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# Fear Eats the Soul: American Melodrama and African-American Sports Activism

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FEAR EATS THE SOUL: AMERICAN MELODRAMA AND AFRICAN-AMERICAN  
SPORTS ACTIVISM

by

DAFNA KAUFMAN

Under the Direction of Ethan Tussey, MA

ABSTRACT

This project examines the relationship between melodrama, sport, and race. It particularly focuses on Colin Kaepernick's athletic activism and the many melodramatic media moments surrounding his controversy (initial protest, media reaction, Nike advertisement response). I use genre theory, media framing theory, and cultural studies theories to examine contemporary American athletic activism and its melodramatic mode.

INDEX WORDS: Sports, Melodrama, Activism, Genre theory, Cultural studies, Representation

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by

DAFNA KAUFMAN

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Master of Arts

in the College of the Arts

Georgia State University

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SPORTS ACTIVISM

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## 1 INTRODUCTION

### 1.1 Purpose of the Study

On February 6, 2017, Jemele Hill and Michael Smith, two African-American sports journalists, commenced their new roles at ESPN: co-hosts of ESPN *SportsCenter*. *SportsCenter*, a daily sports news television program, presents day-to-day sports highlights, updates, news, analysis, and commentary. After Hill and Smith's previous work together (hosting *His and Hers*, a show that discussed sports, and their intersection with popular culture), *SportsCenter* would be a new format where the co-hosts could relate sports news to viewers, while still maintaining their unique chemistry and compatible personas. In September 2017, after seven months of co-hosting *SportsCenter*, Jemele Hill authored a series of tweets that would drastically change her career. On September 11, 2017, Hill tweeted, "Donald Trump is a white supremacist who has largely surrounded himself w/ other white supremacists" (Montanaro). She quickly followed up this tweet, with another one that stated, "[t]he height of white privilege is being able to "ignore" his white supremacy, because it's of no threat to you. Well it's a threat to me" (Spain). As Hill's followers began to respond to her messages, she continued her criticism of President Donald Trump.

Hill's tweets quickly disseminated through national media outlets. White House correspondent, David Nakamura, even brought up the tweets and their claims while interviewing Trump's press secretary, Sarah Huckabee Sanders (Payne). Nakamura asked Sanders if President Trump was aware of Hill's tweets. Sanders replied, "I'm not sure he's aware but I think that's one of the more outrageous comments that anyone could make and certainly something that I think is a fireable offense by ESPN" (Payne). One day after Hill's

tweets, ESPN's PR twitter account released a brief statement regarding the situation: "The comments on Twitter from Jemele Hill regarding the President do not represent the position of ESPN. We have addressed this with Jemele and she recognizes her actions were inappropriate" (Payne). Hill, in the following days also posted a response "to address the elephant in the room" (Payne). She explained that her comments regarding Trump were personal beliefs and she regretted that the tweets may have "painted ESPN in an unfair light" (Post). ESPN did not fire Hill (she was suspended for two weeks in violation of ESPN's social media guidelines), but she did leave her role on *SportsCenter* in February 2018. While Hill may have violated specific rules contained in ESPN's social media guidelines, Sarah Huckabee Sanders' recommendation that ESPN fire Hill nevertheless seems quite radical. This media moment, among countless others, suggests that sports programming is a medium whose constituent elements fit those of melodrama uniquely closely. Like melodrama, sport culture enshrines a mythical realm of innocence that may not be transgressed. And as in melodrama, *injustice* in the realm of sport is defined as transgression of that realm of innocence. Sports journalists transgress their understood role if and when they choose to address political issues.

Sports are very much a part of American culture and media, yet sports are viewed as occupying a space that is separate from both the intellectual sphere and the sphere of politics. Moreover, the sphere of sports is often regarded as an apolitical and egalitarian space. Gamal Abdel-Shehid, in *Who Da Man?: Black Masculinities and Sporting Cultures*, argues that "sport is understood in the following two ways: first, it is seen as a mythical sphere unto itself; second, and relatedly, it is relegated to the realm of nature opposed to and outside of cultural, political, and historical constraints" (Abdel-Shahid 46). Therefore, when

protests or politics are brought into the sports arena, many viewers may consider such behavior as a violation of the sacred region that sports occupy in our culture. Jemele Hill, through her public tweets regarding President Trump, violated this understood separation between politics and sports. This restrictive perception of the sphere of sports has helped to generate a widely shared view that sports and politics should not mix. Yet the cultural sphere defined by sports within American society provides an arena in which marginalized people hold significant power, particularly African-Americans. The sports sphere is a space in which they can communicate social criticism and attempt to mobilize their communities on a large scale. Jemele Hill, through her political critique, violated an unwritten rule by making subtext become text.

