brand serves as a form of charismatic leadership, adapted for a contemporary moment in which activism, social movements, consumer culture, and corporate branding have become increasing conflated.

Beyond the case studies of the Kaepernick Brand discussed above, previous comments from participants – specifically participant discussion of Kaepernick’s dedication to the organizational day-to-day and the ability of Kaepernick’s name to help attract funding, partnerships, and corporate merchandise – must also be interpreted in the context of this discussion. Additionally, Participant #6’s summarized KYRC’s unique ability to overcome the tensions of the nonprofit world because of Kaepernick’s stature and the dedicated efforts of the KYRC team:

I think that part of our responsibility and part of Colin’s, you know, pedigree is to disrupt... We’re looking to kind of disrupt how antiquated systems work, like, ‘no, we don’t think that is the way that it needs to be done.’ And we want to do it differently. So the rapid response is like sometimes ‘hey, people need water and they need it yesterday.’ So it can’t take two

weeks to get an approval on a PO or something to buy water. We need to buy water now and we need to get it to them within a day. So that kind of just sums up some of our rapid response efforts.

This harkens back to two central points about KYRC's model. First, that the rapid response in some ways strategically avoid the pitfalls of non-profits having to prioritize their own sustenance over community well-being. Second, that the Kaepernick Brand functions to bypass some of the necessary evils of the non-profit world, in a manner that can be uniquely mobilized by charismatic celebrity leaders (in this case, socially-conscious Black athletes).

5.5 Experiences and Affective Perceptions of KYRC

Lastly, to capture participants perceptions of KYRC authentically and comprehensively, it is necessary to share their experiences with the SMO. In short, all participants expressed overwhelmingly positive experiences with the camps and the organization. I share their stories not because they are necessary surprising, but because they matter for our purposes of providing a blueprint for current and future sporting activism. Thus far, guided by my resource mobilization approach (Buechler, 2011), I have focused on KYRC's strategies, tactics, and logics from a rather technical approach. However, scholars have argued that SMOs are successful not just because of cold rationality or effective decision making. On an affective level, successful SMOs – in terms of recruiting and retaining members – also cultivate an environment in which participants care about each other and have a personal feeling that what they do is important, necessary, and impactful (Jupp, 2022; Tungohan, 2023).

While in this chapter I have chosen to emphasize the dynamic between The Kaepernick Brand, the KYRC team, and its community-based approach, I want to be careful not to be read as implying that proximity to Kaepernick is the sole or even primary reason that KYRC associates

joined the organization. One of the most common and effective mechanisms for stimulating SMO participation is pre-existing affective interpersonal bonds. This means that people are more likely to join SMOs in some capacity when they have personal ties to members or leaders of an SMO, especially if potential members like them personally and feel a sense of loyalty to them (Lofland, 1996; Stark & Bainbridge, 1985). McAdam et al. (1988) found that “prior interpersonal contact [is] the single richest source of movement recruits” (p. 708). Indeed, half of my sample of KYRC associates (two staffers and one volunteer) had known Kaepernick personally prior to the establishment of KYRC, and even prior to Kaepernick’s rise from professional American football player to global political icon. As demonstrated above, all participants spoke highly of Kaepernick. Additionally, for some participants, KYRC is their part-time or full-time job. Therefore even at the surface, interpersonal ties, professional obligation, and affective bonds are also part of the calculus for associates engaging with KYRC.⁵⁵

I have made the argument that the Kaepernick Brand offers a unique “perk” to recruitment of members (workers/organizers, attendees, and allied adherents). However, it is far from sufficient in answering the big question of “why” people engage with KYRC. In addition to the Kaepernick Brand, interpersonal ties (to Kaepernick or Nessa), and professional obligation,

⁵⁵ I am focusing on affective interpersonal ties here, but the question of why participants engage in SMOs is far more complicated than any single variable. In almost all cases, there are multiple conjoined reasons that people join SMOs, and delineating to what extent which variable is the determinative cause is a difficult process. For our purposes, Lofland (1996) synthesized a range of “candidate” variables that encourage SMO participation. Individual variables include biological orientation towards contentious social activity; deeper motivations (such as personal pursuit of meaning, search for identity, or quest for community); self-concept (the confidence that a person truly can make a difference); a cultural tradition or lifelong beliefs or goals that align with the SMO; active seeking of social movement participation; or a rational cost-benefit analysis of SMO participation. Structural variables include a favorable macro-level political/cultural environment; prior membership in organizations; prior involvement in activism; prior contact with SMO members/leaders; suddenly imposed grievances; situational stress; biographical availability; coercive persuasion; and interpersonal affective bonds (as mentioned above) (Lofland, 1996). These candidate variables all have their strengths and flaws, and some have more validity and applicability than others. Unfortunately, this was not an analytical priority at the time of interviews, and while participants certainly spoke to their motivations for joining KYRC, I regretfully did not inquire about these motivations with much depth. Future iterations of this project may further address this component.

participants shared that they simply viewed their work with KYRC as socially and personally meaningful. Notably, when asked to articulate their experience with KYRC, all participants chose to share their perspective on the tangible and intangible impacts that work with KYRC provided, both for the communities *and* themselves. Unanimously, KYRC staff either explicitly or implicitly shared that, while the primary focus was on impacting the community, doing this work also provided a sense of personal fulfillment. For instance, Participant #6 shared:

We do the camps for the benefit of the youth and the community, power building. But selfishly, I feel, like, reenergized and revitalized. I get so much out of the camps, personally, seeing the youth. Like you can see a visceral reaction from the youth. You literally see that they come in, in the morning, kind of sluggish. You know, it's a Saturday morning. But we have a fully hot catered breakfast out there, and the kids start eating, and start mingling, and start meeting other people from the city and other organizations... I personally feel like you see a physical transformation from when the youth walk in that day to when they walk out that day. They feel more confident. They maybe feel more open, feel more vulnerable, feel more tapped in with the community, able to share more. You know, understanding that they're not alone, understanding that there's other folks that are going through the same thing, the networking opportunity. So I always say that we do it obviously for the youth and for the community, but selfishly, *I feel such a huge benefit from doing the camps. You know, it does feel really good.*

As Participant #6 stated, participants felt personal fulfillment from the impacts that they saw with the youth over the course of the camp.

Although almost reluctant to talk about themselves, other participants shared anecdotes about the transformative effects of the camps on youth and communities. For instance, when asked how they would characterize their experience at the camps, Participant #4 said:

At the end of the day when I go there, I'm not there for myself. I'm not there for really anything else but those kids and making sure that they walk away learning more and knowing something that they didn't know before.... But I'm thinking of two words: life-changing and powerful. Only because when I first went to the camp and I seen Colin on the stage, he had every kid in the room say 'I am powerful.'... I definitely want to say very powerful because a lot of that confidence is not instilled in us when we're young, especially in communities where we don't really have much. And so, even though I was volunteering, I also felt like I was a student sitting there saying 'I am powerful' as well too.

For Participant #3, what stuck out about the camps was the enthusiasm and positive energy. They emphasized that, despite the heavy educational content, somehow the camps were still simply fun. But for Participant #3, the most significant part of KYRC is the way it made them feel like they were part of a “community”, something bigger than the sum of its parts:

I will say my first camp, I felt like you can feel just the love, like the energy of love. That seems like a very good energy. So I felt like the first camp especially... it really felt like a community. It was like, 'oh, wow, [I'm] really a part of something.' Just, like, all of the people, the kids, the volunteers, all the energy around, it was just a positive experience.

Beyond the camps, Participant #2 also reflected on the long-term impact of KYRC's work: “A lot of this job can be faithless and kind of devoid of immediate impact. But the aggregate impact of what we're doing is pretty special and it's very organic. And so just the fun thing to reflect on.”

These anecdotes demonstrate that there is something to KYRC beyond technocratic strategy. It appears that the strategic choices of building coalitions and rapid response also functioned to create solidarities and communities that had an effect on everyone involved. Although personal fulfillment was not the reasons for participant involvement, it was unanimously a byproduct of the work KYRC does, and significant for participant morale.

5.6 Conclusion

This chapter has aimed to detail how KYRC mobilizes its symbolic and material resources to implement its goals, from the perspective of KYRC staff and volunteers. In doing so, I have attempted to outline the organization's strategies, logics, tensions, and affective experiences. KYRC exhibits many characteristics of radical SMOs, and in ways urge us to advance and reconsider some of the possibilities and challenges of radical SMOs in the contemporary times. Most significantly, I have argued that the principal engine of KYRC is the Kaepernick Brand, or the ways that Kaepernick's status as a celebrity and a symbol of radical resistance has facilitated many of KYRC's bold initiatives. This data has implications for Sporting SMOs and SMOs in general. Athletic celebrity star power functions to resolve many of the challenges faced by traditional SMOs, whom do not have the benefit for nationally-renowned star power at the center of the operation. Yet, at the same time, a like-minded, passionate dedicated team is what sustains grassroots community activism, keeps the organization capable of adapting and responding, retains message discipline, and manages the resources accumulated by national prominence. In other words, a dedicated team is what distinguishes traditional sporadic athletic advocacy from a sustained and focused Sporting SMO. In all, KYRC's "blueprint" of grassroots activism can be summarized as *the mobilization of high-profile celebrity association as symbolic resources and*

philanthropy/donor money as material resources for the purposes of youth-oriented radical pedagogy and community-oriented rapid response.

I do not describe the model because I think it can be neatly replicated. Indeed, the KYRC model is likely contingent on a specific set of actors, contexts, and opportunity structures (as mapped in Chapter 4). KYRC is a rare case of a radical SMO with vast resources and ties to sympathetic elite and commercial entities. While difficult, this may be most replicable within the context of sport, as sport facilities celebrityhood provides the platform for the accumulation and deployment of material and symbolic resources. Despite questions of its generalizability, an analysis of this model can hopefully offer insights to current and future SMOs, activists, or even athletes whom are interested in grassroots activism. Further, the insights can better help academics and cultural theorists to understand the role, function, and possibilities of sport for enacting grassroots social change within this political moment.

Chapter 6:
KYRC as Grassroots Critical Pedagogy:
Framing, Rhetoric, and Digital Communications

After discussing the organizational structures and logics of KYRC, I now turn to another central aspect of the Sporting SMO: their messaging and pedagogy. We have established that KYRC's model of activism prioritizes critical education, which reflects their underlying radical politics. In this chapter, I critically analyze what the organization believes, and how they go about spreading their beliefs to the public. The overarching argument of this chapter is that KYRC is a project of grassroots critical pedagogy. The organization provides insight for the role of sport within the academic tradition of critical pedagogy, deriving from the theory and practice of cultural Marxist scholars Antonio Gramsci (1992) and Paulo Freire (2017).

Critical pedagogy is an educational approach that encourages individuals to locate themselves within various structures of power, and discover the linkages between their lives and wider social, cultural, and political processes (Giroux, 1988, 2011, 2021; Kincheloe, 2008; King-White, 2012; Leistyna et al., 1996). Henry Giroux (2011) describes critical pedagogy as both a “theoretical resource [and] productive practice” that guides individuals to “unsettle commonsense assumptions [and] theorize matters of self and social agency” (p. 3), with the broader goal to create a “formative culture of beliefs, practices, and social relations that enable individuals to wield power, learn how to govern, and nurture a democratic society that takes equality, justice, shared values, and freedom seriously” (p. 4). By highlighting (and thus challenging) the socially-constructed nature of power and its connection to knowledge, as well as activating human agency, critical pedagogy operates as political project capable of imagining alternative social orders and spurring transformative action to realize them (Aronson, 2019; Leonardo, 2004). In using education to provoke critique and intervention, KYRC embodies how

the project of critical pedagogy aims to advance from a “language of critique” towards a “language of possibility” (Giroux, 1997; p. 108) that can spark social transformation. However, it must be noted that much of the theorizations about critical pedagogy were developed before the dawn of the digital age (see Castells, 2015; Kavada, 2016; Melgaço & Monaghan, 2018).

As such, analyzing KYRC’s pedagogy entails a shift in empirical focus from the organization’s in-person direct actions to their public-facing digital presence. The camps certainly include critical pedagogy in presentational form at the camp, but analyzing KYRC’s social media and public documents offer a more detailed, coordinated, and substantive data set containing their beliefs and pedagogical strategy. Despite its importance of digital communication to contemporary SMOs – especially in facilitating how SMOs “survive through successful outreach efforts that include seeking/securing external funding, donations, and partnerships” (Wilson & Hayhurst, 2009; p. 156) – there remains a scarcity of research on SMO digital strategy. Sporting activist initiatives such as KYRC are now firmly active on social media, posting content multiple times per day. However, there remains a lack of literature on how exactly SMOs in general – let alone those tied to sport – have used their digital platforms to spread their message, hail their audience, navigate dissent, and maneuver the delicate balance of audience expansion and (relatively) niche political messaging. Numerous scholars have called for more work that understanding how social media and digitalization have changed the landscape for SMOs, as well as how SMOs are strategically responding to these changes (Bennett & Segerberg, 2016; Elliot & Earl, 2018; Crick et al., 2021).

Therefore, examining KYRC’s social media can fill these gaps by lending insight into the communications and rhetoric of Sporting SMOS. Social movements and SMOs by nature deploy rhetoric, as “they organize symbols to persuasive ends; they address unsettled issues of public

importance; and they seek to change not through violence or coercion but through force of argument and appeals”; therefore studying the rhetoric of SMOs is significant as the study of “rhetoric of social protest is to study how symbols—words, signs, images, music, even bodies—shape our perceptions of reality and invite us to act accordingly” (Brown & Morris, 2006; cited in Crick, 2021; p. 4). Additionally, this study can enhance our understanding of how SMOs deploy “framing”: the key task for SMOs of strategically constructing and aligning their message to mobilize current and potential adherents – to constitute their message in the social media age (Buechler, 2011; Goodwin & Jasper, 1999; Johnston & Noakes, 2005; Snow et al., 1986). How SMOs deploy framing in the social media age is especially significant for KYRC because of its national profile, radical orientation, and corresponding pedagogical aims.

This chapter provides a systematic analysis of KYRC’s rhetoric and digital communications as a form of critical pedagogy towards Black liberation. Beyond enhancing our empirical understanding of what KYRC believes and teaching, unpacking this dynamic also highlights the contemporary articulations between sport, social movements, the politics of digitalization, and grassroots pedagogy. I begin with a brief literature review that outlines the theoretical influences of critical public pedagogy, as well as what we know about the rhetoric and framing of SMOs in the digital age. Then, utilizing social media content analysis (Sanderson, 2022), I document how KYRC uses social media to spread critical awareness about racism and police brutality, promote the organization and its partners, and build solidarity. Particularly, I outline how KYRC utilizes the four mechanisms of “framing” social justice messages: bridging, amplification, extension, and transformation (Snow et al., 1986). Next, I conduct a textual analysis of *The Kaepernick Curriculum* (2021) and *The Political Education Curriculum* (2023) to explore both KYRC’s specific pedagogical approach and how the organization curates its politics and tactics for digital

public consumption. The Kaepernick Curriculum demonstrates KYRC's strategic positioning of sport and popular culture as an entry point to denaturalize hegemonic sociocultural assumptions. The Political Education Curriculum demonstrates KYRC's engagement with academia, basis in intersectionality, and promotion of allyship and solidarity. Overall, I contend that these documents demonstrate KYRC's commitment to grassroots critical pedagogy through the mobilization of social critique and action-oriented community pedagogy.

6.1 Gramsci, Freire, and the War of Positions

I have discussed the emergence of KYRC as a Sporting SMO during and after the Kaepernick Moment, which was marked by fierce contestation over questions of race, patriotism, and "acceptable" forms of activism within sport. In this chapter (and the next), I want to more engage cultural Marxist theory to position KYRC within the broader Gramscian "war of positions" (1992). I argue that KYRC is a sport-based tactical intervention into the "contested racial terrain" (Hartmann, 2003), in its efforts to de-articulate and re-articulate hegemonic relations via coordinated grassroots critical pedagogy.

As these final two chapters outline, moments of conjunctural crisis must be confronted through the helping individuals to recognize the articulations of power (Grossberg, 2006). Hall (1981) argued that hegemony is not just a structure to be exposed and critiqued; it is also a terrain through which one can conduct an alternative politics. Read this way, a study of KYRC is thus more than a study of how one Sporting SMO operates. It is a study of both the reality and potential of using sport as an arena to craft an alternative (and more liberatory) politics. KYRC demonstrates the utility of community-based critical pedagogy for intervening into this contemporary moment of political-ideological polarization and division that reflects a deeper

hegemonic crisis over the legitimacy of neoliberalism (Andrews, 2019; Hart, 2024).⁵⁶ In these moments of uncertainty, KYRC's focus on creating "the next generation of change agents" (from their mission statement) models the role of athletes in creating further organic intellectuals, in the tradition of Antonio Gramsci and Paulo Freire. I explain these Gramscian and Freirean models of critical public pedagogy below.

Gramsci and Freire both embarked on political and intellectual projects aimed towards denaturalizing and transcending oppressive bourgeoisie consciousness. They were thinkers who, first and foremost, were interested in the mechanisms through which the proletarian masses could most effectively achieve a critical/dialectic form of thinking that helped them understand their positionality within the contradictions of modern capitalism, and thus prepare them for collective pursuits to overturn oppressive structures and reimagine society (Allman, 1999; Manojan, 2019). Most importantly for our purposes, both Gramsci and Freire believed that education of the public was the basic ingredient for any project aimed towards substantive social transformation.

Sympathizing with the oppressed and marginalized, Gramsci (1992) focused on how hegemonic social orders could be challenged, exposed, and sometimes overturned through the domain of popular culture (such as sport, in our case). Because "cultural formations have become one of the chief means through which individuals engage and comprehend the material circumstances and forces that shape their lives" (Giroux, 2011; p. 48) and that "culture now plays as the main pedagogical force to secure the authority and interests of dominant groups" (p. 49), the cultural sphere was the central site of struggle and resistance in the larger battle for creating a new and oppositional culture (Allman, 1999; Carley, 2019; Hall, 1981). In fact,

⁵⁶ This contextual point is elaborated in the next chapter.

Gramsci was adamant that “subaltern intellectuals” could create a resistive cultural sphere and called for the generation of “more and more organic intellectuals from the children of the peasantry and the proletariat” (Holly, 1980; p. 319). Gramsci believed organic intellectuals – intellectual leaders who arise from, speak for, and speak to oppressed social groups – were important for fostering a critical consciousness and disrupting common sense, as well as situating political education within the context of the experience of the oppressed (Giroux, 2021).

Gramsci distinguished between two core strategic concepts for enacting social change: what he termed the “war of position” and the “war of movement.” The war of position referred to the “trenches” of cultural struggle; the long game of changing minds and winning over hearts through battles on various fronts and terrains over time (Hall, 2021). Central to the war of position was the terrain of popular culture (including sport) and its ability to educate the populace in a manner that could be used to establish the intellectual and political grounds for a new hegemony. The “war of movement” referred to the material revolution that was necessary for upheaving the old hegemonic order; the condensation of transformative efforts into one moment of struggle, one battle, one breach of enemy defenses in which the dominated will decisively win (Hall, 2021).⁵⁷ Gramsci (1992) asserted that the “war of movement” strategy has not been successful since the 1917 Bolshevik Revolution, and is the least realistic strategy for social transformation. As such, Gramsci focused on the “war of position” strategy as being most viable for the specific conjunctures of the mid-20th century; a point that is perhaps even more true in the 21st century (Hart, 2024). For revolutionary leaders operating in this war of position, Gramsci (1992) suggested problematizing peoples’ existing ideologies and experiences, persuading people to reject “common sense” perspectives, and instead embrace critical

⁵⁷ The war of movement is sometimes referred to as the war of maneuver.

dialectical thinking. KYRC thus represents a terrain within the “war of position” attempting to win social change through popular culture education, facilitated by organic intellectuals like Kaepernick and aiming to create more of them.

Brazilian intellectual/educator Paolo Freire (2017) echoed Gramsci’s (1992) view that education can (and must) occur outside formal venues. He used the term “cultural action” to refer to the various informal sites and contexts of education (such as sport, and thus KYRC) that could be used to enable people to develop a critical perception of their oppression and engage in transformative action. Freire believed that Marx’s idea of false consciousness – or what Freire (1976) perhaps more appropriately called “naive consciousness” (p. 4) – could be overcome by developing critical perspectives that identified contradictions within dominant social formations. But Freire, for better or worse, was more concerned with the *process* of social transformation through education than the outcome (Martinson & Su, 2012). Of course, Freire (2017) desired a society free from the widespread dehumanization that, for him, defined the contemporary era. His utopian pursuits thus prioritized active humanization across society. Yet Freire was clear that humanization would not come to fruition by using the same frameworks and ideologies espoused by the oppressive dehumanizers in their domination. Instead, he urged radical pedagogues and revolutionaries to communicate with people in ways antithetical to that of the oppressors (based on love, community, and reciprocity); for if not, they just strive to swap roles with the current oppressors and reproduce new forms of dehumanization (Freire, 2017).

Freire’s largest contribution to the Marxist/Leftist tradition is the mechanics of working *with* the people to educate for liberation (rather than teaching *to*). As described by Allman (1999):

Freire's approach involves starting with 'where people are' but moving with them to an increasingly critical consciousness. Such as consciousness would enable people to understand how their own experience of oppression (e.g. race, class, gender, etc.) is linked to a total structure of oppression and to redefine their aspirations accordingly. (p. 95)

Freire preferred the term "conscientization" to describe his radical pedagogical method.

Conscientization (or conscientização in the original Portuguese) refers to the process of learning to perceive social, political, and economic contradictions of one's status quo, followed by transformative action against structures of oppression and domination, whereby the oppressed "enter the historical process as responsible Subjects" (Freire, 2017; p. 10). Because Freire believed that the primary result of modern Western oppression has been the dehumanization of the oppressed, any efforts to transform the plight of the oppressed will need to first and foremost restore (or help them rediscover) their humanity. In his words: "to surmount the situation of oppression, people must first critically recognize its causes, so that through transforming action they can create a new situation, one which makes possible the pursuit of a fuller humanity" (2017; p. 21). In this spirit, this chapter situates KYRC as a project of grassroots critical pedagogy based in the principles of Gramsci and Freire. Yet KYRC has two distinctions from the Gramscian/Freirean model: 1) it is a formal national organization (an SMO as we have established), and 2) it exists within the digital social media age. These distinctions require us to put Gramscian/Freirean theory in conversation with the literature of SMO framing via social media.

6.2 SMOs, Framing, and the Social Media Age: Literature Review

In establishing KYRC as a project of grassroots critical pedagogy, we must also acknowledge the digital turn in activism (Fisher, 2022; Jackson et al., 2020). While the last

chapter established KYRC's model of critical pedagogy through in-person camps, this chapter analyzes KYRC's social media and digitally-administered public materials. These empirical foci require us to think critically about how KYRC, as a Sporting SMO, engages the digital media-sphere in delivering their messages and constructing their audience. To do so, I must briefly survey the social movement literature of framing, particularly in the digital age.

A focus on framing guides us towards understanding the rhetorical tools KYRC utilizes to achieve its goals and spread its organizational messages. Even if a movement has plenty of resources, a favorable political opportunity structure (Goodwin & Jasper, 1999; Kitschelt, 1986), and aims to relieve intense and ubiquitous grievances (Oberschall, 1972), there is no guarantee that those grievances lead to mobilization. The prerogative is not automatic. Many people agree with a particular issue or share a grievance, but very few of them participate in movement activity. As such, framing is the key process by which social movements activate grievances/resources/opportunities into actual participation, rather than a range of other potential outcomes for individuals (such as social withdrawal, deviance, acceptance of the status quo, nihilism, terrorism, or other antisocial behavior) (Buechler, 2011). The purpose of framing is to curate a message that mobilizes potential adherents, increases support from bystanders, demobilizes movement antagonists, and/or wins concessions from the establishment (Snow & Benford, 1988). Essentially, framing refers to how social movements – more specifically for our purposes, SMOs such as KYRC – curate messaging that normalizes their worldview and persuades individuals to perceive a social issue in a manner that leads them towards active social movement participation, or at least passive support (Lofland, 1996). In other words, it is important to critically examine how SMOs frame their relevant issues and tactics because they are directly linked to mobilization and effectiveness.

A framing perspective is also important for our purposes because it is compatible with this project's overarching method of articulation (Hall, 1983; Slack, 1996) and use of cultural theory (such as that of Gramsci and Freire described above). Framing helps to bring culture back into resource mobilization (RM) by focusing attention on how events, discourses, and language is assigned meaning and used by SMOs and movements to contest dominant ideology and actively shape (rather than passively receive) their own political opportunity structure (Gamson & Meyer, 1996; Snow et al., 1986). Framing thus complements RM, which has been critiqued for its sometimes overly-economic view of social movement mobilization that neglects the role of ideas, grievances, affect, political consciousness, or how SMOs actually procure these aspects on the ground (Gamson, et al., 1982; Klandermans, 2016; Von Zomeren et al., 2004). It also corrects RM's assumption that grievances are generally static and ubiquitous. This assumption downplays the role of SMOs in both the creation/augmentation of grievances and "the manner in which grievances are interpreted and the generation and diffusion of those interpretations" (Snow et al., 1986; p. 466). SMOs are not simply *intermediaries* between grievances and sympathetic publics; they can also be considered *builders* that agitate for more sympathetic publics through fine-tuning the framing of grievances (Buechler, 2011). As this chapter highlights, KYRC is both an intermediary that uses its unique positioning to channel activist energy during the BLM era into organized collection action, *and* an organization that plays in active role in creating grievances among youth who may not naturally or preemptively harbor them.

Following this line of thought, this chapter analyzes the "frame alignment" processes of KYRC (as procured digitally). A crucial task of SMOs for successful mobilization, frame alignment refers to "the linkage between individual interests, values, and beliefs on the one hand and social movement activities, goals, and ideology on the other" (Buechler, 2011; p. 146; also

see Snow et al. 1986). Frames function to organize the interpretation of experiences and guide individual or collective action. In short, they are necessary for movement participation and SMO success. According to Snow et al.'s (1986) pioneering article, there are four primary steps of frame alignment, each with different purposes:

1. *Frame bridging*: linking two or more ideologically congruent but structurally unconnected frames on an issue across individuals or SMOs via diffusion communications
2. *Frame amplification*: clarifying or invigorating the relevance, importance, or value of the interpretive frame for potential supporters
3. *Frame extension*: extending the boundaries of a frame such that it appeals to the values/interests/experiences of a larger pool of potential supporters
4. *Frame transformation*: working to change the perception of preexisting conventions such that it fits the mobilizing frame (i.e. what was once uncritically accepted becomes seen unacceptable), or reconstituting/redefining the world through a radical lens that encourages reparative action.