In my thesis, I examine the relationship between athletic activism and melodrama in American culture. I begin with an examination of the shifting evolution of the idea of melodrama from the eighteenth century to the twenty-first century. I discuss the history of film melodrama and scholarly arguments regarding melodrama's changing role (from genre to mode). I use work by scholars such as Peter Brooks, Linda Williams, and Elisabeth Anker to link the notion of 'the melodramatic' to an American cultural mode (rather than a genre). I then explain how sports, sports media, and sports activism use melodrama—all in different ways for different means. My intervention in the field demonstrates a relationship between sports, melodrama, and race in order to understand different events in the Colin Kaepernick media saga. Specifically, my project uses Colin Kaepernick's melodramatic act of protest, the melodramatic response of American media outlets to his protest, and Kaepernick-Nike's melodramatic-redemption advertisement to explore the ever-changing uses of melodrama. My project relies upon melodramatic genre theory, media frame analysis, and a cultural

studies methodology to examine Colin Kaepernick's contemporary African-American male athletic activism.

Many scholars have explored the relationship between sport and drama. For example, John Hargreaves, a sport sociologist, examines the bond between sport and emotion. Hargreaves claims, "[t]he uncertainty of the contest's outcome and the attendant tension it creates lends a unique excitement to sports...and it is probably one of the reasons why sports become so often the subject of intense interest and emotion" (Hargreaves "The Autonomy" 42). He argues that this link between sport and emotion leads to a theatrical construction within sport activity. "The play-acting, contest, and uncertainty elements ensure that sports are an intrinsically dramatic means of expression," Hargreaves argues, "and an audience in addition transforms them into a form of theatre...dramatic performance" (43). Other scholars have connected sports and melodrama more directly through comparisons to televised soap operas. In their article, "Dallas with balls: Televised sport, soap opera, and male and female pleasures," Barbara O'Connor and Raymond Boyle discuss shared qualities of televised sport and soap operas. They "suggest that both genres invoke similar structures and feelings of sensibility in their respective audiences" (O'Connor 110). Boyle and O'Connor argue that "television sports coverage exhibits many of the melodramatic elements which characterize soap opera" (111). They additionally claim that "sport is one of the few arenas in which emotionality is given a legitimate outlet" (111). Boyle and O'Connor rely heavily upon Peter Brooks' definition of melodrama. His definition of melodrama also influences the definition of melodrama that I use throughout my research. Brooks and many scholars influenced by him emphasize the necessity for moral legibility in melodramatic works.

In the analysis presented in my thesis. I focus on film theorist Linda Williams' definition of this term. Following Williams, I understand melodrama as a cultural mode that affects all forms of media, particularly in the United States. Williams' conception of melodrama relates to film studies, but also pushes past *only* looking at film. Her distinctive understanding of melodrama (built upon Peter Brooks' study) allows scholars outside of a strict film affiliation to use her work. I use Williams' research and theories to examine the relationship between melodrama, race, and American sports media. In *Playing the Race Card: Melodramas of Black and White from Uncle Tom to O.J. Simpson*, she argues that "melodrama is neither archaic nor excessive but a perpetually modernizing form that can neither be clearly opposed to the norms of the classical nor to the norms of realism" (Williams *Playing* 12). Melodrama, according to Williams' logic, surpasses its designation as a genre. Melodrama acts as a "broad aesthetic mode existing across many media and in certain interpenetrating narrative cycles" (12). In a world where nothing is certain, the media (and Hollywood) design stories that are melodramatic in character in order to reduce the discomfort of citizens in a world of uncertainty. In classical melodrama's Manichean construct, there are always good people and there are always bad people, and being able to label each type of person distinctly (no gray areas) soothes the American public's psyche. Contemporary melodrama has, through "the absorption of evolving realist practices" evolved (Williams *On the* 89). Rather than solely focus on Manichean constructs, contemporary melodrama recognizes a moral gray area. Therefore, the media must rely on more subtle and nuanced manners in which to soothe society's psyche.

Williams contends that the representation of pathos and action, "the sufferings of innocent victims and the exploits of brave heroes or monstrous criminals," continuously

helps to compensate for America's "ongoing loss of moral certainty" (19, 23). "Racial melodrama takes on enormous importance as the engine for the generation of legitimacy," Williams furthers, "for racially constituted groups whose very claim to citizenship lies in these spectacles of pathos and action" (44). She asserts that melodrama in America (post mid-nineteenth century) acts as the "primary way in which" American society has "dealt with moral dilemma" of slavery (44). Melodrama updates itself "by confronting new and seemingly intractable social problems to the end of recognizing virtue" (Williams *On the* 114). While originally melodrama was mainly manufactured by white writers, we now have melodrama from other perspectives. While Colin Kaepernick (African-American man) uses melodrama, so does the press (mainly white, male). My project examines how melodrama operates when controlled by these different perspectives.