These processes are over-generalized yet useful categories that speak to the mechanics of how an SMOs attempt to align their movement with potential participants.⁵⁸ While social media surely cannot represent the totality of an SMO, examining KYRC's social media postings are "a privileged site of inquiry because they embody the unmediated self-presentation of the

⁵⁸ There are also critiques of the framing approach. These include the tendency to view frames in purely strategic (rather than, say, expressive) terms; to assume that frames are administered from the top-down (from SMO to individual constituent rather than vice versa); and to approach frames as pre-existing objective tools to be discovered and used (rather than subjectively, dynamically, and agentically crafted) (Benford, 1997; Buechler, 2011). With these critiques acknowledged, it is still important to analyze the framing efforts of SMOs like KYRC to understand the rhetorical tactics it uses to align their frames with potential adherents, and thus most effectively conduct their grassroots critical pedagogy.

organization and movement to others, representing their key concerns and constituencies and also courting connection and mobilization from some kinds of site visitors” (Elliott & Earl, 2018; p. 3). In general, organizations use social media to construct their organizational identity and interact with their communities (Dawson, 2018; Krinsky & Crossley, 2016). To properly analyze how, we must critically examine the dialectic relations between SMOs and social media in the digital age.

Social movements, SMOs, and the practice of framing has been dramatically impacted by the advent of social media. Since its emergence in the mid-2000s, social media platforms – primarily Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, and Reddit – have been utilized both strategically and haphazardly by SMOs for the purposes of messaging, recruitment, and mobilization (Bennett & Segerberg, 2015; Crick, 2021). Indeed, the advent of social media and other digital communication technologies has opened the floodgates for the possibilities (and limitations) of social movement mobilization (Brünker et al., 2020; Earl et al., 2015). Yet scholars are split on the question of whether social media should breed optimism or pessimism for SMOs such as KYRC. While some argue that it has engendered much faster and much more widespread exposure of social problems and allows for an expedited mobilization process to address them (Jackson et al., 2020), others argue that it encourages political engagement that is uncontrollable, superficial, or may act as a substitute for – rather than a compliment to – more action-oriented forms of political engagement that are more capable of enacting change (Earl et al., 2015; Fisher, 2022). Nonetheless, social media has transformed the landscape for SMOs in ways that scholars have yet to fully understand.

Surveying the social movement literature in the digital era, Schradie (2018) outlines the evolution of explanatory theories of social movements: 1) *individual* explanations that focus on

how personal psychological or behavioral choices lead to movements; then 2) *structural* explanations that focus on macro-level processes that lead to movement emergence and resources that movements/organizations mobilized; then 3) *cultural* explanations that focus on the centrality of identity and culture on movement emergence.⁵⁹ Schradie then suggests the contemporary era has activated a fourth model, *digital*, which posits that digital communication (mainly social media) is now a central catalyst to organizing and mobilizing social movements. Noting that the Internet has created a “new species of social movement,” (Castells, 2012; cited in Schradie, 2018; p. 2), some scholars have argued that social media may have replaced traditional methods of organizing based on strong (offline) network ties (Bennett & Segerberg, 2013). Instead, social media has allowed for movements to more rapidly, widely, and efficient mobilize members with weak or no ties to the movement (Margetts et al., 2016; Theocharis, 2015; Tufekci, 2017; Vasi & Suh, 2016). As Schradie (2018; p. 3) summarizes:

A leading argument is that digital media enable citizens to act less as members of an organization and more as individual *users* participating in activism (Bennett & Segerberg, 2012; Bimber, Flanagin, & Stohl, 2005; Earl, Copeland, & Bimber, 2017; Earl & Schussman, 2003). A key claim is that “networked individualism” (Raine & Wellman, 2012) changes the starting point of collective action from organizations to individuals who decide to go online to participate (Bennett & Segerberg, 2012; Bimber, Flanagin, & Stohl, 2012; Wells, 2015).

The digitization of activism may already be impacting the “social” nature of social movements.

To generalize the divergent perspectives on digital mobilization, the main positive argument for social media is that it has lowered the barriers for participation in political activity (Elliot &

⁵⁹ These models overlap, and clearly correspond with the approaches of strain/breakdown theory, political process theory, resource mobilization, and new social movements discussed in Chapter 2.

Earl, 2018). Users are able to share opinions, debate viewpoints, and (more) easily find like-minded people. When it comes to social movements, social media has facilitated the spread of information about social causes and involved new volunteers or participants (Gonzalez-Bailon et al., 2011). Because social media can include people who have not engaged in “traditional” political organizing, it can promote new engagement with unfamiliar publics and have a democratizing effect on social movements (Hwang & Kim, 2015; Wright, 2004). Social media has also become important because of the changing nature of social movements themselves. Contemporary social movements are more likely to be deterritorialized and transnational than traditional movements often organized by offline local SMOs (Hwang & Kim, 2015). As such, social media has come to replace some of the work of these traditional SMOs, such as becoming a tool for recruitment, retention, and framing.

However, not all changes to social movements because of social media can be assumed to be positive. While some argue that social media plays a complimentary role to political organizing, others argue that social media has come to replace traditional political organizing in ways that lack substance and/or are ineffective (Kidd & McIntosh, 2016; Greijdanus et al., 2020). For example, the pithy terms of “clicktivism” or “keyboard activism” denote the concern that social media incentivizes users to perform low-effort and low-stakes activities – such as sharing a graphic, liking a post, putting “BLM” in one’s profile biography – rather than more direct and substantive action (Johnson, 2022; Van Laer & Van Aelst, 2010). Additionally, some worry that the “relationships” built over social media are superficial, fleeting, and do not result in the actual building of social capital that supposedly leads to political action (Hwang & Kim, 2015; Wright, 2004).

Other scholars have expressed concern about and/or challenged the consensus that social media has revolutionized social movement mobilization. Instead, they suggest that social media *reflects* rather than *produces* social movement activity (Schradie, 2018). Digitization is certainly a noteworthy context, but it perhaps has not overdetermined or superseded other structures to the extent scholars have suggested (della porta, 2016; Goodwin & Hetland, 2013). Digital communication still has a central role, but as a conduit between other strong ties rather than an independent producer (Schradie, 2018). In sum, these contrasting scholars argue the impact of social media is overstated, and strong ties and offline organizing are still just as important to social movement activity. Even these critiques only vaguely touch upon the more fundamental critiques of social media itself, which concern how its algorithms, surveillance practices, and engagement-above-all-else logics have redefined our personal, political, and psychological relations in ways we are only beginning to understand (Fisher, 2022). These debates outline the contexts and conditions in which KYRC uses social media in their conscientizing efforts, and contain important considerations for the application of contemporary Gramscian/Freirean grassroots public pedagogy. With the theory and literature established, I turn to the empirical analysis of KYRC's social media and public documents (the Kaepernick Curriculum and the Political Education Curriculum) to examine how they navigate these new terrains.

6.3 KYRC's Social Media Pedagogy

Beyond the camps and the various initiatives, KYRC views social media and the associated Curriculums as central to their organization. In their annual impact report, KYRC is explicit about their intentions with social media:

Changing and elevating the narrative about Black and Brown people is one of the most important elements of our mission. To 'change the narrative', we believe we must invest in

the creation of *free, accessible, and public-facing political education curricula*. A crucial element of empowering and educating our community is our ability to provide well-researched content. Our platform celebrates, honors, and commemorates those who came before us and provides news affecting our communities and updates on our work. Know Your Rights Camp always seeks to *meet the community where it is with a robust social media presence*. (Impact report, 2023; p. 29; italics added for emphasis)

The importance of social media was also underscored by KYRC associates during interviews. For instance, Participant #2 shared the following: “I always reflect on how incredible it is that now, KYRC socials have like 600,000 followers across the various platforms⁶⁰... what an incredible platform we're working on.” With more frequency and wider visibility than the camps, social media is the main venue through which KYRC disseminates its organizational messaging and pedagogy. As such, social provides an instructive point for examining KYRC’s use of social media in advancing its primary objective of critical education.

In Chapter 1, I provided the methodological details of my content analysis of KYRC’s Instagram posts (N=211), collected over three months (June, September, and December of 2023). In this section, I discuss the results, narrated through four “codes” of posts. The first code was “Critical Pedagogy”, which refers to posts that raised awareness for various issues, events, or people related to anti-Blackness or structural racism. The second code was “Organization Promotion”, which refers to posts that highlighting the happenings, events, or people within KYRC specifically. The third case was “Partnerships”, which refers to posts that highlighted the happenings of organizational partners or allies. The fourth code was “Kaepernick Brand”, which refers to posts that highlighted, commemorated, or related to Kaepernick himself. Because

⁶⁰ This interview was conducted in July of 2023. The number of followers likely does not reflect the follower count at the time that this study is read.

Critical Education was by far the most common type of posts, I became interested in determining the specifics of these posts. Particularly I wanted to know how KYRC framed or presented its critical education. As such, I conducted a second set of coding that organized the Critical Education posts into subcodes. The first subcode was “Highlighting Injustice”, which refers to Critical Education posts that highlighted events or trends that demonstrated the ongoing presence of racial injustice/oppression. The second subcode was “Highlighting Justice”, which, alternatively, refers to posts that highlighted progressive changes, acts to rectify injustices, or signs of improvement in regard to structural racism. The third subcode was “Celebrating Blackness”, which refers to posts that highlighted events or trends that celebrated, commemorated, or honored the Black and Brown communities that the organization serves. The above codes and subcodes were not chosen based on any knowledge or suggestion about KYRC’s strategy. They were instead chosen through my subjective frameworks because they reflect the intentions and broader themes of this project, which is to understand KYRC’s model of and relationship to grassroots critical pedagogy.

6.3.1 Results of Content Analysis

Across the entire sample, Critical Pedagogy was by far the most common category of post (82.9% total). This was consistent across all three months (June= 88.0%; September=94.6%; December=63.2%). This means that KYRC’s Instagram was overwhelmingly dedicated to spreading awareness of events, issues, or trends that highlighted structural racism, while substantiating the need for Black liberation. Each post included a brief one-sentence text summary of an issue atop a relevant graphic, while the post’s caption included a longer description, contextualization, relevance to KYRC’s focus issues (anti-Blackness, police brutality, and structural racism mostly). Posts often included a linked article for the user to

follow for more information. Posts are written in a professional tone, but are not neutral or objective. More on this code will be included after a brief description of the other main codes.

The second most common code was Organizational Promotion (12.7% total). This was also the second most across all three months (June= 4.0%; September=4.0%; December=35.2%). As mentioned previously, the spike in December was likely due to the fact that KYRC held a camp in December, for which most of the posts in this code documented. Additionally in December, many of the posts were about the launch of the app and clips from the newly-formed KYRC podcast. It is important to note that Organizational Promotion was not completely unrelated to Critical Education. Most posts in this code simultaneously highlighted issues relevant to KYRC through the mediums provided by KYRC. For example, a post from 12/5 featured brief videos of KYRC volunteers and attendees talking about their positive experience with the Houston camp. Another post from 12/7 featured a brief clip of the KYRC podcast, in which an affiliate spoke about the importance of going beyond critique to imagine alternatives to the status quo for those dedicated to Black liberation.

The third most common – though still scarce – category was Partnership Promotion (2.8% total; June=6%; September=0%; December=1.4%). An example of this code was a 6/17 repost of a post from Ben & Jerry’s arguing for police-free schools, particularly because of the damage police cause for Black children in particular.⁶¹ These stats do not suggest that KYRC does not promote their partners, nor that they should. We had chosen this code because of the interview data that prioritized partnerships, and that we had seen posts in this vein prior to our sample months. But they were not frequent within our sample months. This again shows the

⁶¹ Instead of citing the Instagram post each time I mention one throughout the chapter, I instead list the date, such as 6/17 in this sentence. Unless stated otherwise, all dated posts were from KYRC’s official Instagram page “@knowyourrightscamp.”

malleability of these codes, as some of the Organizational Promotion included Partnership promotion (such as partnered individuals or organizations being at the camps or speaking on the podcasts), although not as explicitly promoting aligned partners as the posts we coded as Partnership Promotion.

The last code was Kaepernick Brand, which included only 3 posts total (1.4%). These posts included a 6/19 repost of an article in which Kaepernick declared “Black History in an Absolute Necessity” and a 9/1 post that included the original picture of Kaepernick kneeling for the first time with Eric Reid, with a caption commemorating the moment. We also anticipated these types of posts to be more prevalent based on our instinct from following the organization for years, but in our sample months, they were not. However, these posts – especially the post commemorating the Kneel – did get more engagement than the average KYRC post (6,479 likes and 91 comments for the Kaepernick posts, compared to 1,906 likes and 89 comments for the average post), suggesting a slight increase in user interest in the Kaepernick Brand. Yet, consistent with the discussion in Chapter 4 about the Kaepernick Brand and the KYRC team working together to implement the model, the KYRC team was highlighted more than Kaepernick himself. Overall, these codes reveal the range and multiple foci of KYRC’s communications, while the frequency appear to correspond to the ebbs and flows of KYRC as an organization.

6.3.2 Analyzing the Critical Pedagogy Code

Given that Critical Pedagogy was by far the most common type of code, I decided to divide these posts into subcodes based on their content: Highlighting Injustice, Highlighting Justice, and Celebrating Blackness. Although I cannot claim that these posts are created strategically to encourage participation with KYRC or alignment with its organizational

worldview (as opposed to merely using its platform to “spread the word” and win ideological alignment on issues; Lofland, 1996), these subcodes still provided insight into how KYRC communicates and frames its social critiques. It is instead more faithful to analyze KYRC’s communication as that of a rather prototypical radical SMO, who, guided by a radical emancipatory ideology, seeks to “uncover what is covered” (Raines, 1983; cited in Fitzgerald & Rogers, 2000; p. 581). Like radical SMOs, the main function KYRC’s critical education appears to be “interested in broad cultural change, in moving the radical ideas to which their organizations are committed into the wider culture” (Fitzgerald and Rogers, 2000; p. 588). In doing so, we found that KYRC’s Critical Education posts exhibited all four of Snow et al.’s (1986) pivotal framing mechanisms: bridging, amplification, extension, and transformation.

The most common subcode was Highlighting Injustice (67.4%), followed by Celebrating Blackness (18.8%) and Highlighting Justice (13.7%) respectively. The most common injustice that KYRC highlighted related to racism in policing and the criminal justice. These posts serve as *frame amplification* (Snow et al., 1986), which refers to how SMOs clarify or invigorate the relevance, importance, or value of an interpretive frame. In this case, KYRC further communicates its organizational message about the need for abolition of police and prisons. For example, many posts described heinous actions of abuse, violence, racism, sexism, fraud, perjury, and murder by police officers; mistreatment and unethical actions of prosecutors that reflected differential treatment by race; and unlawful actions by police and the state during lawful protests. These include a highly-engaged post on 9/25 post that described and shared a video going viral of police attacking a man trying to get into his own car that he locked the keys in, as well as a 6/29 post about police using images of Black men for target practice. Additionally, there were many posts about the inequalities of the prison system. These included

multiple posts about wrongful convictions, the inhumanity of life in prison, medical mistreatment, and deaths in prison. For example, a 12/16 post highlighted the practice of prisoners being systematically denied parole so they can continue being used by corporations for underpaid labor via “convict leasing” (Levenson, 2023).

Posts subcoded as Highlighting Injustice also did so in a manner than exemplified what Snow et al. 1986 called *frame bridging*, or linking two or more ideologically congruent but structurally unconnected frames on an issue (p. 467). These posts reflected KYRC’s common tactic of linking structural racism or anti-Blackness to issues that appear to be separate. For instance, KYRC had posts highlighting the racial disparities in: the emergence of artificial intelligence (the issues with its surveillance, 9/13); mainstream education curriculums (numerous posts about the stifling of Black subjects and war against Critical Race Theory; see Chapter 7); schooling experience (Black female students in Kansas being suspended after being called racial slurs; 12/8); the medical system (discussing Black female Olympic gold medalist Tori Bowie dying from childbirth complications; 6/15), government procedures (the Tennessee House of Representatives silencing Black congressman Justin Jones; 9/7), and gun violence (questioning firearm immunity after the Uvalde mass school shooting; 6/1). A largely credible and renowned organization like KYRC highlighting them alerts and reinforces for users the seriousness of an injustice.

Interestingly, and perhaps surprisingly, KYRC extended their frames to include the critical education or celebration of groups other Black and Brown Americans. KYRC’s emphasis on solidarity and coalition politics reflects how radical SMOs tend to feel a sense of connection to other liberatory causes and movements (Fitzgerald & Rogers, 2000). Exhibitions of KYRC’s sense of connection included posts linking the aims of KYRC with issues that affected the

LGBTQ community (Human Rights Campaign warning LGBTQ Americans about a state of emergency, during Pride Month; 6/7); indigenous/Native Americans (the Supreme Court ruling against the Navajo Nation; 6/26); veterans (Black veterans being denied benefits at a higher rate than White veterans; 6/27); and various posts about Latino and Hispanic Heritage Month (9/27; 9/30). This also functioned as *frame extension*, or the extension of boundaries of a frame such that it appeals to the values/interests/experiences of a larger pool of potential supporters (Snow et al., 1986). Solidarity across racial/ethnic lines is featured in the Political Education Curriculum, as KYRC lists a core objective as helping learners to “work together to restore, repair, and heal within their community space” (p. 7). By connecting police brutality and structural racism to issues that other progressive-leaning users care about, KYRC opened the potential for alignment with other SMOs and groups while, more importantly, contributing to fostering ideological bridges.

Posts also highlighted the presence of cultural racism in addition to structural racism (Kendi, 2019). For example, posts on 9/24 and 12/7 featured discussion of a Black student in Texas being suspended for his dreadlocks. Interestingly though, throughout the sample as a whole, KYRC puts an emphasis on legal action. This is likely due to the core aims of KYRC (policing and criminal justice system) and the corresponding initiatives that focus on the legal terrain (The Autopsy Initiative and Legal Defense Fund, for example). It also could be because the general public is less aware of legal events than more “viral” moments and stories. One could argue this reflects the tendency for nonprofits to fold efforts for radical Black liberation into the terrain of slow-moving reform (Incite, 2007). However, it is difficult to apply this critique to KYRC, as they explicitly favor the abolition of – rather than legitimization of – the institutions they are fighting to reform. Additionally, KYRC was often clear about framing posts in the

Highlighting Justice coded as the result of protest and resistance (rather than some ominous establishment benevolence), which amplified the purpose of KYRC and its call for resistance by the next generation of change-agents.

One noteworthy finding is that KYRC appears to intentionally reconcile this critical education with hope, idealism, and the presence of realistic alternatives to the status quo. While pessimism may be the logical conclusion of the events that KYRC’s social media highlights, the organization includes action steps and tips for organizing in opposition to the structural roots of the problem. For instance, in an Instagram post on April 17th, 2023, reporting on a grand jury’s decision not to indict police officers who shot Jayland Walker over 40 times in Akron, Ohio (see Orsagos & Seewer, 2023), KYRC offered the support of its Legal Defense Initiative. Part of the caption states:

as we have done in the past, the Know Your Rights Camp Legal Defense Initiative will provide resources for free legal representation for anyone unjustly arrested protesting this tragedy. When there is an injustice within our community, it is our legal right to address it (@yourrightscamp, 2023).

This post demonstrates how KYRC – sometimes implicitly, sometimes explicitly – encourages protest and direct opposition.

As opposed to Highlight Injustice, a second subcode called Highlighting Justice aligns with this goal (13.7% of Critical Education posts). In general, this subcode included posts that highlighted some sort of compensation for Black Americans, general deliverances of justice, or alternatives to the injustices mentioned in the majority of posts.⁶² KYRC appeared to find value

⁶² Often, these posts were closely related to injustice, as we found that our determination of whether or not something constituted “justice” was more difficult and subjective than anticipated. For example, regarding a 9/4 post about the city of Denver paying a \$4.7 million settlement because of unlawful and violent actions of Denver police during protests, this is only “justice” because of previous injustice. The multiple posts about settlements with

in highlighting moments that justice or accountability was served, including: materially rectifying historical injustices (such as foundations donating \$50 million to slave descendants; 6/22); symbolic rectifications (Black army men from 1917 having racist charges dropped; 12/8); reform being successfully established (NYPD creating new rules and oversight board for policing of protest; 9/9); and even other forms of successful resistance (medical equipment manufacturers refusing to provide equipment for lethal injections due to ethical qualms about capital punishment; 9/21). Interestingly, the single most engaged post in our sample was a post titled “What happened when a Brooklyn neighborhood policed itself for five days” (10,676 likes and 237 comments) that outlined the positive changes brought about by the absence of police. Posts like these can be considered what Snow et al. (1986) call *frame transformation*, referring to messaging that changes the perception of preexisting conventions such that it fits the mobilizing frame (i.e. what was once uncritically accepted becomes seen unacceptable), or reconstituting/redefining the world through a radical lens that encourages reparative action. Sharing stories of alternatives function to counteract status quo bias and problematizes for users that the uncritically-accepted notion that police have to exist (Freire, 2017; Levitas, 1990; Zamalin, 2018). The fact that this was the most engaged post in our sample suggests that users have an interest, if not appetite, for framings that urge us to imagine radical alternatives to the status quo.

Lastly, the Celebrating Blackness subcode constituted 18.8% of the Critical Pedagogy posts. Examples included sharing of Black achievements (Black high schooler in Florida graduating with a 8.07 GPA; 6/20); honoring Black people who have died as a result of the injustices typically highlighted (death of Mario Woods by police, which directly inspired KYRC;

families who lost a loved one from police murder represented a similar conundrum, as well as innocent/wrongly-convicted prisoners being exonerated after decades in prison. Perhaps accountability would be the better word.

12/2), commemorating Black history (information about the Little Rock Nine; 9/25), keeping Black culture alive (celebrating James Baldwin; 12/1), celebrating Black ideologically-aligned historical icons (wishing rapper Tupac Shakur a happy birthday on 6/16 and victim of police murder Tamir Rice on 6/25); and tying KYRC's organizational missions to holidays (posts about the holiday Juneteenth; 6/19). KYRC's social media strategy, along with their intention to create solidarity and connection at camps, appears aligned with the (re)establishment of social hope in the Black community (Aronson, 2019; West, 1994).

6.4 The Kaepernick Curriculum

Next, in order to engage in a deeper and more qualitative examination of KYRC's digital pedagogy, I turn to textual analyses of KYRC's public documents. The first is called *Colin in Black and White: The Kaepernick Curriculum* (hereby known as the Kaepernick Curriculum), which is an 85-page companion piece to Kaepernick's 2021 Netflix TV series that offers historical, cultural, and academic context to the events of each episode, created by KYRC to educate youth and young adults about issues of race, sport, and identity. The second document is called *Speaking Out: Against the Violence of Policing and Systemic Oppression: A Political Education Curriculum*" (hereby referred to as the Political Education Curriculum), a 58-page document developed by KYRC in 2023 that details how educators can administer public, adult education within communities around the issues of race, policing, and abolition across a five-day course. Below, I highlight the content, themes, and pedagogical tactics that KYRC recommends as a way to more broadly explore KYRC's model of grassroots critical pedagogy. I begin with the Kaepernick Curriculum.

6.4.1 Thinking Critically about Sport

Throughout the Kaepernick Curriculum (2021), KYRC uses sport and popular culture as an entry point into critical conversations about race. The overarching “Learning Goals” of the Curriculum are as follows:

1. Explore historical and contemporary manifestations of Blackness, power, identity, resistance, and liberation
2. Analyze how power and social transformation work through race and practices of racialization
3. Develop strategies for challenging oppressive systems to create a world where all communities can thrive (p. 3)

The emphases on critical analysis, Black liberation, and active strategies of social transformation continue throughout the Curriculum. Each episode has about 14 pages of educational content prompted by the episode’s content, including: Keywords (with robust definitions), Informational Content (accompanied by visuals), Rap Lyrics (relating to the information or events from the episode), a Breakout Activity (designed to engage the reader and/or learners) and Additional Resources (containing what is essentially a references list with links to each academic publication or video that was engaged in the previous pages).

EPISODE 1:
CORNROWS

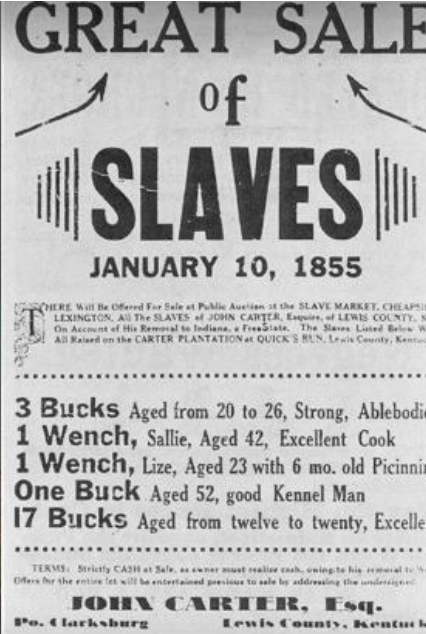
SECTION 1

COLIN
BLACK AND
WHITE

Present-day Colin argues that the NFL Combine and enslavement-era auction blocks are animated by many of the same power dynamics.

Why do you think the show makes this comparison? What similarities do you see between these power dynamics? Are there additional or different ways you see a connection between these practices? Where else in society do you see similar practices and power dynamics show up?

In this episode, when the athletes transitioned into depictions of enslaved people, what were your immediate thoughts?



GREAT SALE
of
SLAVES
JANUARY 10, 1855

There Will Be Offered For Sale at Public Auction at the SLAVE MARKET, CHEAPSIDE LEXINGTON, All The SLAVES of JOHN CARTER, Esquire, of LEWIS COUNTY, KY On Account of His Removal to Indiana, a Free State. The Slaves Listed Below Were All Raised on the CARTER PLANTATION at QUICK'S RUN, Lewis County, Kentucky.

3 Bucks Aged from 20 to 26, Strong, Able-bodied
1 Wench, Sallie, Aged 42, Excellent Cook
1 Wench, Lize, Aged 23 with 6 mo. old Picinnin
One Buck Aged 52, good Kennel Man
17 Bucks Aged from twelve to twenty, Excellent

TERMS: Strictly CASH at Sale, as owner must realize cash, owing to his removal to the Free State. Offers for the entire lot will be entertained previous to sale by addressing the undersigned.

JOHN CARTER, Esq.
S'no. Clarksburg Lewis County, Kentucky

EPISODE 1:
CORNROWS

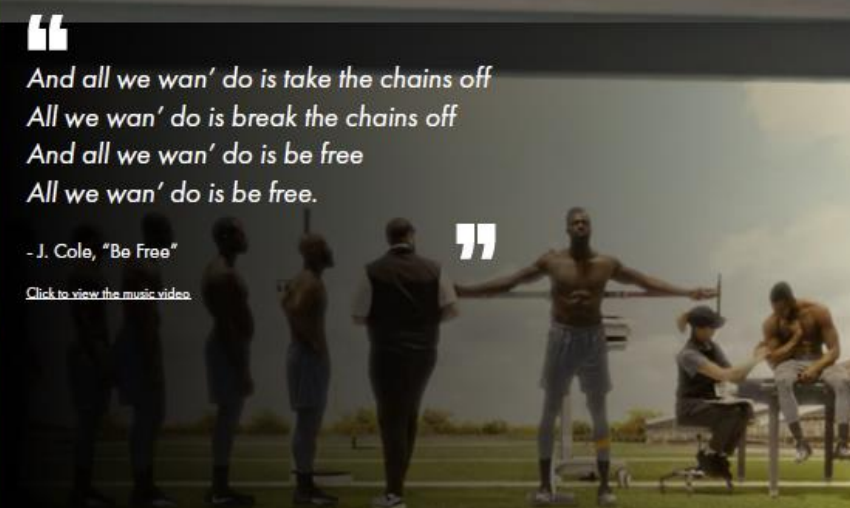
SECTION 1

COLIN
BLACK AND
WHITE

“
And all we wan' do is take the chains off
All we wan' do is break the chains off
And all we wan' do is be free
All we wan' do is be free.
”

- J. Cole, "Be Free"

[Click to view the music video](#)



Brother Ali's song "The Travelers" paints a visceral picture of Black enslavement in the U.S. Listen to the song in full. Which lyrics stand out most to you? Why?