Williams' understanding of melodrama develops ideas from Peter Brooks' *The Melodramatic Imagination: Balzac, James and The Mode of Excess*. "Brook's central thesis," she argues, "is that the quest for a hidden moral legibility is crucial to all melodrama" (18). He understood "melodrama as a modern *mode*, that used the rhetoric of realism alongside an aesthetic of muteness to make sense of everyday life in a modern and secular world" (84, my emphasis). Using Brooks' work and other film scholars research, Williams develops a set of five key features of the melodramatic mode. She argues that melodramas include: (i) a space of innocence (icon of home), (ii) a focus on victim-heroes (virtue), (iii) a dialectic of pathos and action, (iv) realism (in the service of pathos and action), and (v) characters organized in Manichean conflicts between good and evil (28-40). These five elements relate to melodramatic film, but also melodrama as a larger cultural mode. Williams claims that "[f]ilm critics have often not seen the forest of melodrama—the

sense in which all these genres...partake of a basic melodramatic mode—for the trees of these individual genres. They have not seen the way in which melodrama constitutes the larger cultural mode driving the articulation of specific genres” (17). Melodrama does not merely exist as “an archaic holdover of the nineteenth century stage play,” but as an ever-changing “mode of storytelling crucial to the establishment of moral good” (12). She argues that the melodramatic mode shapes not only film and television, but also media portrayals “of war, athletic competitions, and courtroom trials” (13). Melodrama can be found in almost every form of American produced media.

The term *melodrama* can and has been used in many different ways in various disciplines. In order to understand how Brooks and Williams produced their theories of melodrama, one must appreciate melodrama’s extensive history and development in theatre and film. Melodrama emerged in eighteenth century theatre and literature as a new genre that combined elements of comedy and tragedy (Mercer 7). Theatrical melodramas often featured “astonishing twists and turns of fate, suspense, disaster and tragedy, its last-minute rescues, and its happy endings” (7). It also established its own style relying upon “verbal signs, gesture, mise-en-scene, and music” (7). Melodrama dominated much of the early cinematic productions of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. It has continued to flourish in the film sphere producing many subgenres (criminal melodrama, maternal melodrama, etc.). During the 1970s, film critics and theorists began to analyze melodrama and questioned whether it could be defined as a film genre. Over the next decade, film scholars constructed a more distinct definition of the melodrama, particularly focusing on the Hollywood family melodrama (9). By the 1980s, many film scholars viewed the family melodrama as having “the same kind of generic status within Film Studies as the western and the gangster film”

(9). Yet, in the following decades, many film scholars questioned and reanalyzed melodrama's place within film genres. "Film scholars have, in a sense, taken the lead in keeping melodrama alive as a genre by continually revising its corpus and its history" (37). Melodrama exists as an ever-evolving form (37).

While the *genre* of film melodrama may not be directly relevant to my study of American athletic melodrama, the American *mode* of melodrama is essential to any consideration of the relationship between melodrama and sport. The distinction between genre and mode, particularly as these notions relate to melodrama, can often seem vague and indeterminate. The idea of *genre*, used as a categorizing method, allows films "to be identified as belonging to a larger body of work with shared themes, styles, attitudes, and values" (5). The discipline of film studies has "defined melodrama in both broad and narrow terms" (7). At the most minimal level, film scholars have defined the genre of melodrama as a "dramatic narrative with musical accompaniment to mark or punctuate the emotional effects" (7). Some scholars argue that "melodrama must take one form or not be a genre at all," therefore, suggesting that melodrama is "something beyond genre" (37).

Christie Gledhill in her introductory chapter to *Home is Where the Heart is* "offer[s] an example of a more wide-ranging cultural and aesthetic investigation of melodrama" (Gledhill "The Melodramatic" 83). Gledhill calls "for an adoption of a completely new approach to melodrama within film studies rather than an endorsement of the approaches that had been taken already" (87-88). Linda Williams has maintained Gledhill's view of melodrama. In "Melodrama Revised," she offers a "revised theory of a melodramatic mode – rather than the mere notion of the melodramatic genre" (Williams "Melodrama" 43). She argues that melodrama, rather than being a genre or any other sub-set of American

filmmaking, is the pervasive American mode of filmmaking (Gledhill “The Melodramatic” 88). Williams asserts that “melodrama is a peculiarly democratic and American form that seeks dramatic revelation of moral and irrational truths through a dialectic of pathos and action” (Williams “Melodrama” 42). Williams approach to melodrama advances our understanding of what objects and subjects can be studied using theories of melodrama. Sport, a sphere of extreme pathos and action, in which heroes and villains battle for victory (or suffer defeat) corresponds closely to Williams’ understanding of the American melodramatic mode.