[Click to listen to the song](#)

Figure 6.1. – From the Kaepernick Curriculum (2023)

Each episode is packed with content that reveals the belief systems of KYRC. For instance, Episode 1: “Cornrows” depicts a high-school-aged Kaepernick getting cornrows as a hairstyle and navigating the fallout from his White (adopted) parents, Black schoolmates, and his own self-confidence. The Curriculum lists the following Keywords for the episode: (Black)

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Beast, Scientific Racism, Thug, Cornrows, Merry-Go-Round (hip-hop), Black Aesthetics, Black Criminality. As the goal appears to be building a critical vocabulary for words relevant to racial politics (as well as unlearning or relearning words with contested meanings), each Keyword has a 1-2 sentence definition, similar to the one listed for Black Criminality: “A racist myth developed during the era of enslavement that seeks to link Blackness to criminality as a permanent, immutable state of being. Under the ideology of Black criminality, ‘white people commit crimes, but Black people are criminals.’” (p. 7; quotes in original). As shown in Figure 6.1 above, the Informational Content section contextualizes the link made in the episode between the callous bodily measurements conducted at the NFL Combine with those seen at slave auctions. The image also shows how the Curriculum invites the reader/participant to reflect on the events of the episodes and its broader contexts.

The Kaepernick Curriculum demonstrates Kaepernick and KYRC’s awareness of the predicament of the Black athlete (as discussed in Chapter 3), highlighting injustices within sport that speak to wider cultural politics. For instance, Episode 2: “Quarterbackin” depicts young Kaepernick attempting to prove that he can play the position of quarterback, despite his coach’s preference for a White quarterback and belief that Kaepernick should play a different position. The Curriculum engages academic literature for context on this longstanding trope, translating the research findings in a manner that prompts the reader/participant to reflect on contemporary iterations of racial stacking (see Loy & McElvogue, 1970; Dufur & Feinberg, 2009; Ferrucci & Tandoc, 2017). The Breakout Activity for this particular lesson entails requesting readers/participants watch a YouTube video titled “The State of the Black Quarterback” from The Players’ Tribune (retrieved April 2023), in which four prominent Black quarterbacks discuss their experience in the NFL. After listening to the conversation, the discussion questions ask the

reader/participant to think about how the quarterbacks overcame their racialized assumptions and dealt with racial double-standards.

EPISODE 2: QUARTERBACKIN'

SECTION 2

COLIN BLACK and WHITE

KNOW YOUR RIGHTS CAMP

In this episode, 9th grade Colin doesn't make the JV team despite being the most well-qualified and talented quarterback in tryouts. While the coach acknowledges Colin's arm strength as a passer, he's doubtful that young Colin will be able to "command an offense."

Ultimately, the coach picks a less talented white quarterback over Colin because "[he's] the prototype I'm looking for."

EPISODE 2: QUARTERBACKIN'

SECTION 2

COLIN BLACK and WHITE

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Routledge
Taylor & Francis Group

Roughing the Passer: The Framing of Black and White Quarterbacks Prior to the NFL Draft

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This study used social learning theory and a framing perspective to examine the ways in which Black and White college quarterbacks were described by a major sports publication prior to the National Football League draft. An examination of 4,245 attributions used to describe Black and White National Football League quarterback prospects over a 10-year period revealed data patterns that emphasized racial stereotypes. Black quarterbacks were primarily described with words and phrases that emphasized their physical gifts and their lack of mental prowess. Conversely, White quarterbacks were described as less physically gifted, but more mentally prepared for the game and less likely to make mental errors. Implications for journalists, sports and scholars are discussed.

KEYWORDS: athletes, football, framing, quarterbacks, race, stereotypes.

On July 14, 2003, conservative radio talk show host Rush Limbaugh was hired by the cable sports network ESPN to become a televised commentator on its National Football League (NFL) pre-game show, *Sunday Countdown* (ESPN, 2003a). Three weeks after his debut on the network, Limbaugh was in the midst of a major controversy when he stated that Philadelphia Eagles quarterback Donovan McNabb is favored by the media because he

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What do you think is the goal of framing Black and white quarterbacks differently?
[Click to read the complete article](#)

Figure 6.2. – From the Kaepernick Curriculum (2021)

This Breakout Activity regarding the racial dynamics of the quarterback position (as depicted in the image above) exemplifies a central theme found throughout the Curriculum: the use of sport as both a metaphor and entry point for understanding the operations of race and

inequality in broader society. This is central to the Informational Content section of Episode 4: “The Decision”, which depicts a young Kaepernick deciding between pursuing a career in baseball or football. The episodes “explores how the selective enforcement of rules and double-standards in both sports and society can perpetuate racism, microaggressions, and racial injustice” (p. 53). The episode begins with present-day Kaepernick (as narrator) discussing the life of Romare Bearden, an artist and Black baseball player in the 1930s. Bearden’s light complexion resulted in him appearing White to some people, including the owner of the Philadelphia Athletics in Major League Baseball (MLB) which barred Black players at the time. Bearden rejected the opportunity to become the first Black player in the MLB – 15 years before Jackie Robinson famously would in 1947 – because Bearden refused to hide his Black lineage (see Parham, 2012). In the Curriculum, KYRC uses Bearden’s story to highlight the overlap between sport, race, and politics, asking readers to reflect on the following questions:

- Why do you think the league demanded that Bearden “pass” as a white man?
- In the eyes of the MLB, how would this have benefitted the league?
- What does Bearden’s life say about how racism operates in sports?
- What does his life say about how resistance to racism operates in sports? (p. 49)

After alluding to the racism that underpins the history of sport, KYRC – on the very same page – transitions into the histories and strategies of resistance to racism through sport. The Curriculum links to a 9-minute video from Vox that explains the protest of Tommie Smith and John Carlos at the 1968 Mexico City Olympics (Vox, 2021). The Curriculum then asks readers: “What similarities and differences do you see between Smith and Carlos’s 1968 protest and protests among athletes today?”⁶³ In the episode’s Breakout Activity, KYRC asks readers/participants to

⁶³ Similar to the central question of Chapter 4 of this dissertation.

partner up and read an article from Dreier (2020) titled “Will MLB Confront its Racist History?” before analyzing and applying the listed strategies of resistance conducted by Black coalitions in the mid-20th Century to integrate the MLB and advocate for racial justice and equality. Episode 4’s section of the Curriculum ends with the following activity:

This episode explores how the selective enforcement of rules and double-standards in both sports and society can perpetuate racism, microaggressions, and racial injustice. Identify 2 double-standards presented in this episode that uphold racial hierarchies and then list 3 ways they can be undone. (p. 54)

As shown through these examples, the Curriculum encapsulates the underlying strategy of KYRC’s approach towards critical education through sport: 1) capture attention through sport and entertainment; utilize familiar tropes and stories within sport to spark critical reflection; 2) situate sport into its constituent contexts and educates readers on how those contexts still apply to the present day; and finally, 3) encourage readers to imagine solutions, forms of resistance, or steps towards dismantling the appendages of racial capitalism that oppress Black and Brown youth within – but more importantly, beyond – sport.

6.4.2 Incorporating Academia

The second theme apparent in the Curriculum is KYRC’s engagement with academic literature. In most instances, the relationship between activists and academics is unidirectional; scholars study the organizations and initiatives to advance knowledge their academic field, but rarely do the organizations under analysis have much familiarity or engagement with the academic within which are situated. However, this is not the case with KYRC. The Curriculum demonstrates that KYRC is not only familiar with, but actively engages scholarship within the fields of U.S. history, critical race studies, and even a bit of sociology of sport (as evidenced by

the aforementioned “stacking” breakout activity, among other references). The implicit influence of academia is apparent in each of the Curriculum’s Informational Content section, in which the information relays academic perspectives on Black history, race, and sport into digestible snippets. However, academic knowledge is also relayed explicitly, as articles, books, or documentaries featuring public intellectuals are used as the basis for many Breakout Activities. The Curriculum also provides suggestions for further academic reading in the Additional Resources section to end each episode’s section.⁶⁴

For example, Episode 5: “Crystal” explores themes of scientific racism, colorism, and misogynoir (referring to specifically anti-Black misogyny; see Razack & Joseph, 2021). The Breakout Activity has participants read the Combahee River Collective Statement, written in 1977 by a group of radical Black feminists that is a foundational text for Black feminist and intersectional scholarship (see Collins & Bilge, 2018; Crenshaw, 1989; James, 1999; Moraga & Anzaldúa, 2015; Weheliye, 2014; Wynter, 1982). After citing contemporary scholar Keeanga-Yamahtta Taylor to situate the Statement, the Curriculum asks participants to reflect and answer the following questions:

- How do the authors of the Statement define Black feminism?
- The authors write that “We believe that sexual politics under patriarchy is as pervasive in Black women's lives as are the politics of class and race. We also often find it difficult to separate race from class from sex oppression because in our lives they are most often experienced simultaneously.” What do you think they mean here?

⁶⁴ KYRC’s academic prowess is certainly linked to the academic ties of Kaepernick himself, as discussed in Chapter 3. Additionally, KYRC has academic scholars that are affiliated with the program, and appear to assist with the curriculum development. None of the affiliated scholars were among my interviewees for this project.

- How have some of the themes in “The Combahee River Collective Statement” shown up in your life?

In the Additional Resources section a few pages later, the Curriculum refers participants to a range of key academic texts to understand Black feminism: Taylor’s article titled *Until Black Women Are Free, None of Us Will Be Free* (2021), Patricia Hill Collins’ book *Black Feminist Thought: Knowledge, Consciousness, and the Politics of Empowerment* (1990), and Angela Davis et al.’s book *Abolition. Feminism. Now.* (2022), with direct links to each.

An intersectional approach is also a priority in the Political Education Curriculum. Within the section that comprehensively educates learners about the Black Panther Party, KYRC asks learners to research the Black women that constituted the majority of the BPP and did the bulk of the work to make the organization function. The Curriculum then requests the following:

Consider the relationships of gender and race inside the party, and in terms of how we learn about the Black Panther Party’s work. Learners can then share what they have learned with the full class. Share the article “Black Panther Party women honored in West Oakland mural” by Rachel Wolfe-Goldsmith (Tyska, 2021). Ask learners how they might celebrate the stories of the women of the Black Panther Party and their activism. Create a mural or collective piece of art as a class that recognizes and celebrates the human rights these women defended.

(p. 23)

Additionally, an activity on Day 4 (“Solidarity and Community Building”) that guides learners on how to be leaders within their community, critically engages the concept of community leadership through Civil Rights era Black female radical Ella Baker (rather than the typical leaders ascribed to the movement, such as Martin Luther King Jr.) (see Ramsey, 2003). Building on Baker, and in their quest to create “the next generation of change agents” (from KYRC’s

mission statement), they ultimately endorse a more horizontal leadership structure for community organizing:

Remind learners that members of the Rainbow Coalition practiced collaborative leadership instead of nominating a single group leader. Their coalition functioned successfully because they made decisions democratically and enforced the idea that everyone was equal. Affirm that your learners all have unique and individual strengths that give them leadership abilities. Reinforce the idea that they can use these unique skills to collectively work together, strengthen one another, build consensus, and create social change rooted in the core values they created together. (p. 36)

As shown, KYRC not only remains current on relevant academic literature but acts as an interlocutor to – through sport, history, and popular culture – translate and disseminate the ideas that pervade academia into the day-to-day worlds of the youth.

6.5 The Political Education Curriculum

Throughout this chapter, and throughout this dissertation as a whole, I have been referencing the Political Education Curriculum (2023). This Curriculum is an incredibly rich source for examining KYRC’s beliefs, messaging, strategies, and philosophies of pedagogy. To this point, I have inserted excerpts from the Curriculum in support of conceptual discussions that appear elsewhere in this project. As a reminder, KYRC states that the Curriculum is designed to “challenge teachers and students to re-envision the structural hierarchies present around the nation and in most classrooms as well,” with an approach that “will prepare them to take internal action and recognize themselves as human rights defenders” and “hopes to set an educational standard for anyone attempting to fight for human rights and liberation” (KYRC website, retrieved March 2024). Unlike the Kaepernick Curriculum, the Political Education Curriculum

does not discuss sport at all. It is instead written to educators, with detailed lesson plans that are applicable in the classroom but seem to be more focused on teaching that will occur within community spaces (see Figure 6.3). In this section, I focus more specifically on the Political Education Curriculum to give deeper insight on KYRC’s vision for critical pedagogy and community activism. I specifically argue that the Political Education Curriculum contains insights about KYRC’s radical pedagogy and visions for material action, based in the method of social critique.

6.5.1 Pedagogical Tactics

KYRC is not only radical in content, but also in pedagogical approach. Although I have been analyzing the content of The Political Education Curriculum (as a way to explore KYRC’s beliefs), it is important to emphasize that the Curriculum is not simply a manifesto. It is instead a pedagogical guide that goes into extreme detail to about how educators should go about teaching the content (see Figure 6.4). Throughout the document is “Note to Educators” that offer practical tips on navigating each lesson, and thus establishes a model for community-based critical

SPEAKING OUT AGAINST THE VIOLENCE OF POLICING AND SYSTEMIC OPPRESSION

INTENDED FOR IMPLEMENTATION IN GRADES 9-12, ADULT EDUCATION, AND COMMUNITY LEARNING SPACES.

ABOLITION; SYSTEMIC OPPRESSION; INSTITUTIONAL RACISM; RIGHT TO FREEDOM; RIGHT TO DIGNITY; RIGHT TO LIFE; RIGHT TO FREEDOM FROM DISCRIMINATION AND TORTURE; RIGHT TO FREEDOM OF EXPRESSION; RIGHTS TO ADEQUATE STANDARD OF LIVING, SOCIAL SECURITY, EDUCATION, HEALTH, AND SAFETY; AND RESPONSIBILITY TO COMMUNITY.

UNIVERSAL DECLARATION OF HUMAN RIGHTS

- **ARTICLE 1:** All human beings are born free and equal in dignity and rights.
- **ARTICLE 2:** Everyone is entitled to all the rights, without distinction of race, color, sex, language, religion, political, or other opinion, national or social origin, property, birth, or other status.
- **ARTICLE 3:** Everyone has the right to life, liberty, and security of person.
- **ARTICLE 5:** No one shall be subjected to torture or to cruel, inhuman, or degrading treatment or punishment.
- **ARTICLE 9:** No one shall be subjected to arbitrary arrest, detention, or exile.
- **ARTICLE 19:** Everyone has the right to freedom of opinion and expression.
- **ARTICLE 22:** Everyone has the right to social security.
- **ARTICLE 27:** Everyone has the right to participate in cultural life.
- **ARTICLE 29:** Everyone has duties to their community.

TIME REQUIREMENT
Recommended five days, 50-minute activities per day.

GUIDING QUESTIONS

- What intersections and aspects of my identity have been socially constructed?
- What narratives of history should I learn or unlearn to better understand race and racialization?
- What would a world without walls, prisons, and/or police look like?

- What does it mean to engage in solidarity and accountability with members of my community?
- How can I along with my community engage in restorative justice and healing?

OBJECTIVES
By the end of the five-day lesson, students will:

- Critically examine and reflect on their identity and how it affects their understanding of oppression and racism.
- Analyze their understanding of race and racialization based on history, and unlearn incomplete or inaccurate narratives of history.
- Imagine and strategize for a world without prisons, where justice and abolition are realized.
- Unpack their role within community accountability and draft community organizing campaigns.
- Work together to restore, repair, and heal within their community space.

CONCEPTS

- Abolition
- Justice
- Advocacy
- Systemic change
- Black liberation
- Anti-Black racism
- Identity
- Intersectionality
- Systemic oppression
- Master narratives
- International human rights framework
- Solidarity
- Community accountability
- Community organizing
- Reform
- Transformative justice
- Restorative justice
- Reparative justice and reparations
- Healing justice

TECHNOLOGY REQUIRED

- Internet access
- Computer or smartphone access

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Figure 6.3. – From the KYRC Political Education Curriculum (2023)

DAY 4: SOLIDARITY AND COMMUNITY BUILDING

“The Black radical tradition is related not simply to Black people, but to all who struggle for freedom...our histories never unfold in isolation.”

—ANGELA Y. DAVIS, *FREEDOM IS A CONSTANT STRUGGLE: FERGUSON, PALESTINE, AND THE FOUNDATIONS OF A MOVEMENT* (2016)

ANTICIPATORY SET

- Welcome learners back into the community space. Check in to hear what they are thinking and how they are feeling. Ask if they would like to build upon Community Agreements, and summarize the activities and lessons learned from Days 1, 2, and 3.
- As learners consider their Community Agreements, ask them what other general values they believe their community should be built upon. They may answer either “popcorn-style” in the class or in a virtual classroom chat, with words, such as “empathy” or “strategic,” or with phrases, such as “calling in” or “active listening.” Record any additions to the Community Agreements as they are presented.

LEARNER ACTIVITIES

ACTIVITY 1

- Display the words “solidarity” and “community” on the board/virtual board or on a PowerPoint slide. Ask learners to discuss as a full class what these words mean to them, and what connections and distinctions they see between their meanings. As learners discuss, record notes for everyone to see.
- Then, share the following quote from bell hooks: “Solidarity is not the same as support. To experience solidarity, we must have a community of interests, shared beliefs and goals around which to unite, to build Sisterhood. Support can be occasional. It can be given and just as easily withdrawn. Solidarity requires sustained, ongoing commitment” (hooks, 1984). Ask for learners’ opinions about this quote and whether it changes any parts of the definitions they have developed together.
- Ask learners if they have heard of the Rainbow Coalition. Show learners the videos [“From North to South: Chairman Fred Hampton and the original Rainbow Coalition”](#) (2021) and [“Bobby Lee - Black Panther Party”](#) (1969) to understand the formation of the Rainbow Coalition and view footage of their meetings. Ask learners to discuss the following prompts in pairs, small groups, or as a full class:
 - What groups made up the Rainbow Coalition? Have you heard of these groups before? If not, why do you think that is?
 - How did the Rainbow Coalition bring together people from different ethnic and racial backgrounds and lived experiences? What common values did group members share?
 - What were some of the goals toward which members of the Rainbow Coalition were working?

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Figure 6.4. – Excerpt from the KYRC Political Education Curriculum (2023)

pedagogy. For example, one pedagogical tactic that KYRC recommends is establishing a “community agreement” among learners, based in the horizontal teaching style of Freire (2017), such that the content can be best engaged:

Community Agreements should be developed on Day 1 and may be built upon at any time or on any day during the learning process. Coming up with these agreements should be a collective and consensus-driven activity to identify the needs of every person in the group, allow them to feel safe, supported, trusted, and accountable to the other community members. (Political Education Curriculum, 2023; p. 13)

This strategy, the first activity on the first day, establishes KYRC’s emphasis on building what they call a “brave space” that encourages collective comfort, authenticity, and reflexivity in the learning process.

To an even further extent that the Kaepernick Curriculum, the Political Education Curriculum has a strong and explicit grounding in academia. All of the content, pedagogical tactics, and activities that KYRC recommends are based in academic teaching, mostly with the sources directly cited within the Curriculum. For instance, the introduction to the document states “abolitionist and radical teaching pedagogies of people and organizations ranging from Paulo Freire and bell hooks to the Highlander Research and Education Center⁶⁵ and Abolitionist Teaching Network ground the lessons” of the document (KYRC website, retrieved March 2024). The Curriculum also has a full reference list, hyperlinks to all articles and videos, and “Notes to Educators” that outline for educators how to approach each lesson, as well as “Expanding Opportunities” sections that recommend further academic reading or research. Many of the activities also integrate art, often as a way to unlock, express, and disseminate the critical insights that derive from the activities of the Political Education Curriculum. A “Note to Educators” on page 30 explains that:

⁶⁵ Highlander Research and Education Center describes itself as “a catalyst for grassroots organizing and movement building in Appalachia and the South”, supporting peoples’ efforts to “take collective action to shape their own destiny” (<https://highlandercenter.org>; retrieved March 2024).

Incorporating art into the lesson is important because people should have the space and opportunity to express themselves in the way they feel most empowered. This is a reminder of the ways that “progressive art can assist people to learn not only about the objective forces at work in the society in which they live, but also about the intense social character of their interior lives. Ultimately, it can propel people toward social emancipation.” – Angela Davis, *For a People’s Culture, For a People’s Culture, Political Affairs* (1995).

Similarly, in the activity where learners are tasked with creating their own community campaign, the Political Education Curriculum explicitly encourages learners to “connect their messaging to a personal story or a story from popular culture” (p. 39). The emphasis on the pedagogical power of popular culture reflects KYRC’s grounding in Freire and Gramsci. More pedagogical approaches are apparent in the actions that KYRC recommends.

6.5.2 Action Steps

In their quest to create “the next generation of change agents” (from KYRC’s mission statement), KYRC uses the Political Education Curriculum (2023) to pair critical education with concrete action. Each lesson has multiple “Becoming a Defender” suggestions, activities, or directives that guide learners to making practical improvements on the micro and meso level. For instance, the Becoming a Defender activity within the lessons on Black Liberation and a Human Rights Framework suggests the following:

Join a local chapter of the United Nations Association of the USA, or write a detailed letter to the United Nations to advocate that the UN Human Rights Council take further action to acknowledge, make reparations, or engage in reconciliation to counteract systemic racism on a global scale. (p. 26).

Another Becoming a Defender activity asks students to “Identify a rule in your school, classroom, or community to which you can apply transformative justice. Present the rule and recommendations for transformative practice to others in your community whom you trust.” (p. 29). KYRC’s methods of conscientization are readily paired with tangible ways to get involve in creating change.

KYRC also uses the Political Education Curriculum (2023) to help learners think tactically about social movements and activism. After having learners read an article called Organizing versus Activism (Richard, 2018), the Curriculum asks learners to discuss the similarities and differences between activism and organizing, even prompting learners to think about how the digital era has transformed these concepts with the question: “Is our understanding of activism and organizing oversimplified? Do you believe social media/hashtag activism has played a role in this?” (p. 37). The activity within this lesson has learners form groups to identify an example of a social movement (the Curriculum offers BLM, the Civil Rights Movement, and the movement for prison abolition as examples) and aim to identify the vision/messaging, demands/goals, strategies, stories/storytelling, artistry, and leadership of the group’s chosen movement.

The lesson then turns more active, as it prompts learners to apply their activist thinking to their own community. The Curriculum gets learners to differentiate between the “roots”, “trunk”, and “leaves” of an issue in their community, based on the Tree of Power image (Advocates for Youth, 2019; see Figure 6.3). Then, learners are tasked with creating their own campaign or movement to address a problem within their community. KYRC

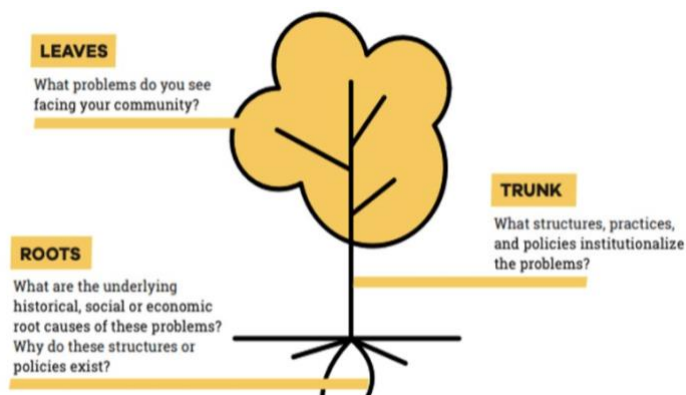


Figure 6.3. – From the KYRC Political Education Curriculum (2023)

asks learners to create demands, primary and secondary target goals, resources they have and need, supporters (or potential supporters) within the community, tactics for getting the message across, and a strategy for the campaign (p. 38). KYRC offers learners some possibilities:

- A rapid response fund and/or a mutual aid campaign to address situations affecting members of your community locally and globally (i.e. providing aid for Haitian immigrants and refugees).
- A teach-in at a community center, local library, or park on topics related to human rights, social justice, and activism.
- A community-based action such as installing community refrigerators and mobile markets, helping to create accessible transportation in your neighborhood, or registering voters for your local elections.
- A social media campaign to spread awareness of and resources related to issues in your community. (p. 39)

In the recommended action steps, many of KYRC’s own model of community organizing examined throughout this project become clear: rapid response, critical public pedagogy, social media messaging, and an intentional and targeted deployment of resources.

Lastly, towards the end of the Political Education Curriculum (2023), KYRC prompts learners to break outside of the current structures of thought to ideologically construct their utopian societies. The last day of the Curriculum – Day 5, thematically titled “Restorative Justice and Healing Justice” – begins with an activity that instructs learners to imagine their ideal community. The activity specifically asks learners to

imagine that the year is 2050 and they are living in a community where all of their hopes have been realized, and liberation and justice have been achieved for all peoples. Ask them to

consider what the people in this community see, hear, smell, feel, and taste. Ask them to think about what this community looks like, and what children, youth, adults, and elders are doing during the day.” (p. 40).

After this reflection, learners are asked to reflect on what is needed to achieve this utopian vision, and how actions in our contemporary society might function to bring this vision to eventual fruition.

6.5.3 Grassroots Social Critique

The content, pedagogy, and action steps proffered by the Curriculum are all underpinned by KYRC’s central pedagogical strategy: critique of the status quo. Returning to a Gramscian/Freirean model of grassroots critical pedagogy, Giroux (2011) argues that critique as an important mode of analysis for critical pedagogues. Critique acknowledges how power works as a mechanism of domination but can also be reimagined to work towards attaining justice, equality, and liberation. Critical pedagogy serves as an emancipatory alternative to traditional pedagogy (or what now could accurately be called neoliberal pedagogy) that pervades all levels of schooling, and arguably culture more broadly. Giroux (2011) notes that this traditional pedagogy operates “under the sway of technical mastery, instrumental logic, and various other fundamentalisms that acquire their authority by erasing any trace of subaltern histories, class struggles, and racial and gender inequalities and injustices” (p. 5). In effect, this form of pedagogy stifles critical thought, reduces notions of citizenship to one’s capacity to produce and consume, and defines certain marginal populations as contaminated and disposable (Giroux, 2011). As shown in both the camps the Political Education Curriculum, KYRC instead targets marginal populations as potential agents of change worthy of being educated.

Participant #6 mentioned during interviews that “I think part of the grassroots approach we’re talking about... we want to make sure that we get the youth that needs [our education] the most into the rooms.” As far as messaging, Participant #4 shared their perspective on the importance of critical pedagogy for KYRC’s youth:

We in the end made sure that each kid knew that the money that could be going to their housing, their food, is being put into policing that is killing their people. The education system that is trying to stop critical race theory, and social injustices, all those things that they don't know about – we make sure that they at the end of the day, that [youth] walk out of the camps, learning more about the community and wanting to do something about it.

As elaborated next chapter, KYRC thus demonstrates how critical pedagogy intervenes into education (both in school and through popular culture) as a contested site of struggle that has been used to reinforce the status quo, but can be wielded to develop the capacity for imagining and struggling for alternatives sets of social relations and modes of knowledge production.

Notably, scholarly discussions of critical pedagogy have largely occurred in the context of higher education. As such, critical pedagogues have often crafted their methods and practices with traditional university students in a traditional university classroom in mind. For example, Giroux (1988; 1997; 2001) has long theorized how instructors can employ critical pedagogy to combat the neoliberalization of the university, which incentivizes competition among researchers instead of collaboration, treats students as rational consumers instead of nascent intellectuals, and aims to develop students into technocratic careerists instead of well-rounded democratic citizens (Andrews et al., 2013; Bunds & Giardina, 2017; hooks, 1994). Similarly, King-White (2012) argues that critical pedagogy must become a central component of how PCS scholars educate

students and future professionals in the fields of kinesiology, sport management, and other sport-related disciplines. While these insights are undoubtedly important (and relevant to the immediate contexts in which these scholars operate), I argue that our conception of critical pedagogy can be enhanced by exploring its presence and impact outside of the university classroom: into the realm of *public* pedagogy (Giroux, 2011; hooks, 2003). Conceptualizing critical pedagogy as oriented solely to the university not only limits the number of people it can inform and the social benefits it can reap, but also mistakes the high school or undergraduate college student as the primary (if not only) agent of transformation.

Because of KYRC's liberatory ends and its educational means, as well as its focus on instilling a critical and productive agency within Black and Brown youth, KYRC clearly represents how critical pedagogy can be mobilized for grassroots public intervention. Despite (or perhaps because of) the fact that KYRC is not formally linked to higher education, KYRC models three crucial developments that expand our understanding of critical pedagogy. First, KYRC demonstrates how critical pedagogy can be enacted and welcomed at the grassroots community level (beyond high school or college campuses), and arguably with more potency and immediacy than in the classroom. Second, KYRC invests in urban marginalized youth as the agent of social transformation, for whom – as Freire (2017) explains – critical pedagogy is often most liberatory. Third, KYRC combines popular culture with critical education, using each to uniquely illuminate the transformative potential of the other. KYRC thus embodies a sport-focused Gramscian/Freirean social transformation project through multiple domains: 1) the facilitation by organic intellectuals, 2) the broadening of conditions and sites of knowledge production, 3) the use of celebrityhood in service of resistance and struggle, and 4) a method of critical pedagogy framed through and made possible by the cultural centrality of sport.

6.6 Conclusion

This chapter has analyzed how KYRC uses education to craft an alternative politics (Hall, 1981). KYRC's use of social media and two of their main public-facing documents offer crucial insight on their framing, messaging, and overall grassroots pedagogical strategy. My analysis found that KYRC mostly use their social media to educate the public, most commonly to highlight injustices related to race, policing, and incarceration. This education is likely both genuine – as in it digitally disseminates KYRC's true organizational views and perspectives – and a form of public relations – as in it publicly positions KYRC as a necessary and credible venue of contestation, thereby justifying its own mission and strategy. While this study looked at the “supply side” (Klandermans, 2004) of KYRC's framing and messaging, future research is needed to examine the audiences that KYRC reaching/constructing, and the effectiveness with which KYRC's framing efforts (in terms of bridging, amplifying, extending, and transforming; Snow et al., 1986) are being received.

KYRC's general use of media differs from previous models of sporting activism. For example, one of the Olympic Project for Human Right's primary tactics for implementing the Olympic boycott in 1968 and forcing racial progress in sport was focused mainly on media. Dr. Harry Edwards and the athletes spoke through traditional media – such as through reporters, interviews, and statements – which they used strategically to boost their message and boast high-profile endorsements (such as Martin Luther King Jr., Jackie Robinson, and Bill Russell) to give the movement momentum and maximize leverage (Hartmann, 2003). As effective as this strategy was at creating the impression that the boycott had more support than it actually did, the OPHR arguably prioritized mainstream media at the expense of more grassroots forms of organizing.

KYRC appears to have the opposite approach. The organization focuses on building coalitions with like-minded organizations and prioritizing localized community activism at the expense of media. Very rarely does KYRC release public statements designed for mass consumption, conduct interviews with traditional media, or even pull any stunts that appear designed for publicity. Part of this could be the preference of Kaepernick, who despite being such a popular topic of global debate after his protest during the anthems, rarely spoke to the media about it. More significant to consider, however, is the changing nature of media and the ways in which digital technologies have altered the tactics and messaging of activism. Rather than having to seek out sympathetic reporters or hope for favorable framing in traditional media like sporting activism of the past (Hartmann, 2003; Peña, 2021), KYRC appears to bypass traditional media altogether. Instead – mainly through social media – KYRC appears to control the frequency and framing of their messaging on their own terms. Additionally, through social media they are able to showcase their activism as it is happening, as well as make visible to allied organizations and sympathetic audiences.

This all, of course, also comes with potential downsides. Whereas sporting activism through traditional messaging (sports media mainly) could disseminate its message globally to the viewers and audiences associated with that platform, KYRC is relegated to the audiences who actively seek out following them on social media. With this comes the possibility of an “echo chamber” effect – wherein KYRC only speaks to those who are likely to already agree with the message (Eschmann et al. 2021; Fisher, 2022) – which dampens its influence and effectiveness. Also undermined by a sole social media strategy is the implicit legitimacy granted to a movement when covered by “legitimate” traditional media (Bennett & Segerberg, 2015; McCleod & Hertog, 1999). These are perhaps sacrifices that KYRC is willing to make, since

their focus is on grassroots community organizing. Nonetheless, it is important to analyze the precise ways in which KYRC utilizes social media to understand not only the messaging and tactics of the organization, but to more broadly capture the benefits, challenges, opportunities, and limitations for Sporting SMOs in the contemporary dynamic digital landscape.

Furthermore, a textual analysis of KYRC's Kaepernick Curriculum and Political Education Curriculum offered insight on the organization's tactical pedagogical approach, and how the organization constructed itself to the public. The Kaepernick Curriculum reflected how KYRC used sport as an entry point for critical conscientization, incorporated and engaged academia, and generally aimed to get youth to think critically with and through popular culture. The Political Education Curriculum – more geared for adults and public education spaces – provided precise detail on KYRC's beliefs, pedagogical strategy, and recommended forms of direct community action. In all, this chapter positioned KYRC as a project of grassroots critical public pedagogy, based in the principles of Gramsci, Freire, and Giroux. In doing so, KYRC both provides necessary education that – as we will see next chapter – is no longer guaranteed in primary and secondary education, while more broadly intervening into the current conjuncture to articulate a progressive vision of society. We now turn to the broader conjuncture to which KYRC is responding.

Chapter 7:
**KYRC as Progressive Conjunctural Response: Racial Backlash,
Authoritarian Populism, and Contesting Neoliberalism**

Now that I have positioned KYRC as a grassroots pedagogical response, it is time to answer perhaps the most significant question of this project: a response *to what?* In this final chapter, I attempt to synthesize this project's findings and arguments to more clearly piece together the social formations to which KYRC responds. Previous chapters have presented empirical data of what KYRC does, including their organizational structure, institutional logics, pedagogical tactics, and communications and rhetoric. However, the resource mobilization and framing approaches through which KYRC have been criticized as sometimes falling into an "abstracted empiricism" in which the "quest for variables, classifications, hypothesis, and generalizations decontextualizes and reifies movements" (Buechler, 2011; p. 183), resulting in the results of these studies becoming "[less] able to tell us much about what is happening in the world we actually inhabit" (Darnovsky et al., 1995; p. xvi). In the same spirit, Stuart Hall (quoted in Rodman, 2017, p. 6) clearly conveyed the importance of the wider social formation in cultural studies work:

This wider social formation quest must haunt every individual piece of cultural studies work you do...no study of television programmes or any other particular instance of culture is in my view properly cultural studies unless, in the end, it is haunted by the question – "But what does this have to do with everything else?"

This concluding chapter now pivots towards an analysis of what KYRC represents in the world we actually inhabit, and what KYRC has to do with everything else.

Utilizing an approach based in articulation (see Hall, 1981; Slack, 1996), the following chapters aim to further contextualize the aforementioned empirical data of KYRC, outline the conjunctural shifts that enabled KYRC to take its current form, and explore what the existence of KYRC and other Sporting SMO means for – and reveals about – our contemporary social formations. Put differently, the focus of this dissertation now switches from a “thick description” of KYRC, to using what we have learned about KYRC to narrate a radically-contextual “political history of the present” (Grossberg, 2010) regarding race, sport, activism, and cultural politics in the (post)-Black Lives Matter moment of the 2020s.

Returning to and expanding upon several previously-discussed findings, this chapter argues that KYRC, in its broadest sense, represents a progressive political response to our current conjuncture. Specifically, within the context of national struggles over race and education being fought in the terrain of popular culture, I outline how KYRC offers a coordinated grassroots response to a rupture in hegemonic consensus regarding what America has been, what it currently is, and what it should be going forward. To do so, this chapter uses radical contextualism and articulation to diagnose – which is to say, map, express, bring to light – the distinct conjuncture from which KYRC emerged and to which it responds.

7.1 On Mapping the Conjuncture

I will begin by conveying my understanding of analyzing a conjuncture. The concept of a conjuncture refers to a complex, historically-specific configuration of a social order comprised of antagonisms, contradictions, and instability that condense to form a hegemonic crisis that is felt, experienced, and understood by people in various (and competing) ways (Clarke, 2010; Grossberg, 2006; 2010; 2019; Hall, 1980; 1997; 2021). Hall (1988) described a conjuncture as "the complex historically specific terrain of a crisis which affects - but in uneven ways — a

specific national-social formation as a whole” (p. 127), marking a moment in which society’s “instabilities and contradictions appear at almost every point of the social formation and when the struggles become visible and self-conscious” (Grossberg, 2010; p. 41). Put differently, a conjuncture is characterized by fractures within a hegemonic social order, in which the wide-scale breakdown of authority and consensus becomes felt/experienced both within everyday life and across cultural, political, and economic dimensions (Gramsci, 1971). These cracks and fragmentations of the once-dominant social order then become explained through and reduced to issues that persuade the masses to perceive a complex crisis in a particular (most often, overly-simplistic and politically-loaded) way. A conjuncture is thus a moment in which “everything seems to be in flux, or better, everything presents itself as a possible site of contradiction and struggle” (Grossberg, 2019; p. 39). Rather than reducing a conjuncture to a singular realm, conjunctural analysis attempts to explore the linkages and intersections between the political, social, economic, and cultural realms that converge within particular forms of social disorder (Clarke, 2023; Gilbert, 2019; Hart, 2024).

Importantly then, articulating a conjuncture is a political act. The breakdown(s) within a conjuncture harbor political potential. They might lead to further division and chaos, but they might also lead to opportunities for new solidarities and social transformation. This, as we will discuss, is what the more colloquial term of “culture wars” is about (Hartman, 2015; Zimmerman, 2022); a political battlefield in which various social factions (with varying degrees of power) latch onto cultural issues in an attempt to articulate hegemonic fractures in ways that direct the popular masses towards interpreting – and potentially acting – in a manner that manufactures support for their vision for society.

A famous and instructive example of conjunctural analysis can be found in Hall et al.'s (2013) *Policing the Crisis* (originally published in 1979), which analyzed how the racialized mugging “crisis” emerged from and reflected deeper crises of capitalism and hegemony in 1970s British society. For these authors, the empirical object was the mugging crisis, but the target of analysis was the state of British society; particularly, how the Right mobilized within and through the hegemonic fissures to articulate mugging as a moral panic. The Right then wielded the socially-produced anxieties over mugging to build support and consent for a political-cultural shift towards Thatcherism and what Hall (1980; 1985) later called *authoritarian populism*, or the manufacturing of popular consensus that functions to legitimize an authoritarian regime.

Similarly in aim (though certainly not execution), this chapter attempts to articulate the position of KYRC within the current conjuncture. I argue that the contemporary U.S. is experiencing what Gramsci would call a “crisis of hegemony” (Gramsci, 1971; Hall, 1978), in which the institutional forces that once governed our lives have become denaturalized, destabilized, and prone to contestation. This chapter maps how the destabilization of ideas about race, history, and education have been articulated by the Right within the contemporary culture wars. It briefly outlines how the Right has orchestrated a collective backlash to the (both real and perceived) progressions in racial politics, towards a society that more actively acknowledges the influence of race that – in the BLM era and because of protests such as Kaepernick’s kneel – has widely displaced the hegemonic “colorblind” racism of previous decades (Bonilla-Silva, 2014). The Right has utilized the schisms in the cultural terrain to underscore the nefarious influence of the Left, and return the performance of America to one of unquestioned and uncritical patriotism.

The social production of the “crisis” over race – crescendoed in the moral panic (Hall, 1978) over Critical Race Theory – demonstrates a similar effort by the Right to exploit the deeper

anxieties caused by the havoc of neoliberalism to win consent for authoritarian populism; an effort that, despite being arguably more overtly fabricated than the crisis over mugging, has nonetheless been effective politically and culturally. KYRC however – even as it operates within a nonprofit sector that harbors a fraught relationship to collective social progress (Fox & Turner, 2016; Rodriguez, 2007; Samimi & DeHerrera, 2021) – offers a model for how the Left might intervene into this crisis of hegemony. In a decisively coordinated and grassroots manner, KYRC represents a Sporting SMO that utilizes community-based critical pedagogy to articulate a vision of society that prioritizes liberation, justice, and critical thinking rather than (uncritical) nationalism, meritocratic individualism, and the tacit maintenance of racial neoliberalism (Goldberg, 2009). In what follows, I attempt to articulate these connections.

7.2 The Black Lives Matter Moment

Of the many places that we could begin our “conjunctural story” (Grossberg, 2018), we will begin by contextualizing the specific racial formation from which Black Lives Matter (BLM) – and as such, Kaepernick’s kneel and KYRC – spawned. As I have outlined, KYRC can be considered a subsidiary, and compliment to, BLM’s broader emergence. BLM is both a movement and a moment; a global social movement that arose in the early 2010s as a direct response to the death of unarmed Black people at the hands of U.S. police, accompanied by a general reckoning with the way Western culture and social structures/institutions devalue and dehumanize Black lives (Hillstrom, 2018). BLM represents a resurgence of Black liberatory activity in the U.S. after a relative retreat of collective and confrontational Black politics in the post-Civil Rights era (see Lebron, 2017; Taylor, 2021).

BLM arose in response to the systemic racism that has plagued American society from its inception. Writing within the U.S. historical context, radical scholar Ruth Wilson Gilmore (2007)

defines racism as “the state-sanctioned or extralegal production and exploitation of group-differentiated vulnerability to premature death” (p. 261).⁶⁶ Evidence of Gilmore’s pointed perspective can arguably be found in any U.S. institution. For an example, we can look no further than health. Part of the project of kinesiology and public health is to restore health and bodily autonomy to individuals and communities who have been damaged physically, socially, and communally by structural racism (Cardinal, 2022; Joseph & Kriger, 2021; Smith & Jamison, 2017). Indeed, racism has recently been identified as a public health crisis and emergency, by both the American Public Health Association (APHA) and the Center for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) (APHA.org, retrieved 2021; CDC.gov; retrieved 2021).⁶⁷

The long history of Black oppression that has led to such disparities requires explication beyond the scope of this project, but they intersect with the issues that KYRC more explicitly targets. Scholars have detailed the structural inequalities that either have yet to be rectified or have residuals that still permeate our contemporary landscape. This long and intertwined list includes disparities that stem from: American slavery and Reconstruction (Du Bois, 1935; Smith, 2021); colonialism (Fanon, 1963; Rodney, 2018); Black community disinvestment and underdevelopment (Marable, 2015); financial discrimination (Baradaran, 2017); educational

⁶⁶ I favor Gilmore’s definition for its precision. Rather than psychological or attitudinal explanations, Gilmore’s definition emphasizes how racism is not found in spectacularized incidences of prejudices, but within business as usual. Racism is not a question of intention or feeling; it is instead a set of political and economic conditions that shape the quality and quantity of life for Black people. Her definition also gestures towards how the mundanity of racism is itself violent, resulting above all in increased exposure to death based on race.

⁶⁷ These declarations have derived from evolving conceptions of what it means for a person and a community to be “healthy.” In 1948, the World Health Organization (WHO) developed the since-influential definition of health as: “a state of complete physical, social and mental well-being, and not merely the absence of disease or infirmity” (cited in Lavarack, 2005; p. 19). Applying this framework to the community as a whole in 1986, the WHO defined a healthy community as one that is “continually creating and improving those physical and social environments and expanding those community resources which enable people to mutually support each other in performing all the functions of life and in developing to their maximum potential” (cited in Hancock & Minkler, 2012; p. 157). From these definitions, scholars have argued that contemporary public health is as much about uplifting and empowering communities to identify the issues impacting their health and working to ensure equity within and among communities as it is about the narrower objectives of prevention and treatment of illness (Minkler, 2012; Wallack et al., 1993).

discrimination (Woodson, 1990); employment and union discrimination (Katznelson, 2005; Foner, 2017); housing discrimination (Rothstein, 2018); medical discrimination (Skloot, 2017); injustice in the criminal justice system (Alexander, 2020); and much more. The specific impetus for the creation of KYRC – as its name and pedagogy as we have examined suggests – is police brutality, the extrajudicial murder of Black people by police, and the racism inherent to the United States criminal justice system. While the relationship between police and Black communities has resurfaced as a central social issue, it is not a new one. Scholars have written and documented the racism inherent to policing and criminal justice for centuries (Alexander, 2020; Camp & Heatherton, 2016; Gilmore, 2007; Henning, 2021; Hayes, 2018; Vitale, 2018). Echoing KYRC’s radical materialist analysis, Taylor (2021) summarizes the relationship between policing and structural racism, in a manner that eschews reform:

The racism of the police is not the product of vitriol; it flows from their role as armed agents of the state. The police function to enforce the rule of the politically powerful and the economic elite: this is why poor and working-class communities are so heavily policed. African Americans are overrepresented among the ranks of the poor and the working class, so police overwhelmingly focus on those neighborhoods, even as they direct their violence more generally against all working-class people, including whites. But the police also reflect and reinforce the dominant ideology of the state that employs them, which also explains why they are inherently racist and resistant to substantive reform. In other words, if the task of the police is to maintain law and order, then that role takes on a specific meaning in a fundamentally racist society. Policing has changed over time as the nature and needs of the American state have changed, but it has also remained

incredibly consistent as a thoroughly racist institution trained on Black communities. (p. 109)

BLM coalesced as a collective response to these conditions, often (though not always) sharing Taylor's (and KYRC's) structural perspective to racism.

Analyzing in detail the theory and politics that characterize the BLM movement are slightly more difficult than previous movements for a few reasons. First, the movement is an ongoing dynamic, and it is still unclear if the movement is in its early, late, or peak stages.⁶⁸ Second, BLM is vastly decentralized in nature and is constituted by a diverse array of local grassroots movements and projects that unite and organize primarily through social media (Taylor, 2021; White, 2014). Unlike past movements that had "leaders" who often defined and expressed liberatory theory ostensibly on behalf of movement's masses, the lack of official leaders or spokespersons in BLM – while enabling more democratic operation – makes it difficult for observers to identify and assess any common intellectual, political, and strategic consensus (if one exists at all). Third, while the simplicity and elasticity of the phrase "Black Lives Matter" likely contributed to its resonance, the malleability of the movement's foundational rhetoric and terminology has resulted in it becoming increasingly coopted and wielded for a wide range of objectives and political projects (many of which diametrically oppose what seem to be the central tenets of BLM) (Táiwò, 2022).⁶⁹

⁶⁸ My perspective, writing in 2024, is that we are now in a post-BLM era of backlash, as detailed later in this chapter. Some scholars, such as Johnson (2022) in his book *After Black Lives Matter*, have declared BLM a movement that is over and largely failed to meet its goals, primarily because of its insufficient focus on class and economic inequality. I tend to agree, although I believe that the BLM moment has permanently punctured the illusion of post-racial colorblindness, which I believe is itself ideological progress that is here to stay.

⁶⁹ An ironic and fitting example is Democratic congressional leadership kneeling in "solidarity" with BLM protesters who were demanding abolition in June 2020, as these same politicians funded a bill to give \$300 million more to police as part of the Democratic policing "reform" package (see Gong, 2020; Lahut, 2020; Marcos, 2020).

Nonetheless, the founding of BLM is most commonly attributed to three Black queer women: Alicia Garza, Patrisse Cullors, and Opal Tometi (Lebron, 2017). What started as a desperate plea that “#blacklivesmatter” in Garza’s Facebook post after the 2012 death of Trayvon Martin, turned into a nationwide rallying cry and organized movement after the 2014 death of Michael Brown by police and concomitant protests in Ferguson, Missouri (Norwood, 2016). Garza (2014) described BLM as “a political intervention in a world where Black lives are systematically and intentionally targeted for demise. It is an affirmation of Black folks’ contributions to this society, our humanity, and our resilience in the face of deadly oppression” (cited in Taylor, 2021; p. 151). BLM adopted the 2011 Occupy Wall Street movement’s methodology of decentralization (see White, 2014), where there is no official leader calling the shots and no hierarchical organization bureaucracy to navigate for entry into the movement. While this can lead to less unity in strategy and viewpoints and a decreased capacity for vetting new members, its strength is in its democratic makeup. Its actions are decided by the movement’s regular people, many of whom have been rather voiceless in previous eras of social movements (especially those from marginalized social locations) (Taylor, 2021). BLM is an official organization with over 40 chapters worldwide. Despite the BLM organization, the *movement* of BLM – to which most scholars and activists, including myself, refer – is constituted by a wide array of local organizations and activist initiatives (such as Ferguson Action, Hands Up United, Dream Defenders, to name just a few) that target slightly different sites and issues, but are ostensibly united under the common goal of making Black Lives Matter (Camp & Heatherton, 2016).

Whereas the “old guard” of Black political movements (such as Jesse Jackson, Al Sharpton, many Black career Democratic politicians) favor slow-moving reform and moderation,

BLM, its founders, and the majority of its adherents (including KYRC, as we have established) represent a “new guard” that favors decentralization, tends to think structurally rather than interpersonally, de-emphasizes the importance of respectability politics, and is constituted by and prioritizes intersectional identities (see Coates, 2018; Collins & Bilge, 2018; Taylor, 2021; Moraga & Anzaldúa, 2015; Weheliye, 2014). In a statement from the Ferguson Action committee, local leaders describe the novelty of the BLM movement (cited in Taylor, 2021):

This is a movement of and for ALL Black lives—women, men, transgender and queer. We are made up of both youth AND elders aligned through the possibilities that new tactics and fresh strategies offer our movement... We are connected online and in the streets. We are decentralized, but coordinated. Most importantly, we are organized. Yet we are likely not respectable negroes. We stand beside each other, not in front of one another. We do not cast any one of ours to the side in order to gain proximity to perceived power. Because this is the only way we will win. (p. 172-173)

The organizations that comprise BLM have made a number of specific demands, including: demilitarizing the police, passing legislation that ends racial profiling, collecting data of police abuse, suspension without pay of officers who use or approve use of excessive force, attorney generals to release the names of police officers who have killed Black people, and many more (Kaba, 2021; Taylor, 2021). While these demands have been highly influential in political legislation and negotiations, BLM has had arguably a greater influence culturally (Hillstrom, 2018). It has functioned as the impetus for many institutions and social sectors worldwide to critically examine and confront the ways in which they have – or still do – contribute to systemic racism or the dehumanization of Black lives (Lomax & Hawkins, 2024; Williams, 2022). It has also created numerous SMOs such as KYRC. On the next steps for BLM approaching a decade

of its inception, Taylor (2021) argues that “the long-term strength of the movement will depend on its ability to reach large numbers of people by connecting the issue of police violence to the other ways that Black people are oppressed” (p. 183) as well as “transforming the goal of ‘freedom’ into digestible demands that train and organize its forces so that they have the ability to fight for more” such that the movement can “have a real plan for building and developing solidarity among the oppressed” (p. 186). It is to this exact notion that SMOs such as KYRC has emerged to fulfill, and has attempted to do through its camps, social media, and public-facing curriculums.

7.3 Conservative Backlash in the Cultural Terrain

The cultural shifts engendered by the BLM moment also produced an intense conservative backlash. The forms of this backlash demonstrate how the current conjuncture is being negotiated on the cultural terrain. Various scholars have noted that racial progress – such that we have (arguably) experienced during the height of the BLM moment from 2016 to 2020 – has never come uncontested (Roediger, 2019). Each moment of significant breakthrough in racial progress have not only been hotly contested in their time, but have also been met with a “White backlash” in the immediate aftermath (Coates, 2018). The BLM movement was no different. This backlash was not limited to just businessman-reality TV star-turned-Republican-politician Donald Trump being elected in 2016 after running a populist campaign driven by explicit racism, sexism, and xenophobia (Serwer, 2021). Indeed, even after Trump left office in January 2021, the conservative mediasphere (including but not limited to politicians, commentators, viral social media provocateurs, and yes, even some athletes) dominated news cycles with gripes and diatribes over (real or perceived) slights in the realm of culture (Andrews & Carrington, 2021; Kusz, 2017; 2019). These outrages included the perceived usage of Critical Race Theory in

schools (Goldberg, 2023), the availability of books that included LGBTQ people in public primary school libraries (Appleman, 2022), the inclusion of marginalized peoples (or even just women) in media such as Disney movies and video games (Abad-Santos, 2022; Fisher, 2022), and of course, the Covid-19 pandemic and its associated vaccines (Whitehead & Perry, 2020). Some of the most vivid and seemingly resonant of these outrages pertained to sport; such as kneeling athletes and the participation of trans athletes in women's sport (Andrews, 2019; Gash & Tichenor, 2023; Posbergh, 2022). Arguably the most vivid materializations of our conjunctural fractures – and most relevant for our purposes of contextualizing KYRC – are the contemporary “culture wars” being fought over race, history, and education (Hartman, 2015; Zimmerman, 2022).

As regressive and downright absurd many of these battles feel in the moment, these culture wars are not new. As Hartman (2015) documents, battles such as these have been fought throughout American history, and more notably, have come to forge the nation that we know today. Even the cultural gains of the American Left during the 1960s provoked a conservative backlash – embodied most vividly by the Reagan administration's social-cultural-economic codification of neoliberalism in the 1980s – that was largely primed at ensuring that American culture matched the idiosyncratic conservative ideological worldview centered around individualism, nationalism, capitalism, Christianity, and “freedom” (often intertwined with sentiments of bigotry and desire to preserve traditional hierarchies based on race, sex, and class) (Katznelson, 2005; Reeves & Campbell, 1994; Hall et al., 1979).