Elisabeth Anker, following Linda Williams, argues that melodrama should be considered “the most popular form of American mass culture” (Anker 2). In *Orgies of Feeling: Melodrama and the Politics of Feeling*, Anker argues that in post-World War II American society, melodrama has developed into a genre of national political discourse (2). While Anker’s subject matter differs from my own research topic, her study of melodrama and United States national identity helps to explain why melodramatic frames have been used in representation of athletic activism. Anker’s research focuses on melodramatic representation of the 9/11 terrorist attacks on the World Trade Center. “The story of 9/11,” Anker argues, “is a melodrama” (2). Anker asserts that melodrama is a “pervasive cultural mode that structures the presentation of political discourse and national identity in contemporary America” (23). In her study of the attacks, Anker relies upon Nietzsche’s concept of “orgies of feeling,” which “describe a counterintuitive attempt to ameliorate confusing feelings of powerlessness by imposing intense affects of victimization upon the self” (15). This victimization “aims to rehabilitate freedom, or at least ameliorate the effects of felt powerlessness” (15). “Melodrama,” Anker argues, “orgiastically displaced a broadly

shared but deeply isolating and confusing sense of powerlessness onto a clearly shared and obvious sense of being attacked and robbed of one's freedoms" (16). This felt powerlessness and fear helps mold a melodramatic national identity. Anker argues that due to melodrama's clear-cut victims and villains: "Melodrama eliminated the space for complexity and ambiguity" (36). Similarly, this tactic has been used in melodramatic representation of athletic activists who introduce politics into the sports sphere. When these activists exhibit their political attitudes in the athletic sphere, melodramatic media representation rejects their complicated or challenging viewpoints. Instead, these athletic activists are instantly branded as transgressors—villains—who destroy sport's non-political innocence.

In this subsection, I summarize the main ideas of each chapter in the context of my argument. Chapter one examines Colin Kaepernick's protest: the act of kneeling during the National Anthem before NFL football games. In 2016, Colin Kaepernick, an African-American quarterback for the San Francisco 49ers, decided to enact a symbolic protest during NFL games. Instead of standing for the National Anthem, he knelt while everyone else stood. Kaepernick explicitly stated his reasons for the protest to members of the press. He would not be standing for the National Anthem, he stated, because "I am not going to stand up and show pride in a flag for a country that oppresses Black people and people of color" (Inman). "To me," he stated, "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" (Inman). Kaepernick did not make specific demands in his protest; he simply refused to stand for the National Anthem as a protest against atrocities perpetrated against racial minorities. His protest at the NFL games occurred shortly before his contract was scheduled to terminate. It was widely expected that the 29-year old

quarterback would quickly be signed by another NFL team. Instead, Kaepernick remains unsigned and without a job. While kneeling is not a disruptive act, his protest used traditional melodramatic tropes to call attention to his social justice cause. In this chapter, I explore three melodramatic tropes utilized by Kaepernick during his protest: gesture, stillness, and muteness. Writers using melodrama often rely upon gesture to express emotions that words could not fully evoke. Gesture is understood as a bodily language that transcends verbal language, in order to make morally legible, right and wrong, just and unjust. In the first section, I discuss historical use of gesture in athletic activism (Tommye Smith and John Carlos at the 1968 Olympics) and Colin Kaepernick's reliance on gesture in 2016.

After an examination of gesture, I discuss the trope of stillness in melodrama. While stillness is accepted in the world of theater and film, athletic stillness, particularly when enacted by African-Americans, disrupts the athletic sphere. While Kaepernick enacted his stillness during the National Anthem (a moment of stillness for all), he separated his body from those of his teammates through his kneeling. Therefore, he asked his audience to see his stillness separately from those around him. Stillness allows the audience to truly take in the gesture of the kneeling "spectacularly still" African-American athletic male body (Farred 27). Such stillness harkens to the stillness of civil rights activists whose "principled inertia" helped them gain equal rights. It also contemplates another stillness inherited by African-Americans: the stillness experienced throughout the Middle Passage. Kaepernick translates these historically traumatic rendering of stillness into his own powerful, political stillness.

The final melodramatic trope discussed in this chapter is muteness. Muteness works to heighten the audience's consideration of the act or gesture represented. The silence of the

mute melodramatic character forces them to use visual methods (gesture, stillness) to express emotion beyond words capacity. Modern athletes, constricted by extreme discipline and surveillance, must conform to very specific norms of the body, but also the mind. In this final section, I discuss how Michael Foucault's concepts of "docile bodies" and "normalization" work to silent professional athletes. Colin Kaepernick, using his own silence, counteracts this discipline through his political protest. His silence also destabilizes cultural notions of African-American athletes. Kaepernick's silence does not enact stereotypes of black masculinity. His silent and still act expresses his desperate hope for American racial justice.