Culture became the site through which these ideologies competed to define America's past, present, and future. Sometimes strategically and sometimes haphazardly, progressives and conservatives utilized media, art, clothing, music, and sport as entry points for asserting their

ideological viewpoint on deeper and more implicit issues central to the American project (Andrews & Carrington, 2021; Collinson, 2017; Kusz, 2017; 2019). These skirmishes cannot be dismissed as pathetic attempts to distract the low-information American voter away from their economic interests, or as last-ditch attempts to cling to an American culture that has passed conservatives by. It was not a foundational figure in the discipline of cultural studies, but in fact right-wing theologian Patrick Buchanan, who declared that the culture wars are the “war for the soul of America” (Hartman, 2015). In addition to how “the history of America, for better and worse, is largely a history of debates about the idea of America” (Hartman, 2015; p. 2), the culture wars occur when symbolic or mundane occurrences within popular culture serve as proxies for more fundamental debates about which values, ideals, and beliefs should be dominant within American culture.

The connections between race, patriotism, and the teaching of American history have been debated for decades, but their contemporary iteration provides the context for KYRC’s specific form of grassroots critical pedagogy, as well as why the organization was established in the first place. Whereas traditional history education promoted a patriotic version of American history that glossed over the nation’s injustices, progressives beginning in roughly the 1960s pursued a version that acknowledged, if not centered, America’s flaws and inconsistencies (Hartman, 2015). Whereas traditional history education was based in the “Great Man” theory of history that prioritized the nation’s elite and powerful figures, progressives pursued a more “bottom up” theory of history that concentrated the agency and experience of the non-elite, with particular attention paid to marginalized groups that the traditional version of history often neglected (Zinn, 2003).

Thus, the history culture wars had clear points of intersection with race. How Americans should think about race relations in the present, and the extent to which America had an obligation to actively improve race relations in the future, significantly depended on how one interpreted the racial sins of America's past. The fundamental question, put simply: *was* America a racist nation? The stakes of this question steered the nation into the inevitable follow-up question: *is* America a racist nation? If not, as conservatives tended to believe, then America had little to no debt to pay to Black Americans, and blaming history was just used as a convenient cop-out of the meritocratic individualism necessary for success in the Home of the Free and Land of the Brave. If so, as progressives tended to believe, then America should not only ideologically (and probably materially) compensate for that fact, but the very social, cultural, economic, political, and even epistemological foundations of America were largely illegitimate because they were so intricately linked to the power relations that were legitimated and sustained by violent racial oppression. These debates proceed today, in perhaps their most vehement form yet.

7.3.1 The Moral Panic of Critical Race Theory

The history of hegemonic contestation over race, history, and education in the U.S. vividly demonstrates how a conjuncture contains struggles in power, “some of which are specific to the conjuncture, and some are more organic or tendential forces that extend across conjunctures; some are new, some are old, and some are re-articulations of the old with the new” (Grossberg, 2019; p. 46). As mentioned in Chapter 5, interview Participant #4 positioned KYRC as a corrective to contemporary state and national regimes that are trying to repress critical knowledge about racial injustice:

the education system that is trying to stop Critical Race Theory, and social injustices, all those things that they don't know about – we make sure that they at the end of the day, that [youth] walk out of the camps, learning more about the community and wanting to do something about it.

Participant #4 is alluding to how decades of cultural debate over race and education have crescendoed in the contemporary moment with the intense political battle over Critical Race Theory (CRT).

In short, CRT is a theoretical framework that analyzes the operations of race and racism within the post-Civil Rights United States, focusing specifically on explaining the paradox of how racial disparities continue to sustain and even widen despite the ostensibly “colorblind” nature of our modern institutions (Bonilla-Silva, 2014; Hawkins et al., 2016). To broadly generalize a diverse field, CRT scholarship typically includes some or all of the following foundational tenets: 1) an anti-essentialist understanding of race that views race as socially-constituted rather than biologically-determined 2) the centrality and permanence of race and racism within the structures of American society; 3) recognition of how liberal hegemonic concepts such as “colorblindness”, “meritocracy”, “objectivity”, and “neutrality” serve to reproduce the racial hierarchies that constitute our status quo; 3) an intersectional approach that examines how one’s lived racial experience is also intertwined with factors such as gender, class, ability, sexuality, and nationality; 4) the utility of storytelling and lived experience as counter-narratives to dominant ideas about Western modernity; and 5) a commitment to transdisciplinary scholarship that advances social justice, transformation, and liberation (see Crenshaw et al.,

1995; Goldberg, 2023). Legal scholar Derrick Bell is often listed as the founder of CRT.⁷⁰ Other prominent scholars – such as Kimberlé Crenshaw, Richard Delgado, Cheryl Harris, and many more – are also influential to the paradigm. CRT is far from a rigid and dogmatic field of study, as its flexibility allows for its core approach to be merged with numerous disciplinary strands. For instance, there are feminist-based approaches to CRT, Marxist-based approaches to CRT, cultural studies-based approaches congruent with CRT, and so on (Goldberg, 2023). While CRT emerged and became influential in the field and practice of law, its approach has inspired some scholarship and practice in other institutions, such as education, policy, and sport (see Hawkins et al., 2017; Howe, 2021; Howe et al., 2023; Hylton, 2009).

Less important for our purposes is the merit or accuracy of CRT as a theory of racism than what its centrality in the contemporary culture wars reveals about our conjuncture. Therefore, rather than give CRT the more in-depth treatment that it deserves, I must instead focus on how CRT has become the engine of cultural conservative backlash against the progressive vision for society that Kaepernick and KYRC aim to articulate. Strikingly similar to how the Kaepernick kneel was mobilized by conservatives as a symbol upon which the Right could project all its cultural grievances in the mid-to-late 2010s, CRT has been wielded as perhaps the foremost “political piñata” (Goldberg, 2023) of the 2020s, upon which the Right has coordinated its authoritarian populist strategy.

How this has manifested in practice contains many absurdities. The conservatives at the center of constructing CRT as the all-powerful boogeyman of our times – such as conservative commentators/tweeters Chris Rufo, James Lindsay, and Mark Levin, to name a few – do not

⁷⁰ Ironically, Bell’s 1973 book *Race, Racism, and American Law* – a foundational text which is heralded as a precursor to CRT – features a picture of Tommie Smith and John Carlos’s 1968 Olympic Black Power salute on its front page.

have a surface-level understanding of what CRT actually is, and barely pretend to. Their claims about CRT lack sourcing, do not hold up to the slightest bit of scrutiny, and as such, are only accepted and aimed at people already existing within the conservative echo chamber (see Boulianne et al., 2020). In other words, conservatives are not as much attacking the actual field of CRT as they are trying to convince their conservative predominantly-White conspiratorial audience that all the things they find uncomfortable about race discussion – talk of White privilege, diversity and inclusion efforts, bottom-up history education, and the like – are not sensible signs of racial progress, but are instead evil concoctions that simply can be attributed to a cryptic and all-powerful theory being taught by the simultaneously “liberal” and “communist” ill-intentioned professors of higher education: Critical Race Theory. Rather than the academic paradigm, CRT is heard by conservatives as “simply a code for any expression critical of racism... a way to dismiss all criticisms of racism without having to take them seriously or make any effective arguments about them” (Goldberg, 2023; p. 137). Inside the political piñata of CRT is a smorgasbord of classic conservative enemies – racial equality, communism, intellectualism, and progress – all waiting to be hit with one unitary swing.

Though CRT has been somewhat influential in academia since the late 1980s/early 1990s, it did not gain wider public attention – or criticism – until late 2020. During the summer of protests sparked by George Floyd’s murder by police, race became an (inter)national story that fence-sitters and apolitical individuals socially (and sometimes, *physically*) could not avoid (see Johnson & Edgar, 2024; Serero, 2020). Years of police brutality compounded with decades of Black precarity and centuries of violent Black oppression erupted in the streets, businesses, and classrooms of America (see Johnson & Edgar, 2024). CRT appeared to provide a framework for answering a familiar set of questions that were on the national psyche: How did we get here?

How many “George Floyd’s” died without recourse because their death was not recorded, lost to the distortions of the inevitably exoneratory police report? Is the fatal kneeling on George Floyd’s neck a tragic outlier in a nation trying its best, or the perfect metonym for America’s historically-consistent treatment of Black people? People sought to answer these questions at all levels of education. Moreover, these protests provoked a rare moment of self-reflexivity among many institutions – including corporate America, Hollywood, journalism, music, and sport – in which they openly questioned how they may have implicitly or explicitly contributed to the conditions that made Black America rise up (Johnson & Edgar, 2024). Surely, for every sincere effort and concrete step towards racial equality, there were some insincere, clumsy, and perhaps even counterproductive tendencies that arose from these institutions finally responding to the pressure of changing cultural tides. But the fact that the pressure was felt at all was indicative of what was becoming a clear leftward shift in the cultural terrain.

Seeking tools to respond to this racial reckoning, many turned to the *1619 Project* (2019). Commissioned by the New York Times and led by journalist Nikole Hannah-Jones, the 1619 Project was a collection of essays by scholars and journalists about the role of race within the history of the United States. Named after the year the first African slaves reached the shores of America and organized in the year of the 400th anniversary of American slavery, the cohesive objective of the 1619 Project was to “reframe the country’s history by placing the consequences of slavery and the contribution of black Americans at the very center of our national narrative” (2019). Though grounded in academic scholarship, the project was written for popular public consumption. It soon became widely-read and shared, and then even more so after George Floyd’s murder. The project helped readers understand the racial outcries happening around them were expressions of a long history of Black oppression in not just the psychological realm,

but the economic, political, social, and cultural realms. Importantly, the project did not claim to *rewrite* the defining American history to focus on race, nor suggest that race is or should be the universal factor central to the interpretation of each American historical event. It instead was written to emphasize the role of race to correct for its prior neglect; scribble race back into the spaces of the American history and historiography where it somewhere along the way has been actively erased.

However, this endeavor of nuance did not prevent the fierce backlash. Despite (or, perhaps, because of) its acclaim among left-of-center America, conservatives vilified the 1619 Project (Serwer, 2021). They claimed that it twisted facts to cast (White) America as evil to its core, which for them epitomized the Left's "obsession" with inserting race into every and any conversation. Interestingly, this vilification did not intensify until the George Floyd protests, roughly a year after the 1619 Project's publication. This suggests the adoption of the 1619 Project as a conservative dogwhistle; a clear object of discontent that stands in for the more-abstract-but-difficult discomfort with the sudden cultural shift to the Left regarding issues of race (Wetts & Willer, 2019). It was uncouth to delegitimize George Floyd's death, and conservatives would sound openly hypocritical to demean the protests in the streets which were happening at 'the right time and place' (unlike Kaepernick's kneel during the National Anthem). But, in this logic, the 1619 Project was fair game to criticize as harshly and intensely as they wished (Serwer, 2021). As backlash intensified, this specific historical treatise became part and parcel of the bigger and scarier villain that the Right settled on: Critical Race Theory.

While President, Trump himself articulated the complaints of the Right about 1619 and CRT (which, as I have hoped to show, were really complaints about racial progress in general):

our nation is witnessing a merciless campaign to wipe out our history, defame our heroes, erase our values and indoctrinate our children. In our schools... there is a new far-Left fascism that demands absolute allegiance. The violent mayhem we have seen in the streets and cities that are run by liberal Democrats in every case is the predictable result of years of extreme indoctrination and bias in education. (Freedberg 2020, p. 2-3)

The rhetoric here – “our nation”, “our history”, “our heroes”, “our values” versus “far-left fascists” who create “violent mayhem” based on “extreme indoctrination and bias in education” – makes it apparent how the cultural politics of education in this moment are being fought with dogwhistles, winks, and hyperbolic euphemisms from the Right. Similarly, Florida Governor Ron DeSantis – who declared that CRT teaches kids to hate themselves and their country – made anti-CRT legislation the centerpiece of his Florida governorship, pitching it as his crowning achievement to conservative voters (Asmelash, 2021).

These sensationalized talking points did not begin with Trump or DeSantis, however. Rather, the above quote is the culmination of a conservative grassroots campaign that has festered since the racial protests of 2020 (Johnson & Edgar, 2024); and arguably, as I have discussed, since at least the 1960s, and perhaps since the year 1619 itself. Conservative provocateurs have established a prolific online presence – not to mention, have risen the political ranks – by labelling everything CRT so that they can rally the troops to denounce it. Much like anything that merely mentioned social class or hinted at valuing equality was labeled “communist” by conservatives throughout the 20th century, anything that merely mentions race in our times is eligible to be demonized under the banner of evil CRT (Goldberg, 2023). One of the foremost provocateurs, Chris Rufo, stated the strategy quite plainly in a series of tweets in March 2021:

We have successfully frozen their brand—"critical race theory"—into the public conversation and are steadily driving up negative perceptions. We will eventually turn it toxic, as we put all of the various cultural insanities under that brand category.

The goal is to have the public read something crazy in the newspaper and immediately think "critical race theory." We have decodified the term and will recodify it to annex the entire range of cultural constructions that are unpopular with Americans. (@realchrisrufo, March 15, 2021)

Unsurprisingly, a strategy this transparently cursory did not organically emerge within the proverbial marketplace of ideas. Rather than grassroots, it is more accurate to call the anti-CRT backlash another cultural battle that is "astroturfed" (Chan, 2022), referring to when support for a cause that appears to be the organic expression of everyday people is actually just the result of a coordinated and well-funded campaign by an entity to curry favor and manipulate public opinion. If grassroots support is organic, astroturfing is artificial. In our case, for example, Rufo, Lindsay, and other anti-CRT figures present themselves as everyday people and parents that have finally grown tired of the Left's racial excesses and have decided – on behalf of "our" nation and "our" children – to fight back. In reality, however, Rufo is part of the Manhattan Institute, and the entire anti-CRT campaign has long been the priority of the Heritage Foundation; two prominent conservative think tanks funded by donations from the elite class. Turning Point USA – another conservative organization, funded by billionaire libertarian David Koch, that has maintained a "Professor Watchlist" for college professors the organization deems too radical (Mudde, 2018) – has also become a central figure to the anti-CRT push. Other outlets of conservative dark money outlets such as Project Veritas, The Leadership Institute, The Concord Fund (who contributed over \$1 million to eliminate racial justice teaching in K-12 curricula)

have joined the mix (Goldberg, 2023). We may never know the true level of “support” that the anti-CRT backlash commands, but there are billionaires spending millions to ensure that the issue remains at the forefront of the cultural agenda.⁷¹

7.3.2 An Attack on Black Education

The backlash would be easier to dismiss if it ceased at the level of rhetoric. Unfortunately, the consequences have become more dire. According to Zimmerman (2022), the conservative backlash to an increased sensitivity to race has been the single “most coordinated legislative attack on history instruction in American history” (p. 7). In 2020, Trump signed an executive order that halted diversity and inclusion initiatives and banned the teaching of CRT in federally funded programs (Flaherty, 2020). It has since been revoked by the Biden administration, which arguably led to even more similar legislation being introduced below the federal level (where they have a stronger chance of passing during the Biden presidency). As of June 2023, there have been over 500 bills introduced in the U.S. that effectively restrict or ban real or perceived CRT in education (Kelley, 2023). It is more than political showmanship, as more than half of these bills have adopted and made into law. Over 90% of the adopted laws target primary (K-12) education, which means more than half of primary school students in the U.S. are educated by an anti-CRT institution (Kelley, 2023). Secondary education is affected as well. In Florida, DeSantis’s attack

⁷¹ Whether or not the conservative culture warriors are true believers or conscientious deceivers misses the point. Conservatives have long abided by the principle that what works matters more than what is true. To be clear, there are substantive critiques to be made of CRT, on a theoretical, empirical, and practical level. But these stem from actual engagement with CRT as a body of study. Culture war battles differ greatly from this constructive and healthy disagreement; they instead “[seek] to defeat enemies, not to engage them; its goal is victory, not inquiry” (Zimmerman, 2022; p. 244). As Goldberg (2023) summarizes: “Rufo could care less what CRT in fact stands for. The terms “critical,” “race,” and “theory, he has repeatedly emphasized in public, are each super-charged fuel for the political right. Anything “critical” reads to them like a left-wing conspiracy. “Race” has become code both for what are deemed doomsday demographic shifts and, relatedly, for Black Lives Matter activism and protests. And “theory” is understood as Marxist obfuscation. Believing predetermines seeing!” (p. 70). It suffices to say that what conservatives are attacking in the name of “CRT” is just any discussion of race at all, in any American institution. It is tempting to say that if CRT did not exist, conservatives would have to invent it. But they essentially already have.

on CRT has also included bills that effectively police and surveil the beliefs of tenured faculty, and in some cases, directly outlawing the teaching of words or subjects that they determine resembles CRT (or advances the “gay agenda”) (Flaherty, 2021). Bills in other states have also ramped up efforts to directly regulate what is and is not taught in college classrooms, or to punish colleges or professors who teach from critical perspectives.

As Kaepernick himself has documented in his latest edited academic book (Kaepernick et al., 2023), these attacks have particularly targeted the collective field of Black Studies. It is more than a niche field applicable only to Blacks. Born out of political and cultural struggle for freedom and understanding, the object of Black Studies is:

Black life, the structures that produce premature death, the ideologies that render Black people less than human and their material consequences, and the roles colonialism and slavery played in the emergence of modernity...Black Studies grew out of, and interrogates, the long struggle to secure our future as a people and for humanity by remaking and re-envisioning the world through ideas, art, and social movements. (Kelley, 2023; p. 14-15)

These attacks, then, are rather unsurprising, given that Black Studies is, as Cedric Robinson described, a critique of Western Civilization (see Burden-Stelly, 2018; Kelley, 2023). KYRC represents the exact type of pedagogy that conservatives are mobilizing to outlaw.

Again, while the flavor has been adapted to our times, the underlying practice is not new. The prevention of education about and for Black people has been a staple of American history. From the first steps that African slaves took on the North American shores, Black education was not an unfortunate omission or silent absence; it was violently mandated. Black people have been denied, punished, and even killed for simply trying to learn about themselves, their history, or gaining any intellectual tools for thinking about their future. As Taylor (2023) notes, this is why

the emergence of Black Studies in the 1960s was so necessary. It was explicitly conceived as both a way to strengthen communities and as a radical political tool of education that explicitly offered an alternative to the traditional patriotic narrative of U.S. history and a “Eurocentric university culture with ties to corporate and military power” (Kelley, 2023; p. 147). While the rhetoric and legislation sound bad enough on a textual level, a more subtextual reading reveals wider agendas. Often openly linked with banning of Critical *Race* Theory is the not-so-subtle addition of any perspective vaguely considered “Leftist”, such as teachings about socialism, Marxism, sexism, heteronormativity, or social justice in general (Zimmerman, 2022). Included in the list of terms banned by this legislation is not just race-coded words such as *multicultural*, *equity*, *structural bias*, and *White Supremacy*, but also words such as *cultural proficiency*, *land acknowledgment*, and *social justice* (Goldberg, 2023). Kaepernick himself outlined the implications:

Make no mistake about it—attempted and achieved bans on the teaching of Black Studies throughout the country are more than an attack on Black people—they’re also an assault on all social justice movements as well as non-Black people of color and white coconspirators fighting for a better, freer, and more just society. (Kaepernick, 2023; p. 8).

While Black Studies is the current focus, it appears to be merely the starting battle for a longer culture war aimed at eliminating all forms of social criticism and progress.

7.3.3 KYRC’s Response

KYRC is the fierce opponent of, and potential antidote to, this conservative suppression of critical education. KYRC explicitly acknowledges this contested terrain of education in the introduction to Political Education Curriculum (2023). The document begins as follows:

Dear Educators,

It is with great admiration for you and the work you do that we welcome you to this space, one that invites you to help your community of learners increase their understanding of human rights and Black liberation. We are thrilled to provide you with this resource, *SPEAKING OUT AGAINST THE VIOLENCE OF POLICING AND SYSTEMIC OPPRESSION*, created by the Know Your Rights Camp (KYRC).

As educators, you are navigating a difficult and often volatile educational landscape, particularly when seeking to educate about human rights and liberation. What, how, and often why you teach may be called to question. At times, you may be limited by restrictive policies and directives placed on you by individuals with a range of agendas.

And yet, you know the importance and power of your work. You know that, as educator and philosopher Paulo Freire noted, “education is not neutral.” You also know your work can focus on maintaining the status quo or, through liberation education, as teacher and civil rights activist Septima Poinsette Clark emphasized, can open the door to political, economic, and social power. (p. 3; italics in original)

Giving its emphasis on deconstructing master narratives of history, it is clear that these disputes over American history were a main impetus for the creation of the Political Education Curriculum, if not KYRC altogether. KYRC lists one of the core objectives of the Political Education Curriculum (2023) as being to help learners “analyze their understanding of race and racialization based on history, and unlearn incomplete or inaccurate narratives of history” (p. 7). The theme of Day 2 is called “Black Liberation throughout History”, which KYRC describes as goal as follows:

Learners critically reflect upon the “master narratives” they have received or have been taught about U.S. history and peoples. Then, learners explore the movement for Black

liberation in the context of the global human rights framework, analyzing the Black Panthers' Ten Point Program and the petitions of the Civil Rights Congress and Malcolm X on a global scale. (p. 12)

The specific tasks KYRC recommends include having learners read a short academic essay (Takaki, 2011) about social construction of “race” – particularly Whiteness – and the creation of master narratives of history. It then asks learners to form groups to discuss questions such as: “Takaki defines the ‘master narrative’ of the United States as one that is founded in Eurocentrism and ‘whiteness.’ How can we work to dispel this narrative and myth?” (p. 18). The lesson then ventures into critically analyzing both the precise master narratives that propel traditional American history education, as well as how the concept of master narratives itself functions to “maintain current social order” and “contribute to the erasure or neutralization of counter-narratives (often those of the social or cultural groups that lack dominant power)” (p. 21). KYRC then instructs educators to engage the following quote (echoing, in an accessible way, the spirit of Hall and Grossberg’s understanding of radical contextualism and articulation):

verbally share or write this quote: “History is the fruit of power, but power itself is never so transparent that its analysis becomes superfluous. The ultimate mark of power may be its invisibility; the ultimate challenge, the exposition of its roots.” (Silencing the Past, Michel-Rolph Trouillot, 1995). Ask learners to respond to the quote and consider the following questions: In your opinion, what perspectives and historical narratives are emphasized in schools? (Political Education Curriculum, 2023; p. 21)

The activity ends by recommending that learners write and construct their own narratives – stories integral to their identity – in the form of a monologue, Ted Talk, or spoken word piece,

even suggesting that community members host their own events or artistic showcases to share their personal narratives with each other.

The Political Education Curriculum recommends other ways for learners to intervene into the debates over race, history, and education. One of the most interesting pedagogical tactics offers by KYRC entails presenting learners with a guide to critically deconstruct their history education. The “Becoming a Defender” call to action is as follows:

On your own or with a group, choose a section from a history textbook used in your school to analyze through the lens of a counter-narrative. As you read the selection, look for the following:

- Stereotypes: An oversimplified or untrue representation of a group that represents prejudiced attitudes. This might include descriptors such as “primitive,” “barbaric,” or “uncivilized.”
- “Western civilization” or white supremacy: Representation of groups who are not European in origin as “undeveloped,” in need of help, fetishized, or inferior.
- Renaming or lack of acknowledgment/cultural genocide: The replacement of Indigenous names of practices, places, or people with Eurocentric versions.
- Images: Positioning of “good” and “bad” people/cultures that seek to classify an entire group, or fail to recognize multiplicities of identities.

After you’ve had a chance to do some research, record your results in a paragraph format or through visual representation. Think about these questions:

- What feelings are coming up for you as you identify these narratives and stereotypes?
- How can we repair inaccurate or incomplete narratives to redress history?
- How can we uplift narratives that might not be the “master” or dominant narrative?

Present your analysis to your school administration or school board as evidence where current curricula may be lacking accurate history. Petition to have these sources removed or reshaped. (p. 22)

In the Political Education Curriculum, KYRC thus articulates *itself* as a Freirian response to the current conjuncture, while encouraging and directing actions to articulate a more critical and progressive vision of the U.S. past, present, and future. In some ways, then, it can be considered a form of Leftist “astroturfing”, in which the platforms and fortunes of a Black athlete (Kaepernick) are funneled into promoting a grassroots movement to (re)think history and education as a way to (re)imagine the current social order. Both KYRC and conservatives understand the power and stakes of education. Whereas conservatives aim to mold education to maintain oppression, KYRC weaponizes education for liberation.

7.3.4 Authoritarian Populism

Returning to the conservative astroturfing of anti-CRT sentiment, we must ask: towards what ends are the conservative backlashes aimed, and why do their critiques find popular resonance? To answer these conjunctural questions, we must return to a materialist perspective that understands ideology as connected to the material reproduction of everyday life. From this perspective, culture wars are not simple bickering over preferred interpretations of empirical phenomena, but rather a fight between classed interests (certainly intertwined with race) and dominant/non-dominant blocs over the legitimacy and reproduction of the status quo. The culture wars are thus the vernacular expression of conjunctural crises, in which dominant and dominated groups battle in the cultural realm to popularize their diagnosis and prescriptions for the apprehensions of the status quo (Gramsci, 1992; Hall, 1985; Hart, 2024). I argue that this status quo is still neoliberalism, and the primary aim of dominant blocs is to keep racial capitalism (and its contemporary form of racial neoliberalism) intact (Goldberg, 2009).

In the wake of the 2009 financial crisis, the devastation caused by the COVID-19 pandemic, and every catastrophe in between, neoliberalism has faced a crisis of legitimacy. What we are experiencing is that attacks on racism increase in proportion to the decline in hegemonic legitimacy of neoliberalism (Roediger, 2019). For the Right, then, the backlash against anti-racism strategically capitalizes on the residual racial sentiments as a form of tarnishing the brand of social criticism itself, which doubles as a preemptive strike against the broader critique of capitalism that continues to exploit Blacks, Whites, and all of the non-elite (Kelley, 2003; Johnson, 2022). Remember that these bills are not only widely supported by local and national conservatives (with CRT being *the* main political issue for many conservatives), but they are also funded by conservative think tanks. As Kelley (2023) suggests, while many everyday conservatives prefer to replace perceived CRT with a traditional patriotic education, the elite conservatives funding the anti-CRT push aim to replace it with a market fundamentalism that sustains neoliberal capitalism. What appear to be the Culture Wars over race and education – as I have argued – are underpinned by an intense conjunctural crisis over the legitimacy of (racial) neoliberalism (Goldberg, 2009). Because these culture wars are occurring in the wider context of the global conjuncture marked by the return of authoritarianism (Hart, 2024; Norris & Inglehart, 2019), the outrage over CRT resembles a renewed form of what Hall (1980) called authoritarian populism.

Scholars have documented a global return of authoritarianism since roughly 2015 (Diamond et al., 2016; Frantz, 2018). It has been an alarmingly global trend, illustrated most visibly by the electoral victories of authoritarian regimes in various corners of the world: Donald Trump in the U.S., Jair Bolsonaro in Brazil, Viktor Orbán in Hungary, Rodrigo Duterte in the Philippines, and Brexit in the United Kingdom (Levitsky & Ziblatt, 2019; Norris & Inglehart, 2019; Wiatr, 2019).

Applying Poulantzas' (1978) concept of authoritarian statism, Hall (1980) remarked that authoritarian *populism* is the strategy that through which consent for authoritarian regimes is won at the political-ideological level. Hall (1985) used the term to refer to the:

ways in which popular consent can be so constructed, by a historical bloc seeking hegemony, as to harness to its support some popular discontents, neutralise the opposing forces, disaggregate the opposition and really incorporate *some* strategic elements of popular opinion into its own hegemonic project. (p. 285; italics in original)

The recent deployment of authoritarian populism utilized by Trump in the American context has targeted not just criminals and immigrants (familiar authoritarian tropes), but has also positioned the danger-from-within to be a pervasive group of Leftist-indoctrinated professors and educators who – under the guise of anti-racism and equality – are conspiring to overturn the foundational ideas of America and Western modernity, thereby redefining what it means to be American (Goldberg, 2023). As we have outlined, it arose as a backlash widespread criticism of police brutality, and its resulting global acknowledgement of how race structures so many facets of our lived experience; it is a response to the moment in which a “colorblind” society was suddenly jolted into seeing color (Bonilla-Silva, 2014). Those opposed to this racial progress responded with a desperate attachment to a cognitive dissonance towards the pervasive advantages and disadvantages linked to race. This constituency primarily was susceptible to, if not actively involved in, a renewed form of authoritarian populism: the construction of consent among the popular masses for a state that disciplines not just people, but *ideas*, in service of authoritarian crackdowns (Hall, 1980).

This new form of authoritarian populism – what Bray (2015) has now aptly called neoliberal populism – is an expression of more fundamental dissatisfaction with the neoliberal hegemonic

formation (Mouffe, 2018). Therefore moral panics over ideas such as CRT, no matter how abstract or absurd, “[prove] extraordinarily useful as a vehicle for electorally channeling popular frustrations over economic conditions in the core” (Bray, 2015; p. 50), especially when threats produced by neoliberalism’s economic functions can be vernacularly attributed to the excesses of efforts to help the (racialized) undeserving poor or marginalized (Hart, 2019). Aptly, Stepp and Castle (2021) even suggest that intense negative attitudes towards Kaepernick’s kneeling in 2015 – itself a moral panic, as analyzed in Chapter 4 – were most strongly associated with two social-psychological traits: racial resentment and authoritarian personality traits. The moral panics engineered through right-wing populism continue to gain traction because “neoliberalism generates antagonisms that it is incapable of containing” (Hart, 2019; p. 315). In all, populism is an expression of class antagonisms that deploys the unfortunately familiar vocabulary of racism, anti-communism, and xenophobia.⁷²

Certainly these culture wars are not solely responsible for the return of right-wing authoritarian populism, as authoritarianism is a “complex, multifaceted, and contradictory phenomenon” (Bruff, 2014; p. 120). However, I discuss these contemporary culture wars because they are operating in the political-ideological terrain in which hegemony is being secured, strengthened, and legitimated (Hall, 1985). In more simple terms, this political-ideological terrain is where the idealized image of a nativist and uncritical patriotic America is being cultivated, and thus where popular consent for conservative regressivism articulated by the Right is being won. It is in this terrain that the Left must fight back, by working to articulate a present

⁷² Wherein a large part of authoritarian backlash centers children – how so many right-wing populist issues use children as a facade to push cultural regressivism – it is ironic that KYRC also targets youth. So to speak, the right-wing Save the Children ethos is countered by KYRC’s left-wing Educate, and thus, Empower the Children. While the empty signifier of “the youth” has historically been deployed by conservatives as ideological cover for the culture warring (see Abate, 2010; Wheeler, 2003), it is significant that KYRC enters the terrain of ideological struggle but actually in investing in “the youth” as its primary agent of change.

(or future) of America based in equality, liberation, and a critical consciousness that is decoupled from the material and ideological grips of neoliberalism. This, perhaps more than the other arguments I have made to this point, is KYRC's significance. *Through the empowerment and solidarity offered at its camps, through its community outreach and material rapid response, and through its critical sporting pedagogy via community spaces and social media, KYRC is above all an effort to pair political-ideological intervention with material intervention to articulate a vision for a liberated society.* In the next section, I explore the stakes of contemporary neoliberalism for Black America, which underscores the necessity of KYRC's urgent, if delicate, intervention.

7.4 Neoliberalism and Black America

KYRC is attuned to both the culture wars over race and education and recognizes their deeper connections to neoliberalism, and as such, coordinates to counter the Right's efforts in the political-ideological terrain. Towards the beginning of KYRC's Political Education Curriculum (2023), Kaepernick states that "To understand the necessity and urgency of abolition, we must first understand the genesis and histories of the institutions and practices we must abolish" (p. 3). In providing further context for what KYRC is responding to, it is important to remember that while culture wars often manifest as hysterical, they are not constituted from thin air. They may be interpreted by some through the lens of Marxian false consciousness (Althusser, 1971; Gramsci, 1992; Freire, 2017; Lukács, 1972; Marx & Engels, 1970),⁷³ but culture wars are often the manifestation of real material contradictions that drastically affect our day-to-day lives. These contradictions are foundational to capitalism, but are arguably widening and intensifying

⁷³ For Marx, "false consciousness" refers to the state in which the proletariat (working-class) uncritically accept the ideological framings and systems of thought that function to conceal the reality of proletariat subordination, maintain bourgeoisie dominance, and more generally uphold class relations in capitalist society (see Marx & Engels, 1970).

within the current capitalist stage of neoliberalism. As I discuss below, although the widespread harms of neoliberalism are at the root of these cultural antagonisms, neoliberalism has had the most devastating effect upon the Black communities in which KYRC operates. KYRC's pursuit of Black liberation thus must confront how neoliberalism has harmed Black people, Black communities, and even Black political resistance.

7.4.1 An Economic and Social Doctrine

In general, neoliberalism refers to the ideological project that seeks an upward transfer of wealth through a confluence of political and economic agendas: the promotion of privatization (rather than investment in public services); deregulation as a supposed stimulant to innovation (rather than regulation aimed at protecting consumers or the environment), corporate protection and competition (rather than consumer protection), trickle-down economics, and overall supremacy of the free market as the ultimate solution to public problems (see Andrews & Silk, 2012; 2018; Brown, 2015; Harvey, 2020; Slobodian, 2018). This ideology is linked with a corollary social ideology that legitimizes individualism and meritocracy over collective solidarity and acknowledgement of structural determinants. Neoliberalism thus functions as a “dominant political rationality that moves to and from the management of the state to the inner workings of the subject, normatively constructing and interpellating individuals as entrepreneurial actors” (Rottenberg, 2014; p. 420). Since neoliberalism's (bipartisan) takeover of the Western world in the 1980s, the rich have gotten richer, the poor have gotten poorer, the oppressed have been told to pick themselves up by their bootstraps, and the hyper focus on the individual has dramatically severed our sense of community and social solidarity (Aronson, 2019; Harvey, 2021).

While neoliberalism has wrought harm for everyone but the upper-class, it has harmed vulnerable groups most viciously, including Black America (Kelley, 2018; Marable, 2015). To

fully understand the mechanisms through which neoliberalism harms Black America, we must first explore how racial oppression has always been linked with class oppression. As previously discussed, scholars have used the terms racial capitalism (Robinson, 1983; see also Bhattacharyya, 2018), or its current flavor of racial neoliberalism (Goldberg, 2009), to refer to how the racism and capitalism/neoliberalism cooperate to oppress on the basis of race, class, and even territory. Capitalism relies on the affective and differentiating process of racism to conceal and in some cases justify the exploitation, violence, and expropriation that capitalism requires to function (Gilmore, 2007; Kelley, 2003; Mills, 2000; Roediger, 2017). Meanwhile, capitalism affects how racial structures persist through cultural and economic means, even as the salience of race is popularly denigrated as a constitutive factor in individuals' lives (Bonilla-Silva, 2014; Hall, 2021).

What are the practical implications of this process in the U.S. context? As detailed by Manning Marable (2015), many of the issues that have resulted in the underdevelopment of Black America can be attributed to the routine workings of capitalism. Though they have been exacerbated (while ironically also being concealed) by the mid-1970s turn to neoliberalism, the capitalist processes that destroyed Black America preceded its neoliberal prototype. Eschewing common liberal notions that Blacks have been harmed by *exclusion* from mainstream society, Marable (2015) flips this logic on its head by arguing that Black America was damaged by its *inclusion* in the neoliberal project:

Blacks occupy the lowest socioeconomic rung in the ladder of American upward mobility precisely because they have been 'integrated' all too well into the system. America's 'democratic' government and 'free enterprise' system are structured deliberately and specifically to maximize Black oppression. Capitalist development has occurred not in spite

of the exclusion of Blacks but because of the brutal exploitation of Blacks as workers and consumers. Blacks have never been equal partners in the American Social Contract, because the system exists not to develop, but to *underdevelop Black people*. (p. 2., italics in original)

This quote demonstrates a critique of mainstream liberal anti-racist doctrine, wherein it is believed that racism can be solved through more diversity and inclusion of Blacks within the capitalist system (as opposed to overturning the structures that rely on and reproduce Black oppression) (Frederickson, 1995; Mills, 2017; Spence, 2015; Wallace, 2024).

In my previous discussion of dominant neoliberal form of sport-for-Development in Chapter 2, I established that many social programs – let alone sport-based programs (Darnell, 2007) – that aim to address racial inequality do so in a manner that implicitly locates (predominantly poor and working class) Blacks as subjects who unfortunately lack the knowledge to achieve success in mainstream society, and thus cultivate strategies to help poor and working-class Blacks ingratiate themselves to the status quo (Hartmann, 2016). After now having empirically analyzed KYRC, we can identify that KYRC’s radical view of racism locates the problem within hegemonic social structures itself. Therefore, KYRC answers calls from Black radicals such as Marable to “analyze the historical foundations of underdevelopment, and articulate a theory of social transformation which will overturn capitalism, patriarchy, and white supremacy” (Marable, 2015; p. 9). The connections between racism and these other oppressive forces are made clear in KYRC’s social media, as well as the Kaepernick Curriculum and Political Education Curriculum.

It is fashionable for scholars to highlight (and in some cases, exaggerate and romanticize) the resiliency of Black America in the face of these dire circumstances. Perhaps I am doing so in this project. But we must also be fully aware of how, unsurprisingly, the economic despair has

severely impacted the zeitgeist of Black America. Cornel West (1994) identified how neoliberalism precipitated a widespread sense of nihilism in Black America, referring to a combination of psychological depression, personal worthlessness, and social despair that has resulted in a loss of hope and absence of meaning for many Black communities. Indeed, one of neoliberalism's most overlooked attacks is its "privatization of hope" (Aronson, 2019), referring to the widespread transferring of hope and collective of pursuits of social transformation that once comprised the social sphere to the domain of the private individual, wherein the contemporary neoliberal subject has become unaware of the presence of a social self in addition to (or perhaps in opposition to) the private self. In other words, the sociocultural ideologies of neoliberalism have come to shape the very methods of protest against it, individualizing a form of resistance that can only be effective when done collectively. As a result, pursuits of social transformation – such as KYRC – must begin with (re)establishing the idea that the "social" exists at all.

7.4.2 Restoring Hope in a Colorblind America

Though sounding like a simple concept, the restoration of "hope" is what Aronson (2019) situates as the direst need of contemporary social movements and SMOs, whom he argues have either overemphasized the objective social factors or have succumbed to cynicism as a result of daunting ubiquity of neoliberalism. Aronson describes social hope as the merging of subjective factors (social attitudes, feelings, moods) and objective factors (political, social, and/or economic realities) in such a manner that encourages collective social action in pursuit of altruistic social goals. For Aronson (2019), "social hope starts with the fact that its subject is collective: *we not I*" (p. 36; italics in original). The emphasis on restoring the collective is the antidote to the cynicism that includes the conviction that all people are motivated solely by naked self-interest;

the belief that lying and manipulation in the sociopolitical realm is inevitable and inescapable; and a political fatalism that breeds passivity, stifles social action, and promotes the feeling that every individual must fend for themselves (Aronson, 2019). This cynicism is not a feeling that is instead built into capitalism and especially pervasive in the era of neoliberalism (Aronson, 2019).

Yet, the prospects of restoring social hope in contradiction to the individualizing forces of neoliberalism is still possible (White, 2014). West (1994) has long diagnosed social hope as the antidote for the nihilism of Black America. Careful to avoid the widely-adopted “culture of poverty” argument that was prevalent in the 1990s and beyond that placed blame on a deficient Black culture and Black behavior for the persistence of racism isolated from structural conditions (Coates, 2018), West argues that nihilism has permeated Black youth behavior because of the structural conditions of neoliberalism. Nihilism poses a threat not just to the psychology of Black America, but to the political energy that would be required to transform oppressive structures. West argued that “the self-fulfilling prophecy of the nihilistic threat is that without hope there can be no future, that without meaning there can be no struggle” (p. 15). KYRC takes active steps to incorporate hope into its programming. Kaepernick ends many of the promotional camp videos with his statement to the attendees: “love is at the root of resistance.” As such, West’s point applies strongly to KYRC, which educates about structural constraints while emphasizing the development of self-love and collective solidarity amongst Black youth as a precursor for transformative action.

KYRC, however, is operating within a unique racial formation. While there is such a renewed focus on race on the Right (with kneeling Black athletes and CRT) and the Left (with BLM and a broader racial reckoning), this focus awkwardly has emerged beside a doctrine of colorblindness. In fact, Bonilla-Silva (2014) notably identified “colorblind racism” as the form of

racial thinking produced by the neoliberal age. This social ideology underpins claims that the U.S. has achieved a post-racial society in which race ostensibly no longer influences one's life chances and experiences, and that we can (and indeed should, the thinking goes) act with a "colorblind" approach that purportedly ignores race and treats people equally (Bonilla-Silva, 2014). However, despite the convenient naïveté of neoliberal doctrine, racial inequalities are persisting – and in some capacities, deepening – because many social, political, and economic institutions function in manners that privilege Whiteness and/or discriminate against Blackness, even if no group or individual commits an act that could be described as racist (Kendi, 2019). Bonilla-Silva's (2014) notion of "colorblind racism" in the neoliberal age then captures ways in which racial attitudes and inequalities are circulated and arguably fortified most in the arenas that engage race in a manner that masquerades as apolitical or racially neutral.

The fiction that the ideas of neoliberalism and colorblindness espouse does not mean that they can be readily dismissed. Beyond the manner in which they neglect the structural (rather than interpersonal) operations of racism and shift the burden of liberation onto the racialized individual, they widely obscure the historical consequences of centuries of racism that have yet to be meaningfully ameliorated, as well as the immense material damage that colorblind racism wreaks in the present day that disproportionately harms the Black community (Goldberg, 2009; Marable, 2015, Mills, 1997; Rothstein, 2017). Perhaps, as we have discussed, we have already moved beyond the covert colorblind racism, and the loud conservative backlash to color consciousness of BLM has signaled a return to covert racism. Perhaps the dogwhistles have become blowhorns. Given that Rufo and others lean into colorblindness as an argument against anything that explicitly names Black oppression (as CRT does), it appears that the Right has become aware of how the language of colorblindness can be mobilized to retain racial

hierarchies and disincentivize structural racial transformation (Hartman, 2015). The unresolved tension between a Right that weaponizes colorblindness and a Left that demands color consciousness is what is at stake in the culture wars. The new racial formation that is being forged in the aftermath of neoliberal colorblindness is what both conservatives and initiatives such as KYRC are competing to manufacture.

Yet the concept neoliberalism itself is rarely identified by the general public as a target of compliance or resistance (Monbiot, 2016). The cultural politics of neoliberalism have functioned to educate the populace in ways that reinforce its economic and political dictates (Andrews & Silk, 2018). Neoliberalism produces “a powerful ensemble of ideological and institutional forces whose aim is to produce competitive, self-interested individuals vying for their own material and ideological gain” (Giroux, 2011; p. 134). The “permanent education” – as Raymond Williams (1967) has termed it – occurs not just in the classroom, but through a ubiquitous (and ever-expanding) range of institutions (including sport, film and television, and advertising) that promote certain ideologies and subject positions while restricting others. These messages delivered through culture often serve to reinforce neoliberal social relations and undermine the imagining of – let alone realization of – radical collectivist politics that could challenge its hegemony.

This is not simply a conspiracy of neoliberalism, but again substantiates the central role of culture in the sustenance of sociopolitical formations. Because culture exists as “the primary sphere in which individuals, groups, and institutions engage in the art of translating the diverse and multiple relations that mediate between private life and public concerns” (Giroux, 2011; p. 138), it functions as a highly contested sphere over “the production, distribution, and regulation of power, and how and where it operates both symbolically and institutionally as an educational,

political, and economic force” (p. 138). In a nutshell, this is the project of cultural studies: to understand the relationship between culture and power, by articulating how the mundane and the personal is/becomes political, and thus how the political is/becomes pedagogical (Andrews & Loy, 1993; Hall, 2016; Miller, 2001). More than a productive site for scholarly analysis, radical programs such as KYRC demonstrate how a critical analysis of culture can help one theorize not only the operations and dominance of power, but also its conjunctural cracks and fissures. These cracks can serve as opportunities for radical thinkers/activists/SMOs who have retained the capability to imagine alternatives to the seeming inevitability of the status quo. We now turn to how KYRC has evaded an ironic (yet widespread) “neoliberal” form of Black resistance to racial neoliberalism.

7.5 KYRC as Anti-Essentialist Black Resistance

Unfortunately, neoliberalism as a prevailing social and cultural ideology has hindered the ability to imagine radical alternatives to racial capitalism (Zamalin, 2018). Therefore, we must address how neoliberalism has polluted the political imagination of the Black community, thereby limiting the conceptual vocabulary to critique it and the tactical toolkit to transform it. Spence (2015) outlines the neoliberal turn in contemporary Black politics, which encourages Blacks to compete over scarce resources. Spence specifically refers to the “hustler’s mentality,” which touts that idea that Blacks can achieve liberation by pursuing constant entrepreneurship, prioritizing investments and financial initiatives, working extra hard in their endeavors, or if all else fails, finding creative ways to exploit or trick another party out of their money (Spence, 2015). This theory is rampant in contemporary Black popular culture – especially rap music – but is essentially just a recent iteration of a long tradition of Black conservatism that preaches self-responsibility, respectability, economic empowerment, and individualism, submerged with

the contemporary gig economy, informalization of work, and emphasis on materialism and consumerism (Frederickson, 1995; Kelley, 2003; Matlon, 2022; Zamalin, 2019).

The ubiquity of this belief reflects the individualization of Black liberatory thought. It is likely derived from the stereotype that Blacks are at the bottom of the socioeconomic ladder because they lack the work ethic necessary to “compete” in the modern market (Marable, 2015). It also demonstrates the ways in which the same market forces that West (1994) argues damage the Black community have captured the community’s desires, imaginations, and identifications in ways that obscure its own exploitative effects and discourage critical interrogation (Matlon, 2022). Interestingly, Spence (2015) mentions that although Black popular culture (such as music and sport) often reifies the hustler’s mentality, Black cultural forms are still capable of challenging the key premises of neoliberalism and steering Black youth into more politically productive avenues. KYRC appears to pursue the task of exposing and counteracting the neoliberalization of Black politics by promoting collectivity rather than individualism, while encouraging critical interrogation of – rather than passive accommodation to – capitalist structures.

Returning to our discussion in Chapter 3, KYRC strikes the delicate balance of advocating for a collective Black radical resistance without falling into the “essentialist” trap. Scholars within cultural studies have noted how discussions Black resistance can all too quickly become essentialist, referring to the idea that those socially assigned to a racial category (such as “Black”) share a common, fixed, universal essence (whether that be a phenotypical marker, biological trait, cultural commonality, or as Robinson [1983] argued, a radical political consciousness⁷⁴) (Gilroy, 1993; 2000; Hall, 1988; 1996). In this essentialist view, Black

⁷⁴ Even Cedric Robinson’s attempt to construct the Black Radical Tradition has been accused of perpetuating the notion that Blacks have an essential, inherent radical consciousness that sprouts up across regional or historical

resistance is often romanticized instead of critically engaged; wherein anything that is coded as “Black” is assumed to be transgressive in and of itself because it purportedly expresses a monolithic “Black” viewpoint – regardless of what political visions it is actually advancing, or if the impact extends beyond the individual to the collective Black community (Wallace & Andrews, 2021). Put simply, it is too often assumed that Black people all – automatically – have an intricate understanding of the effects of racism and an intuitive knowledge of how to eradicate it. Despite the host of ontological and epistemological issues that arise (see Burden-Stelly, 2018; Hall, 1988; Johnson, 2022; Reed Jr., 2021; Taiwo, 2022), the impulse to romanticize Black resistance stems from what mostly appears to be a well-intentioned corrective of a history that denigrated anything coded as Black. From that perspective, it is understandable how one can perceive just existing, let alone succeeding, as a Black person to be a form of transgressive politics. The logic then extends to Black athletes – whom literally embody the American Dream on a global stage – as being the paragons of Black resistance (Cashmore, 2008; Hartmann, 2003; Farred, 2022; Matlon, 2022).

However, this romantic view of Black resistance is too simplistic – for Black people and certainly Black athletes – and thus is limiting and counterproductive to structurally-focused anti-racist and anti-neoliberal politics. What Hall (1996) calls this ‘essentializing moment’ of Black romanticism is flawed, first and foremost because of how it “naturalizes and de-historicizes [racial] difference, mistaking what is historical and cultural for what is natural, biological, and genetic” (p. 475). While Hall was talking about forms of Black popular culture being a product of history and culture rather than “nature”, the same idea rings true for what Robinson (1983) designated as a Black radical political consciousness. The implication for Hall (1988), and later

context, thereby implying that Black radicalism is innate because he does not adequately emphasize the political-ideological work done to construct a Black radical resistance across various contexts (see Robinson et al., 2022).

Gilroy (1993; 2000), was that Black politics, resistance, and intellectual production must be approached with the same rigor and scrutiny as non-Black intellectual production. Those with too charitable or inclusive of a definition of progressive Black politics – whom are too quick to label any individual Black success as racial progress, regardless of whether or not one Black person’s success is in any way beneficial to the broader (intersectional) Black community – risks not only diluting popular conceptions of what constitutes activism, but more concerning, tacitly promoting and advertising neoliberal or even conservative methods of Black advancement that reinforce (rather than resist) racial neoliberalism. The stakes of Black liberatory politics are too significant not to engage them critically. The existence of KYRC illustrates how the heightened economic and cultural prominence of sport should mean higher political standards for Black athletes, and even offers the broader Black community a model of anti-essentialist organizing against racial capitalism and neoliberalism.

Johnson (2022) provocatively noted the return of reductive Black ethnic politics – what he calls Black exceptionalism – within the BLM moment (specifically among the Black community). This Black exceptionalism is embodied by the academic emergence of Afropessimism (see Ford & Brown, 2022; Olaloku-Teriba, 2018; Sanchez, 2022) but expressed prominently within the broader activist community. He argues that Black exceptionalism “insists on the uniqueness of the Black predicament and on the need for race-specific remedies” (p. 16) in a manner that “prohibits any substantive discussion of class” (p. 58). In turn, it permits the falsehood of a unidimensional Black population that is “noble, long-suffering victims of oppression and the moral conscience of a white-dominated nation, rather than as a people possessing all the social contradictions, ideological diversity, foibles, heroism, and frailties found throughout the American populace” (p. 59). For Johnson (2022), Black exceptionalism has

underpinned some good-faith resistance efforts to neoliberalism, as well as bad-faith weaponization and appropriation of Black nationalist sentiment for more narrow individualist goals of fame, stature, career advancement, or disguising other forms of exploitation. Not only is the logic of Black exceptionalism flawed in that it veers into (if not, in many instances, fully endorses) racial essentialism, but it also discourages rather than encourages notions of solidarity, coalition-based efforts for social change, and any common humanist basis for organizing against racial capitalism (Carley, 2019; Reed Jr., 2013; Taiwo, 2022).

Scholars have noted how neoliberalism's decimation of the working class has also fractured the formation of solidarities required to organizing against it. For instance, this was argued by Hall et al. (2013) in their conjunctural analysis of race and class as examined through the moral panic of mugging. For Hall, racism fractures the working class, dulling the unity necessary to fulfill what Marxists believed to be its revolutionary potential (Allman, 1999). Labor and the activities of vulnerable workers are not simply 'colored' by race, but labor works through race; race is intrinsic to how class-structured modes of production appear in the economic, political, and ideological level (Hall, 1980). Hall argues that:

the constitution of this fraction as a class, and the class relations which ascribe it, function as race relations. Race is thus the modality in which class is 'lived', the medium through which class relations are experienced, the form in which it is appropriated and 'fought through.' (p. 239)

Hall viewed capital as responsible for neutralizing class unity through stoking racial divisions, preventing attempts to construct an alternative means of representation which could consolidate the oppressed class of all races against the dominating forces of both capitalism and racism.

Heeding Hall’s warning almost 50 years later, KYRC’s focus on capitalism and endorsement of allyship and solidarity is the more politically-productive pathway to racial liberation against the forces of neoliberalism than the Black ethnic politics too-often endorsed in BLM era (Chapman, 2021; Johnson, 2022). KYRC certainly celebrates Blackness and acknowledges the many unique forms of oppressions faced by Blacks. But they do so while explicitly rejecting essentialist notions of race and emphasizing the shared plight of racialized groups and ethnicities in ways that encourage coalition organizing.

For instance, KYRC emphasizes in the Political Education Curriculum the social construction of race, as well as the material conditions that precipitated the development of “racial” logics. The first activities of Day 2 (“Black Liberation throughout History”) asks learners to peruse the *Dictionary of Races or Peoples* (Dillingham, 1910) developed by Immigration Coalition of the U.S., which outlines the “biological” racial typologies generally-accepted at the time. KYRC asks learners to reflect on the following critical questions:

Who decided these classifications and categorizations of race? Who gave this group of people the authority to do that? Who or what inspired the search to classify humans in this way? What power does this give the people in different classifications? (p. 20)

Not only does KYRC suggest a pedagogy that demystifies the “natural” derivation of race, but it also acknowledges and critiques the lingering (and perhaps re-emerging) ideologies that implicitly or explicitly position race as biological. Additionally, the Political Education Curriculum (2023) connects KYRC’s fundamental objective of Black Liberation with the plight and liberation of Native American/Indigenous, Chicano, and Asian American peoples. One of the “Becoming a Defender” activities on page 18 – in discussing the concept of settler colonialism –

even guides learners to research the Native/indigenous roots of their community and crafting a land acknowledgement.

KYRC's focus on the Black Radical Tradition – in other words, their radical and materialist pedagogy of race – even provides tips for constructing solidarity with other oppressed peoples and constructing political coalitions. The Political Education Curriculum has the entirety of Day 4 – thematically titled “Solidarity and Community Building” – focused on unpacking the practices and challenges of allyship, solidarity, and community building across race, ethnicity, and social location. Beginning with Angela Davis' quote that “the Black radical tradition is related not simply to Black people, but to all who struggle for freedom...our histories never unfold in isolation” (2016; quoted in Political Education Curriculum, 2023; p. 31), the Curriculum has learners engage the famous coalition-building tactics of Fred Hampton and the Illinois Chapter of the BPP in forming the Rainbow Coalition (KYRC cites Reckon, 2021; also see Haas, 2011; Middlebrook, 2019; Pierce, 1988). After guiding learners through this (rather suppressed) history of Black coalition politics, KYRC asks learners to engage and apply the historical lessons to today, with questions such as: “How did the Rainbow Coalition bring together people from different ethnic and racial backgrounds and lived experiences? What common values did group members share?” and “What do you think are the roles of white and non-Black people in the movement for Black liberation? How do feminist, pro-poor, pro-Black, pro-the oppressed, pro-queer, and pro-trans politics inform what actions they can take?” (p. 31). In other words, rather than viewing Black issues in isolation from material conditions, KYRC aims to connect them with plight of other groups affected by the processes of racial capitalism/neoliberalism.