While Chapter one focuses on Kaepernick's physical act of protest, Chapter two examines the American media's representation and framing of his activism. In order to contextualize media representation of Kaepernick's protests, I begin by discussing the assumption of meritocracy in the American sports sphere. I examine notions of the "magic circle" and the supposed apolitical nature of athletics. These beliefs lead to a widely shared view that one should not mix sports with politics. Yet, the athletic sphere has often been a place in which marginalized groups have held cultural power and, therefore, could express political grievances. Historically, the athletic sphere has been a significant place where African-American voices could be heard, whether Americans want to listen or not. This chapter also examines narratives of patriotism and militarism espoused through American sports. In this section, I discuss how the National Anthem entered the sporting sphere. I also discuss the significant relationship between the NFL and United States military. The sports sphere allows and promotes "patriotic" politics (military, anthem), while simultaneously contesting any and all other forms of politics.

After examining these historical trends in American sport, I begin my discussion of Colin Kaepernick specifically. I note that—although social activism by athletes has been frowned upon—in recent years, particularly with the rise of Donald Trump’s political career, many athletes have felt the need to publicly engage with politics. In this chapter, in order to demonstrate the relationship between melodrama and the American media’s representation of Colin Kaepernick’s initial activism, I discuss Linda Williams’ five elements of melodrama. I focus on the media’s use of melodramatic characteristics such as spaces of innocence, victim-heroes, and Manichean conflicts between good and evil. After this media analysis, I also note that much of the American news media relies upon a colorblind rhetoric to discuss Kaepernick’s activism. Rather than exercising old-fashioned stereotypes of African-American athletes, the media reframes the story. For the most part, the media chooses to discuss Kaepernick’s activism in terms of patriotism and respect, rather than to acknowledge the value that his protest was trying to promote (racial justice).

After a discussion and examination of the media’s use of melodramatic conventions, Chapter three focuses on a third media moment: Kaepernick’s collaboration with Nike for an advertisement campaign. In order to contextualize Kaepernick’s work with Nike, I first consider the ever-changing relationship between sport, the media, and capitalism. After briefly relating the history of this relationship, I specifically relate this discussion to Nike, one of the most famous global sportswear brands. Nike, known for its powerful ad campaigns, often works with African-American celebrity athletes in those campaigns. In September 2018, nearly two years after Kaepernick’s initial protests, Nike released both a video and billboard ad campaign featuring Colin Kaepernick. The video advertisement begins with a voiceover advising the viewer that “[i]f people say your dreams are crazy, if

they laugh at what they think you can do: good, stay that way” (“Nike”). The ad presents clip after clip of athletic feats performed by persons ranging from anonymous amateurs to professional athletes. After about a minute of video clips, Colin Kaepernick is revealed as the voice behind the voiceover. As the viewer sees Colin Kaepernick’s face for the first time, the voiceover instructs the viewer to “[b]elieve in something, even if it means sacrificing everything” (“Nike”). Soon after Nike released the advertisement, many Americans took to the internet to express their dismay. Colin Kaepernick detractors burned their Nike gear and called for a ban of the brand expressing their distress and anger. While these disgruntled Americans incinerated their Nike wear, many others continued to buy Nike’s gear. While a controversial choice, using Kaepernick and his attached movement allowed Nike to represent themselves as a trendy, enlightened global brand.

This chapter concludes through an examination of “Dream Crazy,” the Kaepernick-Nike ad campaign. As in my analysis in Chapter two, I examine “Dream Crazy” through Linda William’s five elements of melodrama. The melodrama of “Dream Crazy” works to redeem Kaepernick’s media lashing and ejection from the NFL. Kaepernick’s face and message will not be forgotten lightly. Yet, one also must consider the ramifications of Kaepernick’s relationship with Nike. In order to explore this relationship, I examine theories regarding commodity activism. Is it counter-productive for Kaepernick to work with Nike (a brand known for its many problematic labor issues)? Or is Nike’s global brand the only manner in which Kaepernick can continue his fight for racial justice?