In doing so, KYRC demonstrates how one can reject an essentialist and romanticizing view of Black resistance without dismissing the ontological category of Black altogether, as if the label means nothing. In fact Hall (1998) has argued – and I would argue in my application to Black athletes in Chapter 3 – that “Black” is still an important category of political organization. But the identification of a group of people as Black has to be cultivated and developed, let alone a political project that advances collective Black empowerment. Hall saw racial identity as always being actively constructed, discernible not in its definition but in its positioning. For Hall (1990), racial identities are “a matter of ‘becoming’ as well as of ‘being’ ... Far from being eternally fixed in some essentialized past, they are subject to the continuous ‘play’ of history, culture, power” (p. 260). Identifying as Black is generative not because it channels any sort of categorical authenticity, but because it could form the creative basis of the identities and Black collective politics of the future (Hall, 1986). Here, he declares the key insight situates the importance of KYRC’s work: it is not identity that mobilizes political struggle, but political struggle that mobilizes identity:

Identity is at the end, not the beginning, of the paradigm. Identity is what is at stake in political organization. It isn’t that the subjects are there and we just can’t get to them. It is that they don’t know yet that they are subjects of a possible discourse. And that always in every political struggle, since every political struggle is always open, it is possible either to win their identification or to lose it” (Hall, 1998; p. 331)

KYRC engages in critical pedagogy to nurture a liberatory Black politics, while acknowledging, as Hall did, that a politics capable of creating a Black identity cannot be guaranteed in advance. It must instead be struggled for. As Gilroy (1993) articulated, popular culture (such as sport) serves as a means of identification, communication, affiliation, and consolidation within and

across Black cultural contexts. Black resistance through popular culture has harbored both potential and contradictions: they have articulated insights and perspectives that, in many cases, was influenced by and sought inclusion into Western Enlightenment ideals while simultaneously resisting, coping, and/or posing alternative modes of social organization. Through the case of KYRC, I am arguing that contemporary sport provides the factors – most notably economic capital, cultural resonance, a global platform, and deep ties to personal and collective identity – through which a Black collective politics can be promoted, advanced, and hopefully achieved.

In other words, returning to my Chapter 3 discussion in this context, my perhaps controversial position is that it is not enough to celebrate Black athletes for their individual success; we must demand them to use their success for collective Black uplift as a proper resistance to neoliberalism. This is undoubtedly unfair and unequal. White athletes do not have the same burden. But the White community is not nearly as reliant on White athletes as the Black community is Black athletes. Certainly not every Black athlete will agree, or act in a collective “activist” manner; especially given the predicament described above. The Black Radical Athlete, however, is the one who does. An anti-essentialist Black athletic resistance acknowledges that a productive Black resistive pedagogy is not automatically instilled within a Black athlete. It must instead be called for, constructed, developed, and modeled. The work of Kaepernick and KYRC demonstrates the power and potential of Black radical sporting activism, and as such, offers a model that athletes in the present and future will hopefully follow. KYRC, if nothing else, is a model of both the political-ideological and grassroots-collaborative work of mobilizing sport to create social change. It is both the work that results from the discovery of the Black Radical Athlete, and the active coordinated political work that it will take to exponentially unlock a collective Black politics.

7.6 Black Liberation, The Third Sector, and the Non-Profit Industrial Complex

Now that we have established the culture wars and the individualization of Black politics as neoliberal expressions of our conjuncture, we now turn a critical eye towards another aspect of KYRC alluded to throughout this dissertation (most directly in Chapter 5): the organization's status as a *non-profit organization*. There is nothing inherently nefarious about this designation, but it is worth mentioning that KYRC's status as a non-profit fits somewhat awkwardly alongside its radical organizational mission and pedagogy, solely because of the complicated history of non-profits within pursuits of racial progress (Incite, 2007). Indeed, concurrent with the rise of neoliberalism and the concomitant shrinking of the state has been the emergence of the "Third Sector" (Kallman & Clark, 2019), which is composed of non-profit organizations (NPOs), non-governmental organizations (NGOs), international non-governmental organizations (INGOs); and civil society organizations (CSOs) somewhere in between the public and private sectors. Social movement organizations (SMOs) are also commonly included in this sector, especially as the lines between non-profits, non-governmental organizations, and social movements have become increasingly blurred (Della Porta, 2020). In the U.S. context, and often in the increasingly globalizing neoliberal context, the Third Sector tasks itself as filling in the "holes" left by the neoliberal retrenchment of public services (Pitter & Andrews, 1997). As such, this sector has emerged as an increasingly political force, with the power to create values, define problems, and dictate solutions (Dunning, 2023; Kallman & Clark, 2019).

By its proponents, the Third Sector is commonly touted as impacting the lives of the poor and marginalized in a manner that is more targeted, privately-ran, and does not require funding from the state. However, while more ostensibly operating in a space between fully public or fully private, this Third Sector is not fully independent of governmental or market forces (Dunning,

2022). Non-profits often rely on government funding. Additionally, many are reliant on donations from the middle and upper class (if not what is colloquially termed “the 1%”), which can be written off during tax season and thus lower the tax burden of the rich. What results is a situation where less public money is going to the state, and more is going to non-profits, which arguably should be the money that they just pay taxes with. As such, concomitant with neoliberalism and the Third Sector is the rise of what Pitter and Andrews (1997) call the “social problems industry” that consists of non-profits, NGOs, and other organizations that are deployed to solve the problems that once (and perhaps still should be) the burden of the state. In effect, outside of bottom-up grassroots social movements, non-profits are now by and large the primary venue through which mainstream institutions attempt to implement social change in a manner acceptable to the state.

Mixed perspectives have emerged regarding the effect of non-profits on movements for social justice. In *The Revolution Will Not Be Funded* (2007), a variety of scholars map the rise of the “Non-Profit Industrial Complex” (NPIC), which refers to “a set of symbiotic relationships that link political and financial technologies of state and owning class control with surveillance over public political ideology, including and especially emergent progressive and leftist social movements” (p. 8). The NPIC is intricately linked to neoliberalism, especially as it relates to the neoliberal approach to “uplifting” poor Black and Brown communities through charity and integration into the broader capitalist project, along with its corollary ethos and values. In other words, the critique inherent to the NPIC is that non-profits who claim to be concerned with social justice have instead acted as technologies of surveillance, control, and deradicalization of social movement energy (Fox & Turner, 2016; Samimi, 2010). Scholars argue that these non-profits, under the guise of empathy and/or philanthropy for the downtrodden, act as a form of

disciplinary power that instills pro-capitalist values into individuals that they “serve” (Mower et al., 2023). The reliance on donors and financial support often comes with strings attached, in ways that restrict the autonomy of even the most radical Third Sector organizations.

As a concept, the NPIC does not apply to every non-profit associated with every cause, but instead brings attention to a general trend. Even critics of the NPIC would largely agree that most non-profits and the people who start, operate, and fund them are mostly well-intentioned (Incite, 2007). Even if they cannot sufficiently produce the structural transformation that radicals seek, many non-profits do make tangible positive impacts of people’s lives. “Reform” is often used as a dirty word in radical circles, but even reform can often lead to material improvement to the situations of individuals and communities. Empowerment does little to change structural circumstances, but there is something to be said for how empowering the downtrodden can help them overcome psychological hurdles as a first step to collective action, even if psychological hurdles are not the problem in the first place. As the former secretary of the Ford Foundation (one of the largest philanthropic non-profits in the United States) stated:

We are in great need of more – not fewer – instruments for necessary social change under law, for ready, informed response to deep-seated problems without chaos, for accommodation of a variety of views without deafening anarchy. Foundations have served as such an instrument. (Cited in Incite, 2007; p. 8).

Proponents thus argue that non-profits are just another path to social change to be added to the overarching toolkit, and importantly, a path that allows and solicits the crucial economic support of elites in ways that social movements and protest activity, for instance, often do not.

However, critics of the NPIC argue that the non-profits have not contributed to the collective push for social change; they have, at best, replaced services that should be provided by

the now-weakened retrenched state, or, at worst, functioned to co-opt and derail grassroots efforts for progressive social change (Dunning, 2023; Incite, 2007). Arnove (1980) argued that non-profit foundations:

have a corrosive influence on a democratic society; they represent relatively unregulated and unaccountable concentrations of power and wealth which buy talent, promote causes, and in effect, establish an agenda of what merits society's attention. They serve as "cooling-out" agencies, delaying and preventing more radical, structural change. They help maintain an economic and political order, international in scope, which benefits the ruling-class interests of philanthropists. (cited in Incite, 2007; p. 8).

Furthermore, Rodriguez and Gilmore (2007) argue that the NPIC developed in tandem with the Prison Industrial Complex. Whereas the Prison Industrial Complex punitively and violently *represses* dissent, the NPIC *manages* dissent by funneling it through bureaucracies and incorporating it into the state, thereby neutralizing and controlling the spontaneous energy of radical resistance. The NPIC thus functions "as an alibi that allows government to make war, expand punishment, and proliferate market economies under the veil of partnership between the public and private sectors" (Incite, 2007; p. 9).

Non-profit foundations often brand themselves as agents who assist in ameliorating the symptoms caused largely by racial capitalism (such as poverty, homelessness, and even racism). However, Ahn (2007) argues that non-profit foundations take the public and private money that should be used for providing a social safety net, directs them towards things that help the poor less than direct payment (such as professional salaries and events for fundraising), do so with little oversight or transparency, and overall do not benefit the public in proportion to the money they take from them (in lost taxes). In essence:

their funds are derived from profits resulting from the exploitation of labor. That is, corporations become rich by exploiting their workers. Corporate profits are then put into foundations in order to provide "relief" to workers that are the result of corporate practices in the first place. (Incite, 2007, p. 9).

One of the most common causes to which non-profits have historically been dedicated is racial justice. Critics too have argued that the NPIC stifles racial justice movements by professionalizing them (and thereby decenter mass grassroots organizing and organizers in favor of those with advanced degrees) and prioritizing support for organizations aimed at political and legal reform rather than radical structural change (Roefels, 2003; Incite, 2007). The same critique has been made of SMOs. For example, Allen (1969) argued during the Civil Rights Era that non-profit organizations and the nascent third sector played a key role in shifting the Black Power movement's approach from collective liberation to one that favored Black capitalism and individualism.

In some ways, KYRC appears to be beholden to the realities of the non-profit world that hinder its goals. In other ways, KYRC's unique qualities – particularly the Kaepernick Brand – allow it to circumvent some of the NPIC's deradicalizing tendencies, and possibly represents a new, more progressive branch of the third sector. When I collected my data, my interest in KYRC in relation to the NPIC/Third Sector had not yet developed. The issue was briefly brought up organically, as previewed in Chapter 5. While describing KYRC's rapid response strategy, Participant #6 shared: "As we became a more formalized organization, you do realize that there is some *red tape within the kind of non-profit space* and things like that" (emphasis added). The euphemism "red tape" colloquially refers to excessive or rigid bureaucratic rules or procedures. While it is unclear if Participant #6 or other participants are attuned to the critiques of the NPIC I

an outlining, comments like this demonstrate an intuitive awareness of how KYRC's radical orientation and liberatory objectives sit uneasy within an often-slow-moving bureaucratic nonprofit sector.

KYRC indeed resembles a traditional non-profit in numerous ways. It is linked to a fiscal sponsor named Entertainment Industry Fund (EIF), an overarching philanthropy foundation established in 1942 that sponsors a variety of public and private philanthropic initiatives that boosts entertainers to “leverage their platforms for social good” (retrieved Dec. 2023). Statistically, the Fund claims to have raised over \$1 billion, with 200+ charities supported and over \$1 billion in “advertising space and airtime donated to EIF initiatives” (“2022 impact”, 2023). It appears this fiscal sponsorship was also made possible by the Kaepernick Brand, given that EIF declares that: “We Help Artists, Athletes and Influencers Expand Their Philanthropic Footprint” (retrieved December 2023). KYRC is the first organization pictured in EIF's 2022 annual report (2023). Additionally, like almost all non-profits, KYRC still solicits donations. Upon clicking KYRC's website, as footage of Kaepernick leading a camp autoplays above KYRC's mission statement, there are four separate buttons for viewers to click in order to donate (retrieved December 2023). They are also beholden to the transparency requirements of non-profit foundations, such as creating a publicly-available annual report.

However, I argue that KYRC – in addition to pedagogical interventions into national debates over race and education – represents how the Third Sector can be mobilized for material community uplift. KYRC is able to effectively pair radical education that identifies the structures responsible for oppression with material uplift that helps communities to survive until collective action can spur more sustained social transformation. Returning to the quote from Participant #6, following his comment about the red tape of the nonprofit space:

I think that part of our responsibility and part of Colin's, you know, pedigree is to disrupt... We're looking to kind of disrupt how antiquated systems work, like, 'no, we don't think that is the way that it needs to be done.' And we want to do it differently. So the rapid response is like sometimes 'hey, people need water and they need it yesterday.' So it can't take two weeks to get an approval on a PO or something to buy water. We need to buy water now and we need to get it to them within a day. So that kind of just sums up some of our rapid response efforts.

Interestingly, KYRC's rapid response stems from a "responsibility" to overcome "antiquated systems", which is implied to be whatever is responsible for people not directly getting the things they need.

It is not only that this responsibility stems from Kaepernick and KYRC's political commitments. These are indeed admirable, but shared by most individuals and foundations in the social justice space. The important point is that KYRC has the resources to do so. Among key insights is that, by way of the Kaepernick Brand, KYRC is able to avoid some of the deradicalizing pitfalls of the NPIC. As discussed in Chapter 5, Kaepernick's global profile provided by his athlete-activism allows KYRC to bypass the necessary sustenance activities that many traditional SMOs and nonprofits spend *most* of their resources on (at the expense of their stated social justice missions).

Instead of spending resources on fancy galas and fundraising events to appeal to elite donors, Kaepernick's celebrity status and symbol of progressive resistance attracts donors who are politically or personally aligned with Kaepernick (or desire to appear as so). Instead of spending resources on marketing and promotion trying to gain publicity, even the mere existence and mundane activities of KYRC are considered (sometimes sensationally) newsworthy by a

range of media and publications because of its connection to Kaepernick. Instead of trying to recruit staff and retain volunteers, KYRC is able to mobilize Kaepernick and the team's established connections for labor, as well as can capitalize on people willing to volunteer who are likely enticed both by KYRC's message and leadership. Instead of having to accrue the social capital necessary to navigate the nonprofit world – a dynamic that puts Black and Brown-led organizations at a disadvantage compared to White-led organizations – KYRC has been able to maximize the social and cultural capital that Kaepernick has accumulated through his athletic and educational career. This is not to say that Kaepernick's national profile has only attracted benefits. The nature of polarization – as discussed in this chapter and Chapter 4 – have resulted in arguably as many problems as benefits for Kaepernick and KYRC. But one main benefit is that, instead on spending resources on all of the above to keep itself afloat, the Kaepernick Brand enables KYRC is able to channel many of those resources into direct community uplift.

7.7 Sites of KYRC's Progressive Counter-Attack

Throughout this chapter, we have discussed the conjunctural factors that KYRC is responding to (conservative backlash to racial progress, culture wars over race and education, social and economic damages of neoliberalism, essentialist and individualized Black resistance, the deradicalizing non-profit sector). At a bird's eye view, I am arguing that KYRC represents how the Left can fight back against these processes. The organization is significant, and unprecedented, because of the way it intentionally deploys sport as a vehicle for critiquing racial capitalism/neoliberalism, restoring collective social hope, and intervening into the contemporary culture wars over race and education. KYRC offers a "bottom-up" version of history that centers the unique circumstances, challenges, contributions, and perspectives of Black people in both

sport and society, highlighting their interconnections. It represents what fighting the culture wars would look like from a progressive viewpoint.

I argue that over the next decades, there will be – in fact, there already explicitly is (King, 2008; Kusz, 2019; Dickerson & Hodler, 2021) – a metaphorical “fight” for sport between the Left and the Right. By this I mean that the black box of “sport” has been cracked open – most of all by Kaepernick, ironically – and now there is no going back. Each political movement will fight to claim the institution of sport beloved by all as solely congruent with and the ideal embodiment of their ideological values (Andrews, 2019). The Right will fight to articulate sport as a bastion of rugged meritocracy, “natural” gender roles, and colorblind American exceptionalism. The Left must fight to instead articulate sport as a bastion of cultural diversity, critical patriotism, and a vehicle for cross-cultural dialogue and solidarity. The Right perhaps has an advantage in this fight. Because sport has always been an empty vessel that has reflected the values and morals that its creators infused into it, many of our sports have intentionally or fortuitously promoted values reminiscent of a conservative America (Darnell et al., 2019; Serazio, 2019; Silk, 2013). However, I argue that KYRC represents a progressive conjunctural response in two primary sites: media and local community.

7.7.1 Media

This battle for sport will be fought across numerous terrains. A primary one will be media. The post-Kaepernick years has seen a rise in explicitly conservative (*Breitbart Sports*, *Outkick*) or implicitly conservative (*Barstool Sports*, *The Pat McAfee Show*) sports media ventures, whom aim to revert sport back to an era in which the men’s jobs are to hit each other as hard as possible, women’s jobs are to sit on the sideline and look pretty, and sport can be passively consumed unencumbered by the inconvenient stench of “politics” (Kusz & Hodler,

2023). These publications emerged in response to exaggerated grievances that mainstream sports companies such as ESPN had a “liberal bias” (Clavio & Vooris, 2018; Peterson & Muñoz, 2022). These claims are only true insofar as almost all mainstream media companies tend to report the news with an ostensibly “neutral” status-quo bias that reflects classic liberalism (see McLeod and Hertog, 1999; Peña, 2021). But despite how American conservatives conflate classic liberalism with Leftism and thus deploy this complaint to imply that mainstream news unfairly favors Leftist viewpoints, this is nowhere near the truth. Ironically, these complaints crescendoed during Kaepernick’s protest in the mid-2010s as conservatives complained that ESPN and mainstream news did not demonize Kaepernick enough (despite aforementioned studies that showed news reports often accepted conservative framing when discussing Kaepernick) (Boykoff & Carrington, 2020; Duvall, 2020).

If anything, these complaints reveal the *lack* of sports media that reports upon and discusses sports in a manner that is explicitly Leftist and progressive. Granted, there are some programs that do so rather implicitly. Programs such as ESPN’s *Outside the Lines* and HBO’s *Real Sports* feature investigative sports reporting that is often critical, serious, and speak at least slightly to the dialectic relations between sport and broader context. Furthermore, the contemporary emergence of athlete-led sports media – such as the *Player’s Tribune*, *The Shop*, and numerous podcasts by athletes – has utilized new communication technologies to allow players to not have to rely on mainstream media framing and tell their own stories (Manning et al., 2021; Peña, 2021; Wallace & Andrews, 2021; 2022). This harbors the potential for a power shift in sports media towards the athletes, even if we cannot (and certainly should not) assume that it will automatically result in more progressive or radical content. Nonetheless, given its strategic framing and use of sport as an entry point for critical conversations, KYRC represents a

model of how the platforms provided by sport – as well as the content of sport itself – can be used to articulate the need for, and nature of, radical progressive change in society.

7.7.2 Local Community

Secondly, KYRC is a conjunctural response at the localized grassroots level. As the Right has mobilized the culture wars over high-profile symbols and events, it has also matched that symbolic war with the more localized grassroots project that is more akin to community organizing. For instance, the Right's success in demonizing CRT was arguably not due solely to the rhetorical maneuvers of Rufo and Fox News. It is true that the issue was astroturfed as described above, magnified – if not invented completely – by conservative operatives in elite think tanks, rather than by run-of-the-mill concerned parents in the heart of America. However, it is also true that these maneuvers were paired with Right-wing individuals in local communities across the U.S. who – mobilized by the anti-CRT rhetoric – implemented grassroots campaigns to take over school boards, surveil local libraries, infiltrate city politics, and construct anti-CRT propaganda through towns (Kingkade et al., 2021). These grassroots tactics appear to be funded and coordinated by the national anti-CRT campaigns, even to the point of training activists to interfere with local education and politics. As Griffey (2021) explains:

A movement to train activists has amped up grassroots parental organizing around the country, bringing the lens and stakes of national politics — along with the playbook of seasoned GOP activists — to school boards... Critics of these traveling activists allege they are a part of a well-coordinated effort to foment mistrust and create chaos. While the end result of their efforts is often unclear, the tactics are similar. (para. 6-8).

Ironically, and despite my loaded language, KYRC’s Political Education Curriculum (2023) advocates for these same tactics to enact a collective progressive movement at the grassroots level.⁷⁵

While the Left largely has not hesitated to fight the symbolic battle – such as debunking conservative talking points and aiming to articulate progressive viewpoints across news and social media – the contemporary Left has found itself quantitatively outflanked when it comes to sustained grassroots campaigns that aim to shift the cultural landscape. The Left has demonstrated effective grassroots tactics in the context of labor organizing, historically and re-emergent today (Grantham-Philips, 2023; Nolan, 2024). However, the efforts to enact cultural change at the grassroots level, Freirean or otherwise, have been few and far between. In other words, concomitant with substantial shifts in racial thinking brought upon by the BLM moment, KYRC is operating in a terrain that the Left has curiously conceded to the Right. It is no wonder that the conservative backlash has been so intense.

7.8 Conclusion: Why KYRC *now*?

Applying Johnson et al.’s (2004) cultural studies-based textual analysis approach that asks “why this text now?”, this chapter attempted to ask and answer the question: “why KYRC *now*?” I argue that KYRC emerged within a moment of contention about a constellation of debates: the salience of racism in 21st century “colorblind” America; whether education should prioritize critical dissent or patriotic unity; whether progress should be made through highlighting or glossing over the visible differences that constitute the current American populace; and the role, as well as appropriateness, of using sport as a venue to articulate these visions. Moreover, as evidenced by the “moral panic” over Critical Race Theory and general instances of rolling back

⁷⁵ This may read as an example of what I mentioned in Chapter 1 about the language we intuitively use to describe the tactics of “good” and “bad” SMOs (Lofland, 1996).

racial progress with authoritarian populism (Goldberg, 2023; Hall et al., 2013), these cultural debates are rooted in anxiety and skepticism about the broader legitimacy of neoliberalism as an economic, political, and social doctrine (Andrews & Silk, 2012; Brown, 2015; Slobodian, 2018). Importantly, KYRC constitutes an anti-essentialist response to the decimation of neoliberalism that does not fall victim to forms of reductive ethnic resistance (ironically themselves rooted in neoliberal individualism) (Hall, 1998; Gilroy, 1993; Johnson, 2022), instead advancing an emancipatory politics based in solidarity amongst people victimized by racial capitalism/neoliberalism (Goldberg, 2023). Even as a non-profit organization operating in the Third Sector (Incite, 2007; Kallman & Clark, 2019), I assert that KYRC attacks these questions in ways that the broader progressive Left has failed to: with coordinated strategy, at the localized grassroots level, operating in the terrain of popular culture. KYRC therefore demonstrates how there is no *necessary* correspondence between sport and reactionary conservative populism (Andrews, 2019), and can instead be assembled to articulate a progressive vision for America's past, present, and future. Thus, KYRC can be read as both a sport-based attempt to embolden critical dissent, inclusive education, and multicultural solidarity. It also can be read as a blueprint for using sport – and perhaps popular culture more generally – in an organized, strategic, and unapologetic manner from the Left.

For how central Kaepernick's kneel was to the mid-to-late 2010s culture wars, it is surprising how little KYRC has been the target of conservative attacks. With the explicit focus on race and the unapologetic radical education offered by KYRC, it would be reasonable to expect that KYRC would be ripe for conservative critique (perhaps misrepresented as evidence of CRT run amok). An analysis from the Right of KYRC's messaging would seemingly allow for conservatives to simultaneously advance the aforementioned talking points about race and

education, while tying them to a Kaepernick endeavor would both strengthen their animosity towards Kaepernick and his brand of progressive critical pedagogy. Yet, surprisingly, the Right has had little to say about KYRC. They even seem to be unaware of it, despite the ubiquity of mainstream reporting about its initiatives.

After an exhaustive search, I could only find a few mentions of KYRC by the Right. The first is from a Fox News article from March 2023 headlined “Colin Kaepernick's activism organization silent on ties to Ben & Jerry's after report of migrant child labor”, referring to KYRC’s partnership with the progressive ice cream brand Ben & Jerry’s (Koberg, 2023). The article frames Kaepernick and Ben & Jerry’s as hypocrites, only mentioning KYRC to say that Kaepernick or the organization did not respond to Fox News’ request to cut ties with Ben & Jerry’s. Essentially the exact same story – featuring the same headline almost word for word – appeared on [Outkick.com](https://www.outkick.com) hours later, which is a bombastic conservative sports media outlet owned by Fox Corporation that lists its purpose as the following: “Questioning the consensus and exposing the destructive nature of “woke” activism, OutKick is the antidote to the mainstream sports media that often serves an elite, left-leaning minority instead of the American sports fan” (Barack, 2023). Another article from the Daily Mail – headlined “That's rich! Colin Kaepernick slams CAPITALISM as he promotes new black studies book he wrote with Marxists - despite ex-NFL star having '\$40M' fortune and \$5.4M Vegas mansion” – only mentions KYRC in passing (however, seeming to mistake it for The Colin Kaepernick Foundation) (Polio, 2023).

Otherwise, even as celebrities and progressives has donated to and partnered with KYRC, conservatives have largely ignored it. Perhaps it is as simple as KYRC’s strategic defensiveness, relative closed-off nature towards the public, and general avoidance of publicity as detailed in Chapter 5. Perhaps it is the bold and unapologetic radical messaging of KYRC that has allowed

it to evade the conservative outrage attention machine. Perhaps this messaging has rendered KYRC unsusceptible to bad-faith framings. Perhaps the meticulous strategy and coordination of KYRC at every level has signaled to the conservative outrage machine that KYRC is not worth the rhetorical or tactical battle at all.

Returning to the central question of “why KYRC *now*?”, KYRC only makes sense now because it is a coordinated response to a conjuncture for which the fractured Left has found itself unprepared. Its grassroots community focus must be situated within a particular shift in cultural politics in which fighting the battle on the terrain of spectacle and symbolism is no longer enough. KYRC’s radical approach only makes as an expression of a generational exhaustion with liberal, non-radical tactics of Black liberation – such as incremental reformism, hollow identity politics, Black exceptionalism, and Black capitalism – have proven insufficient and have given way to a more comprehensive disillusionment with the foundations of our social structure. The organization only exists because of how neoliberalism has dismantled the public service and Black America, to the point that basic community needs are subject to the benevolent “rapid response” of organizations in the Third Sector.

Further, this public sector weakened by neoliberalism combined with a particularly-American historical dissonance has resulted in children no longer being guaranteed an education that critically and accurately situates students’ lives into the broader fabric of American history, such that Third Sector organizations find it necessary to intervene in order to teach Black and Brown students a history that acknowledges race, class, gender, and power. On a more positive note, the fact this an organization like KYRC can be founded and led by an athlete such as Kaepernick – while retaining credibility among fans, activists, educators, and celebrities alike – reflects the broader cultural evolution in the unique transgressive perspectives of elite athletes

and the legitimacy of their off-the-field political pursuits. KYRC represents how sport provides the setting and the metaphorical matches for our nation's most pressing debates over race, history, education, and the very legitimacy of neoliberalism. Because of sport, and through sport, KYRC interjects into the conjuncture with a coordinated, locally-tailored, academically-curated, and strategically-sustained progressive pedagogy that advocates for a liberated society.

Chapter 8: **Conclusion**

This dissertation has analyzed KYRC from several angles, situating the empirical findings within various social contexts, academic disciplines, theoretical traditions, and historical lineages. The common thread between each of these discussions is the intention to answer the central research question: *in what ways, and within what broader sociopolitical contexts, does Know Your Rights Camp conduct grassroots sporting activism?* As such, I want begin this conclusion by highlighting how the key insights of each chapter contribute to the broader whole of understanding KYRC and its relationship to sport, race, and grassroots activism.

8.1 Summary of Findings

Know Your Rights Camp (KYRC) offers a unique entry point into the shift in sporting activism to the grassroots; a shift being administered by organizations that I have conceptually characterized as Sporting Social Movement Organizations (SMOs). These refer to organizations that utilize a connection to sport or athletes to pursue social, political, or cultural change in a coordinated, strategic, and sustained manner. Based on an analysis of their underlying objectives, logics, tactics, and politics, I have argued that KYRC and Sporting SMOs emerged at the intersection of – and perhaps from the shortcomings of – symbolic and institutional sporting activism, traditional sport-for-development organizations, and traditional athletic philanthropy organizations. KYRC’s unique model of grassroots sporting activism can be summarized as the mobilization of high-profile celebrity association as symbolic resources and philanthropy/donor money as material resources for the purposes of youth-oriented radical pedagogy and community-oriented rapid response. My empirical examination of KYRC combined the social movement frameworks of resource mobilization and framing with a cultural studies approach

based in radical contextualism and articulation. As a whole, this dissertation contained a sociological analysis of KYRC's resources, communications, institutional logics, pedagogical tactics, and challenges. This sociological analysis was paired with a cultural studies analysis of the broader contexts that enabled the rise of KYRC, and the conjuncture to which KYRC articulates a response.

First, KYRC is a Black Radical political project. The emergence of KYRC occurred within specific historical and contemporary racial contexts, specifically linked to the Black Lives Matter social movement that arose in response to widespread police brutality, Black death, and systemic racism within the ostensibly post-racial "colorblind" United States. Colin Kaepernick inadvertently became one of the most central figures in this movement with his kneeling protests in 2015. Kaepernick's radical (rather than reformist) politics materialized in his establishment of KYRC, which exhibited Kaepernick's turn from symbolic activism to coordinated grassroots activism. Examining Kaepernick's own writings and KYRC's primary influence of the Black Panther Party demonstrates how KYRC operates with radical, structurally-focused Black politics, that understands racism's linkage to capitalism and advocates for police and prison abolition. As such, KYRC exists and contributes to a historical and political lineage that academics have termed the Black Radical Tradition. Through KYRC, Kaepernick thus represents the newfound possibilities of the Black Radical Athlete, who wields a self-awareness about both the contemporary power and historical predicament of the Black athlete within racial capitalism to pursue collectivist goals that materially benefit the everyday Black masses. While we cannot expect every Black athlete to undergo the political and intellectual development of Kaepernick, the structural dynamics of sport – as well as the material state of Black America – compel us to heighten our political expectations of the Black celebrity athlete.

Second, and relatedly, KYRC is also a form of celebrity sporting activism, that provides new insights to the decades-long question of sport's emancipatory potential. The organization exists within and extends a lineage of sporting activism dating back to Dr. Harry Edwards and the previous crescendo of race-based sporting activism during the Civil Rights movement. Kaepernick's kneeling protests of 2015 harnessed the platform afforded by modern sport to question – and by extension, reconfigure – deeply held cultural assumptions about race, sport, patriotism, and identity within contemporary United States. The Kneel quickly became the iconic figurehead of an entire political moment, thereby punctuating the connections between sport and politics and launching Kaepernick into a celebritized global symbol of bold and authentic political resistance. This ascension, combined with Kaepernick's own maneuvers, created the Kaepernick Brand that is the engine of KYRC. Even this, though, was only possible within a contemporary archetype of sport fundamentally commercializes, celebritizes, spectacularizes, corporatizes, and digitizes sporting figures. While this visibly and commonly accompanies reactionary conservatism, nationalism, neoliberalism, and sheer capitalist accumulation, KYRC demonstrates how the economic and cultural centrality of sport in our everyday life can be appropriated for transformative purposes.

Third, with the social, cultural, historical, and ideological contexts in place, I then turned my attention to KYRC's specific organizational model of grassroots activism. Interviews with the people who run KYRC were most insightful for understanding the foundational goals and logics of KYRC, as well as the experiences and meanings that participants attached to KYRC's grassroots activism. The Kaepernick Brand – commercially and affectively representing authentic political resistance – catalyzes many of KYRC's operations. It has eased the collection of various symbolic and material resources for KYRC: funding, labor, publicity, participation,

partnerships, corporate endorsements, celebrity endorsements, and enthusiasm. However, it was the strategic coordination by the KYRC team that channeled these resources in accomplishing organizational goals. These goals, as conceived by participants, were primarily holistic critical education, youth empowerment, and material rapid response aimed at meeting community-specific needs. The organization sometimes faced challenges related to balancing a national profile (i.e. the Kaepernick Brand) with its radical and community-first approach, as well as navigating a non-profit world often saddled with bureaucracy, professionalization, and other deradicalizing tendencies. Yet participants felt that they were able to mitigate them through self-reflexivity and a focus on the community, and in general perceived the work as fulfilling and impactful. As a Sporting SMO, KYRC's model of grassroots activism entails the mobilization of high-profile celebrity association as symbolic resources and philanthropy/donor money as material resources for the purposes of youth-oriented radical pedagogy and community-oriented rapid response.

Fourth, KYRC is a grassroots pedagogical project. The organization applies the Gramscian and Freirean model of critical public pedagogy within a digital age that offers new opportunities and challenges for engaging audiences. KYRC uses social media to promote the organization and its partners, but the vast majority of social media usage is geared towards advancing and framing the organization's pedagogical messaging regarding police brutality, the criminal justice system, and the impact of structural racism across various realms of society. More specifically, the critical education that KYRC proffers through social media highlights injustices (underscoring the need for the organization's goal of Black liberation), highlights rare moments of justice (helping users to imagine alternatives to the status quo), and commemorates Black history and contemporary Black achievements. KYRC's Kaepernick Curriculum and Political Education

Curriculum show how the SMO is guided by a radical, intersectional, academically-grounded, structurally-oriented understanding of race and racism. In translating these viewpoints to youth, KYRC uses sport and other forms of popular culture as an entry point for denaturalizing hegemonic ideas about race and oppression. KYRC's pedagogy also encourages solidarity, horizontal styles of leadership, and localized institutional action as tactics to build power for community uplift. KYRC thus embodies a sport-focused Gramscian/Freirean social transformation project by facilitating organic intellectuals, the broadening of conditions and sites of knowledge production, mobilizing celebrityhood in service of tactical grassroots resistance, and use sport as a framing device for transformative social critique.

Lastly, in addition to a micro-level empirical examination, KYRC is also a phenomenon through which we can better understand the broader contemporary moment. KYRC emerged from and responds to a conjunctural formation in the U.S. characterized by reactionary conservative backlash to BLM and racial progress. While what is colloquially called the culture wars have always imbricated deeper national anxieties over race, history, and education, the most recent iteration has centered upon fabricated-but-effective attributions of all our nation's perceived issues to a single boogeyman: Critical Race Theory. Under the guise of correcting excessive racial advances, eliminating Critical Race Theory has been weaponized as an authoritarian populist strategy by the Right to eradicate discussions about the role of race in America's past, present, and future. In effect, education is being reoriented in primary and secondary levels of schooling to remove any flavor of critical thinking, about any subject matter. Hidden beneath the glamor of this moral panic over Critical Race Theory, however, are economic antipathies and fissures in the social fabric caused by (racial) neoliberalism. KYRC demonstrates not only the role of sport in intervening into these debates, but also models the bold

and coordinated action necessary for the Left to fight back at cultural polarization and expose the conjoined oppressions of neoliberalism. KYRC also navigates tensions between the essentialism inherent to many contemporary forms of Black resistance, as well as non-profit sector that harbors deradicalizing tendencies. While these cultural debates are being held in the domains of media and local community politics, KYRC shows how (Sporting) SMOs are capable of competing with the Right on the grassroots level, offering a social vision based in anti-essentialist Black liberation, solidarity, and community. The future of the American project is at stake.

8.2 Implications for PCS

This research began where so much other research in PCS and the sociology of sport ends. There has been an abundance of research that has analyzed and exposed the injustices, inequalities, and operations of power within sport and physical culture. Many of these works contain a common tendency. They often conclude with the argument that enacting change within sport (and society more broadly) will require widespread conscientization, or, sometimes put differently, a translation of the academic knowledge produced by scholars into communities and the public realm, such that everyday people and communities can ostensibly be mobilized to enact change. For example, after describing the structures of late capitalism that sustain contemporary uber-sport and its various exploitations, Andrews (2019) concludes with the following call to action:

...such a social transformation is never likely to be realized from some elitist, top-down, party political imposition. Rather, it requires generating a groundswell of critical understanding from below, as a pre-cursor to developing the popular will that could challenge dominant rationalities and hierarchies. (p. 155)

Later, Andrews offers the approaches of critical pedagogy and conscientization (Freire, 2017; King-White, 2012; Giroux, 1998) as potential solutions for catalyzing the de-articulation and subsequent re-articulation of elite, commercialized sport for more progressive ends. Despite the frequency of similar-sounding calls to action in PCS research, these tasks have remained easier said than done. Moreover, critical questions regarding the details of this call to conscientize the public – such as how, where, with whom, to whom, in what capacity, against what opponents, and with what impact – have still required rigorous examination. This is a project that, perhaps above all, aims to contribute to the precise details of how sport can be mobilized to enact social change, such that current and future PCS scholarship can be assisted in fulfilling its interventionist promise.

I argue that this project represents the merging of the theoretical, empirical, and political realms that stand at the foundation of Physical Cultural Studies (PCS) work. Andrews and Loy (1993) state that cultural studies “in addition to being an intellectual project ... is also a pedagogical and political project” (p. 270). Sport and physical culture then – through this lens – must be understood as a site of everyday experience that is not divorced from broader social structure, but it infested with meaning and power. At its core, our field must approach and analyze sport with a broader objective than just attaining knowledge for its own sake, but must examine how sport is utilized as a site for political and pedagogical dissemination and intervention in the contested terrain of culture, fulfilling the gap between “consciousness and corporeality” (Andrews & Loy, 1993; p. 270). Overall, because of both sport’s position in the global cultural register and the everydayness of physicality, Sporting SMOs such as KYRC demonstrate how physical culture is capable of radical public pedagogies that expose the formations of power precisely because of physical culture’s perceived innocuous nature.

I unpacked these dynamics through a theoretical and methodological eclecticism (Wheaton, 2017) that merges influence from various theoretical and methodological paradigms as a way to best analyze my empirical site. In doing so, I positioned KYRC as an entry point for understanding the relationship between cultural studies, the Black Radical Tradition, social movement theories, and sport's emancipatory potential ("theoretical"); attaining the meaning, processes, mechanics, challenges, messages, experiences, and institutional logics of KYRC's grassroots activism ("empirical"); for the purpose of articulating how sport, athletes, and Sporting SMOs can and are being used to advance Black liberation, promote structural social transformation, and intervene into conjuncture negotiated through sport, race, and cultural politics ("political"). Furthermore, this project reflects the effort of PCS to make good on kinesiology's long-lost promise to study the body holistically, doing so by understanding the body as constituted by society, culture, and power in addition to (but not instead of) nature (Andrews, 2008; Andrews & Silk, 2015; Hargreaves & Vertinsky, 2007). In the process, this project employed all eight of the foundational pillars of PCS: 1) empirical, 2) contextual, 3) transdisciplinary, 4) theoretical, 5) political, 6) qualitative, 7) self-reflexive, and 8) pedagogical (Silk et al., 2017). In moving beyond the literal and figurative walls of the academy, this project should be read as both the study and manifestation of praxis that intervenes into sites of injustice and liberates those too often at power's mercy (Silk & Mayoh, 2017).

Lastly, I reiterate that project is not about KYRC, but instead uses KYRC as a vehicle for understanding more broadly how sport and Sporting SMOs can be wielded to challenge and resist power at the broad structural level. For all my talk of structural transformation, I do not write this under the naive assumption that we are on the brink of revolution, as many Marxists sometimes did. I think the romantic dream of a spontaneous revolution that can commence and

conclude in single political moment is all but dead. This is partially the reason I prefer the term social transformation, because it better connotes my thinking of social change as a process that includes various actors and various projects, operating in conjunction, in a non-linear process that may even take generations. And while revolution may not be happening, social transformation is always happening. The question is if the transformation is progressive or regressive. For those interested in progressive social transformation, it is vital that we understand the mechanics and logics of doing so, and perhaps even beginning to develop a blueprint. I humbly hope that this project can serve as a beginning step in that process.

Moreover, I intend for my findings to not be relegated forever to the realm of academic conference presentation or scholarly journals. Instead, I aim for it to be disseminated among the groups and communities engaged by sporting activism and affected by the oppressions against which KYRC mobilizes. Additionally, I aspire for each academic constituency that I engage to be enhanced by my attempts to create cross-disciplinary dialogue; i.e. PCS and the sociology of sport benefitting from social movement approaches, social movement theories benefitting from my engagement with sport and celebrityhood, media and communications benefitting from my engagement with sport and social movements, cultural studies benefitting from my empirical application to modern sport, and the like. In all, the broader impacts of this project include assisting KYRC and future Sporting SMOs in best reaching marginalized communities, illuminating the impact and efficacy of grassroots sporting activism, and expanding the scope of how scholars, athletes, fans, and activists alike understand the transformative possibilities of sport and grassroots activism. If absolutely nothing else, I hope I have inspired each reader to think radically.

8.3 Limitations

This study has numerous methodological strengths, most centrally its ability to ascertain the deep logics, tactics, and meanings of Sporting SMOs, from the perspectives of those administering the work, and working with a case study that has global prominence. However, there are a few limitations of this study. The first and most significant is generalizability of the findings, which is partially a limitation of my specific methodology and partially a limitation inherent to the nature of qualitative research (Denzin & Lincoln, 2005; Markula & Silk, 2011). My method of using KYRC as a case study for Sporting SMOs gave us rich insight into the meanings, logics, and mechanics of this specific Sporting SMO, but these may not be – and likely cannot be – generalized to all Sporting SMOs or grassroots activist initiatives. Qualitative research in general, though, accepts the sacrifice of generalizability in favor of enhanced validity and authenticity of findings (Markula & Silk, 2011).⁷⁶ In other words, this study sought deeper, more thorough, and more contextual data at the expense of more generalizable and perhaps more representative data. More “scientifically” driven SMO researchers can sometimes lose the broader contextual picture, while cultural studies scholars can sometimes lose the critical minutiae of tactics, details, and processes. For better or worse, I have tried to supply both the trees and the forest. Neither was likely done sufficiently. But I hope that the gaps and shortcomings of this project can productively spark future work to fill them, hopefully with other methodological, conceptual, contextual, and empirical tools.

Additionally, there are potential limitations with my sample of KYRC staff and volunteers. Given that my research interest concerned the logics, meanings, and inner-workings of KYRC – and as such required talking with people who are intimately involved in KYRC – it made sense

⁷⁶ This is opposed to quantitative approaches, which, as we observed with the content analysis of KYRC social media in Chapter 6, can sometimes sacrifice validity and authenticity of data in favor of generalizability (Markula & Silk, 2011).

to solicit interviews with actual KYRC workers. However, I am aware of how the positionality of my participants might have influenced what they shared with me. For instance, given KYRC's national profile – as well as how even some of its functionality is based upon the reputation and public perception of Kaepernick and the organization – there is likely an incentive to avoid sharing anything “negative”, or the worry among participants that I may twist their words into something negative.⁷⁷ As mentioned previously by participants, KYRC generally avoids interviews and coverage from popular press, so the potential stakes to them were that this dissertation may be one of the few, if not only, public-facing accounts of KYRC that was not curated by KYRC. There are also numerous sensitivities at stake for participants. Beyond the fact that I am seeking their perspective on their job (and to some extent, their employer), they also primarily serve marginalized youth, and have a national profile. Furthermore, as detailed in Chapters 4 and 7, they also have many ideological and political opponents, for whom Kaepernick and his associates may be a target of dissent or protest. Given these constraints, it was always a possibility that KYRC would avoid speaking with me at all, and even if they did, that they would be guarded, would exclude any intimate details, and/or their commentary would skew “positive” in a manner that affected the validity of the data. To be slight surprise, and to my participants' credit, I did not perceive my participants to be guarded or “pull any punches” in their interviews, so to speak. I perceived each interview to be an honest and authentic window into KYRC from each participant's perspective. Consistent with Institutional Review Board (IRB) protocol, I did explain my intentions with this project as best as I could to each participant, and even acknowledged the sensitivity of KYRC and the aforementioned dynamics. I do not believe these

⁷⁷ This concern is probably magnified, given the uncharitable media coverage of Kaepernick himself as detailed in Chapter 4.

dynamics significantly influenced the data. However, they are still worth listing as a potential limitation.

Additionally, because the sample size was relatively small and I prioritized protecting the identity of my participants (internally and externally), I was unable to elaborate on any of my participants' role within KYRC, as well as any of their demographic or background information. This does not change the data or alter its interpretation, but presenting this information would have perhaps added more context and perspective to participant's comments. There is also a dynamic in which, in describing KYRC and its initiatives based on public documents created and disseminated by KYRC, I may be accused of uncritically presenting KYRC's self-framings as the objective truth. However, my aim with this project was to present KYRC as perceived by participants and the organization themselves. This project was not concerned with whether or not they were the objective truth, and they should not be read as if they are. Throughout this project, I aimed to contextualize KYRC's claims and framings as best as I could. All citations of KYRC should be read and considered within this context.

Lastly, it is likely that not all the contexts relevant to KYRC are relevant to the emergence and logics of other Sporting SMOs. For instance, it is unlikely (though not impossible) that other Sporting SMOs will be led by a sporting figure with the stature of Colin Kaepernick. It is important to remember that KYRC in many ways embodies and epitomizes the shift of sporting activism to the grassroots; but, in many other ways, it is a unique organization that is enabled by an unprecedented and perhaps non-replicable set of circumstances and ingredients. The goal of this project, then, was not to present KYRC as coterminous with all Sporting SMOs, or to present it as a step-by-step model of what I think "good" activism is. Instead, the far narrower or more humble aim was to describe KYRC from the perspective of the people who make it run, as

well as contextualize it within certain trends and ideas that I viewed as appropriate, in hopes that other current and future Sporting SMOs may be able to draw insights where possible.

8.4 Future Directions

Future research on grassroots sporting activism and Sporting SMOs can begin by addressing some of this project's limitations. For instance, scholars can attempt to conceptualize grassroots sporting activism with quantitative approaches. These studies might assist in painting a more complete picture of grassroots sporting activism by seeking participants' perspectives with a larger sample size via surveys, or more generally outlining the prevalence and typologizing the different variations for grassroots sporting activism. The shifts in sporting activism and the emergence of Sporting SMOs would be enhanced with merging qualitative data with other rigorous mixed-methods or quantitative inquiry.

In my view, the most logical next step in researching Sporting SMOs is moving from the production side to the consumption side. In other words, now that the meanings and logics of Sporting SMOs have begun to be understood, future research should conceptualize their *impact*. For instance, this study has described how KYRC associates perceive the impact of their work, but it is necessary to examine how the work of KYRC and other Sporting SMOs are being received and perceived by the actual communities that they serve. This too should be studied qualitatively and quantitatively. Even my discussion of KYRC's social media in Chapter 6 did not include the public's (digital) engagement with the posts, which is a key element that could perhaps be taken up by a researcher with more expertise in quantitative social media analytics.⁷⁸ There are far more ways to advance this research qualitatively as well. Deploying the methods of

⁷⁸ This study also tracked the engagement with KYRC's social media posts. The data from this portion was not included in this project for various reasons, but mostly because the results did not yield any interesting insights for my purpose of understanding the impact of KYRC's pedagogy.

ethnography or participant observation, for example, would help researchers to examine firsthand the logics, operations, and impacts of Sporting SMOs.

Additionally, to fully capture the emergence of Sporting SMOs and this general moment in sport, it is necessary to research other Sporting SMOs. KYRC is an example that I think is representative and instructive of this phenomenon, but the logics and contexts of each Sporting SMO will differ in ways that merit scholarly attention. This can even include Sporting SMOs similar to KYRC. For example, another Sporting SMO that comes to mind is called *RISE*, which is a non-profit that “educates and empowers the sports community to eliminate racial discrimination, champion social justice and improve race relations” (risetowin.org, retrieved Jan. 2024). Established in 2015, *RISE* utilizes partnerships and programming within communities nationwide to “inspire leaders in sports to create positive change on matters of race and equality” and to “harness the unifying power of sport to end racism and champion social justice” (risetowin.org, retrieved Jan. 2024). *RISE* has many similarities to KYRC, with what appear to be productive differences in tactics, logics, approach, and reach. Another Sporting SMO called *Beyond Sport* claims to use sport – along with partnerships, networking, and programming – to build sustainable social change internationally. Their website declares that “For Beyond Sport the path to systemic change is clear: Increased partnerships and collaboration > Greater Collective Impact > Increasing Sport's Role in Social Change Globally” (beyondsport.org, retrieved 2024).

Future research can also explore Sporting SMOs that champion different causes. An example of this is *Athlete Ally*, a movement and organization that uses “education, policy reform, athlete activism, and groundbreaking research to champion LGBTQI+ inclusion in and through sport” (athleteally.org; retrieved Jan. 2024). While these examples have achieved considerable prominence, consider that many Sporting SMOs doing work at the grassroots level are only

concerned with and known by local communities, may not yet have a website and legal designation, or likely have not risen to the level of institutionalization and national recognition.

These truly grassroots Sporting SMOs, perhaps most of all, are ripe for future research.

8.5 Final Remarks

“We understand struggle and resistance, nowadays, rather better than we do reform and transformation. Yet transformations are at the heart of popular culture” (Hall, 1981; p. 228).

This project is driven by an attempt to, as Hall says, understand transformation. I consider this research to be ongoing. Rather than a final moment of completion, this dissertation represents my findings and my thinking at this point in time. This is not the definitive study of grassroots sporting activism, but rather a starting point, if not a call to attention. The work by myself or others of conceptualizing the relationship between sport, race, grassroots activism, and Sporting SMOs will hopefully continue to expand, contextualize, provide nuance to, and clarify the findings of this current project. Such is the nature of cultural studies work that once a cultural phenomenon has been put into words, it has already undergone drastic contextual changes that scholars must begin again to document. Nonetheless, I hope that the various audiences and parties interested in this work – scholars, colleagues, activists, athletes, and members of the public – will continue on this journey with me. It is hopefully just beginning. More importantly, the work of Sporting SMOs is also at its beginning stages. If this research can at all help to illuminate the conditions of this work or assist with its practical application, then it will be just a small nudge within the larger pursuit of using sport to build a better world.

Appendix A: Methodological Documents

Below are the basic questions that guided my in-depth interviews with participants, which served as the starting point from which additional relevant discussion derived.

1. What is your role/association with KYRC?
2. Before or outside of KYRC, tell me a little bit about yourself professionally?
3. How and why did you get involved in KYRC?
4. Tell me about your role with KYRC, what are you currently doing and what have you done?
5. Next few questions are about how you understand KYRC as an organization and your perspective on it. What, to you, are the goals/aims of KYRC?
6. What do you think distinguishes KYRC's model of activism from other community-outreach initiatives or social justice organizations? What is unique about it?
7. What strategies does KYRC use to accomplish its goals?
8. How would you describe the organizational culture of KYRC?
9. How does KYRC measure/evaluate its own effectiveness?
10. How would you characterize your own experience with KYRC?
11. What are some challenges that KYRC has faced?
12. Are you aware of anyone else involved with KYRC who may be willing to participate in this study?

Appendix B: Institutional Review Board (IRB) Approval



UNIVERSITY OF
MARYLAND

INSTITUTIONAL REVIEW BOARD

1204 Marie Mount Hall
College Park, MD 20742-5125
TEL 301.405.4212
FAX 301.314.1475
irb@umd.edu
www.umresearch.umd.edu/IRB

DATE: March 16, 2023

TO: Brandon Wallace, MA
FROM: University of Maryland College Park (UMCP) IRB

PROJECT TITLE: [1928499-1] Analyzing the Emergence and Impact of Grassroots Sporting Activism through Know Your Rights Camp

SUBMISSION TYPE: New Project

ACTION: APPROVED
APPROVAL DATE: March 16, 2023

REVIEW TYPE: Expedited Review

REVIEW CATEGORY: Expedited review category #7.

Thank you for your submission of New Project materials for this project. The University of Maryland College Park (UMCP) IRB has APPROVED your submission. This approval is based on an appropriate risk/benefit ratio and a project design wherein the risks have been minimized. All research must be conducted in accordance with this approved submission.

Prior to final approval of this project scientific review was completed by the IRB Member reviewer.

This submission has received Expedited Review based on the applicable federal regulations.

This project has been determined to be a MINIMAL RISK project.

Please remember that informed consent is a process beginning with a description of the project and insurance of participant understanding followed by a signed consent form. Informed consent must continue throughout the project via a dialogue between the researcher and research participant. Unless a consent waiver or alteration has been approved, Federal regulations require that each participant receives a copy of the consent document.

Please note that any revision to previously approved materials must be approved by this committee prior to initiation. Please use the appropriate Amendment forms for this procedure.

All UNANTICIPATED PROBLEMS involving risks to subjects or others (UPIRSOs) and SERIOUS and UNEXPECTED adverse events must be reported promptly to this office. Please use the appropriate reporting forms for this procedure. All FDA and sponsor reporting requirements should also be followed. All NON-COMPLIANCE issues or COMPLAINTS regarding this project must be reported promptly to this office.

Please note that all research records must be retained for a minimum of seven years after the completion of the project.

If you have any questions, please contact the IRB Office at 301-405-4212 or irb@umd.edu. Please include your project title and reference number in all correspondence with this committee.

This letter has been electronically signed in accordance with all applicable regulations, and a copy is retained within University of Maryland College Park (UMCP) IRB's records.

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