I examine three media moments related to Colin Kaepernick’s athletic activism. In order to understand and examine the representation of his activism in the media, I analyze media framing of Kaepernick’s initial protest. “Media discourse is part of the process by

which individuals construct meaning,” Gamson and Modigliani claim, “and public opinion is part of the process by which journalists...develop and crystalize meaning in public discourse” (Gamson and Modigliani “Media Discourse” 10). In examining the media discourse and framing regarding Kaepernick’s activism, I focus particular attention on the light these incidents shed on the substantial power and influence the media possesses in the United States. W. Russell Neuman suggests “[a]udiences rely on a ‘version of reality built from personal experience, interaction with peers, and interpreted selections from the mass media’” (Neuman 105). An analysis of Kaepernick’s protest illustrates the manner in which the mass media influences the cultural and political beliefs of its audience.

Framing analysis focuses on the approach employed by journalists to discuss and represent media events (Semetko 93). Journalists rely on certain types of frames in order “to convey, interpret, and evaluate information” (Neuman 107). Such frames have been shown to influence “public perceptions of political issues or institutions” (Semetko 94). A media frame functions as “a central organizing idea or story line that provides meaning to an unfolding strip of events...the frame suggests what the controversy is about, the essence of the issue” (Gamson and Modigliani “The Changing” 143). While journalists may deliberately employ such frames, “the motives can also be unconscious ones” (Gamson 160). Media framing permeates journalism and mass media whether it is employed deliberately or unintentionally.

My project, in order to assess the role of media frames used in journalism surrounding athletic activism, considers the use of melodramatic framing on the media representation of the event I discuss. I use Linda Williams definition of melodrama and her list of five key features of the melodramatic mode to analyze the media framing of

Kaepernick's initial protests. To reiterate from earlier in my paper, Williams argues that melodramas include: a space of innocence (icon of home), a focus on victim-heroes (virtue), a dialectic of pathos and action, realism (in service of pathos and action), and characters organized in Manichean conflicts between good and evil (Williams *Playing* 28-40). Therefore, I examine media framing of Kaepernick's activism for such imagery and elements. In the conclusion of her book, *Playing the Race Card*, Williams poignantly proclaims that "[u]ntil we grasp the full extent of the melodramatic imagination of race, and all of our susceptibilities to it, we will continue to be...in a profound state of denial as to what we are about" (310). In my project, I hope to probe understood perceptions regarding race, sport, and activism, using Williams exploration of melodrama as a model and guide.

Another guiding text for my project is Ralina Joseph's *Postracial Resistance: Black Women, Media, and the Uses of Strategic Ambiguity*. In this 2018 text, Joseph examines three black female cultural figures: Michelle Obama, Oprah Winfrey, and Shonda Rhymes. She devotes a chapter to each woman. In her examination of each woman, Joseph analyzes two different media moments where her subject either used strategic ambiguity (Joseph's term) or acted in a more forthright political manner. In her first chapter, she states, "[t]o read Michelle Obama's strategic ambiguity...I investigate two of her speaking events that were heavily hyped by the media: a before and after picture, if you will" (Joseph 33). While Joseph's project differs greatly from my own, her methods have proven inspirational for my research. Rather than simply examine media framing regarding Kaepernick's initial activism, I would like to examine a second media event (similar to Joseph's before and after picture): Kaepernick's Nike advertisement. Through Nike's own use of melodrama (in the ad), Kaepernick's activism is consumed into a new world of commodity activism. Through

an examination of both media events, I am able to understand how the discourse of melodrama works over time.

My analysis employing a media frame analysis will analyze the approach employed by major media institutions to frame and represent African-American male athlete activism. A full understanding of the significance of this analysis, however, requires historical and cultural context. Therefore, my research will also employ cultural studies methods. John Hartley describes the field as “dedicated to the study of the expansion of difference in human affairs...an assemblage of intellectual concerns about power, meaning, identity, and subjectivity in modern societies” (Hartley 10). Cultural Studies as an academic discipline, he notes, was “devoted to displacing, decentering, demystifying and deconstructing the common sense of dominant discourses” (10). Thus, Cultural Studies aims to question and reinterpret commonly held ideas, especially about society. “Cultural Studies,” Hartley writes, “was the study of mass or popular culture, especially the mass media in a mass society” (31).

In our culture, language constitutes the principal means of conveying ideas and meaning. Stuart Hall, one of the leaders of the Cultural Studies field, examines the employment of language to produce meaning (Hall 28). Hall argues that “[r]epresentation is the production of meaning through language. In representation...we use signs, organized into languages of different kinds, to communicate meaningfully with others” (28). While language conveys information about the world, Hall emphasizes, “there is no simple relationship of reflection, imitation or one-to-one correspondence between language and the real world” (28). Hall argues that codes of social convention “allow us to translate our concepts into language...They [codes] are a crucial part of our culture—our shared ‘maps of

meaning’—which we learn and unconsciously internalize as we become members of our culture” (29). Therefore, in one society, a particular object could signify one meaning, while in a different society, the same object could signify a completely separate meaning. Cultural studies, he argues, is therefore “inevitably caught up in this ‘circle of meaning’” (42). While there are no absolute truths, Cultural Studies is interested in examining the many possible meanings behind representations.

David Andrews, in “Coming to Terms with Cultural Studies,” argues that cultural studies “has never been dominated by a single theoretical or methodological position” (Andrews “Coming” 111). Rather, he suggests that cultural studies is “characterized by multiple theoretical influences, research methods, and sites of analysis” (111). Yet, while cultural studies remains an interdisciplinary field, “radical contextualism” lies at “the definitional core of the cultural studies project” (111). Methodologically, radical contextualism involves “unearthing the socially and historically contingent matrix of social, economic, political, and technological articulations” (114). In order to identify and deconstruct this matrix of influences and meanings, Andrews argues, “[a]rticulation, then, involves a method reconstructing a cultural practice’s conjunctural relations, identity, and effects to produce a contextually specific map of the social formation” (114). In my research, I will engage with the issues of “social, economic, political, and technological articulations” surrounding each moment of athlete activism, in order to attempt a more fully comprehensive analysis of the events (114).

The Cultural Studies discipline carefully examines the “state of play in cultural relations” (Hall 235). Sport, as a cultural product, therefore, should be examined as “a product of intersecting, multidirectional lines of articulation between the forces and

practices that compose the social context” (Andrews 116). “[S]port-oriented research demands,” Andrews argues, “a truly contextual sensibility premised on, and seeking to excavate and theorize, the contingent relations, structure, and effects that link sport forms with prevailing determinate forces” (116). The employment of both a media frame analysis and cultural studies methodology will allow my research to identify submerged and suppressed meanings surrounding race representation and media framing in American society more generally.

I conclude my thesis using Linda Williams’s examination of justice and melodrama. Williams argues that what differentiates melodrama from other genres is its demand of justice (Williams *On the 5*). Melodrama desires a utopian search for what justice could be (106). Colin Kaepernick’s enacted his original protest in order to fight injustice. Kaepernick heard the message of Black Lives Matter and saw police violence against minorities (particularly African-American men) in the news. These injustices drove Kaepernick to kneel during the National Anthem. He could not “stand up and show pride in a flag for a country that oppresses Black people and people of color” (Inman). A search for justice and fair treatment motivated Kaepernick’s athletic activism.

Yet, justice is not a fixed term. Justice for one, does not necessarily mean justice for all. While Kaepernick asserted his beliefs about justice, the media responding to his protests responded in terms of their own views regarding justice. The media chose not to engage with Kaepernick’s ideas regarding racial injustice, and instead defined justice in their own terms. Kaepernick’s protest during the National Anthem, they argued, constituted a serious failure of respect for the flag and for American soldiers/veterans. His acts were portrayed as unpatriotic—an attack on conventional notions of nationalism. While he felt it was his

American duty to kneel to express his beliefs, the media read his behavior as contemptuous and insolent. The media's sense of justice identified Kaepernick as an unpatriotic traitor. The media's deceptively colorblind rhetoric stripped Kaepernick's protest of its meaning for many sports fans.

Melodrama's justice—fortunately—did not end with the media's representation of Kaepernick's activism. Two years after the initial protest, Kaepernick worked with Nike to create "Dream Crazy," an ad campaign celebrating pushing boundaries and sacrifice in the athletic sphere. "Dream Crazy" uses Williams' five melodramatic characteristics in a story of redemption and injustice. Nike's "Dream Crazy" acknowledges the injustices Kaepernick has experienced during the past two years. It offers Kaepernick a media moment of "redemption." While Kaepernick will no longer be a part of the NFL's organization, his message will re-enter American culture and Nike will compensate him for his work.

Kaepernick's employment of the resources of melodrama to frame his protest thus produced mixed results. Kaepernick effectively reconstructed his position in the public sphere, moving from the category of sports star to that of cultural critic. In addition, the visibility of his activism made him—at least for the moment—an effective and salient cultural critic. On the other hand, none of this activity produced profound changes in the racist and chauvinistic character of NFL culture or the incidence of injustice in American society.

This project hopes to illuminate the many entanglements of melodrama in contemporary American culture—particularly its entanglement with the athletic sphere. The melodramatic mode evolves and allows one to address "timely social problems and controversies" (Williams "Tales" 215). Yet melodrama, and its trope of justice can be exploited by white,

patriarchal Americans. Their “justice” uses melodrama to perpetuate hate and fear, particularly when minorities attempt to gain an equal footing. Kaepernick used melodrama to assert his sense of justice (equal treatment of the races), but the American media fought his justice with their own definition of justice (punishment for anyone who dares question American values). Kaepernick’s melodramatic work with Nike in “Dream Crazy” allowed him—in part—to reframe his activism and, in the process, to create a media environment that might be more receptive to his message.

## 2 MELODRAMA AND KAEPERNICK

In my introduction, I discuss the intersecting relationships between melodrama, sport, and race. In this chapter, I further demonstrate these connections through an examination of three specific melodramatic tropes: gesture, stillness, and muteness. These characteristics of melodrama are unmistakably present in Colin Kaepernick's athletic activism (and other historical examples of African-American athletic protests surrounding the National Anthem). Kaepernick's protest utilized many melodramatic qualities in order to express his disappointment and frustration regarding race relations in the United States, particularly as reflected in police violence against minorities. Kaepernick's employment of these melodramatic attributes reflects melodrama's emphasis on expression and articulation of "the essential moral universe in a post-sacred era" (Brooks 15).

His use of gesture, stillness, and muteness work to put forth Kaepernick's moral agenda. In world where words alone are not mitigating social injustices, Kaepernick put forward himself, his own body, in protest. "Melodrama from its inception takes as its concern and *raison d'être*," Peter Brooks asserts, "the location, expression, and imposition of basic ethical and psychic truths" (15). Kaepernick's protest and, in particular, his kneeling gesture were designed to start a conversation about racial justice in America. Kaepernick could not and would not hold back his own "ethical and psychic truths" anymore (15). Even if it meant risking his career, Kaepernick kneeled before NFL viewers and America attempting to be heard through his resounding corporeal gesture.

Athletes such as Colin Kaepernick, Tommie Smith, and John Carlos, use classically melodramatic positioning to make their exasperation and discontent with race relations in America legible. Similar to classic melodramatists, these athletes "refuse to allow that the

world has been completely drained of transcendence” (22). Many contemporary Americans believe racial matters and inequalities no longer exist. Once America voted in an African-American president, African-Americans could no longer claim that a race problem still existed in America. Many African-Americans and other Americans know this claim to be fictitious and wrong. This fight between those who believe America is now egalitarian and those who completely disagree can obstruct true change from ever occurring. This ever-evolving battle begets frustration and drains those who want to continue the fight against racial injustice. Kaepernick uses melodrama’s tropes to separate him from the usual argument. He believes in a more utopic America where true racial equality can exist. He has not forsaken America as irrevocably committed to racism. Through demonstrating and activism, Kaepernick believes, American racial social dynamics can evolve and progress. Peter Brooks defines melodrama as “the expressionism of the moral imagination” (55). Through mute, still, symbolic gestures, Colin Kaepernick demonstrates his “moral imagination” and hopes for a more radically just American nation. His silent gesture did not demand any particular actions, it only attempted to make legible atrocities of black and white.

## 2.1 Gesture

Peter Brooks argues that gesture, in melodrama, often works as a “mythical primal language, a language of presence, purity, immediacy” (66). Gestures can supplement language or even bypass it. Brooks contends that in melodramatic works, writers use gesture to explain what words cannot express. Brooks asserts, “[t]he conventional language of social intercourse has become inadequate to express true emotional valences” (66). In theatre and in life, gesture acts a “sense-maker in sign-systems” (77). Gesture asks an audience to read

the body, rather than interpret words (Raub 440). In melodrama, gesture operates as a form of universal communication; a corporeal language that is “every bit expressive as words,” and perhaps “even more closely tied to truth” (445). Through gesture’s direct communication with the audience “it professes ‘truth’ and ‘passion’ by drawing from ‘nature’ and presenting a language ‘common to all mankind’” (445). Chare and Watkins, in their *Introduction: Gesture in Film*, even suggest that gesture can support the body’s capacity to suggest psychic trauma (Chare 1). Gesture makes visible this psychic trauma when “language or law do not suffice” (3). Christine Gledhill further develops this claim by asserting that gesture “reveals what words *conceal*” (Gledhill 210, my emphasis). Meanings that remain opaque through language and words can, in melodrama, be communicated through physical gesture. Much of America will not listen to the many people expressing their beliefs that racial injustice still exists, therefore, symbolic gesture becomes a fresh, visually-assertive quality necessary to propel their movement forward.

The 1968 Mexico City Olympic protest involved one of the significant instances of physical gesture in sports history. The protest involving Tommie Smith and John Carlos was not a spontaneous act. Tommie Smith and John Carlos, two American sprinters, “were actually members of a small cadre of world-class athletes and activists...who tried to engineer an African-American boycott of the 1968 Mexico City games under the official title of the Olympic Project for Human Rights” (Hartmann “The Politics” 551). This boycott failed, yet the thought and planning involved in the boycott effort led to Smith and Carlos’s infamous national anthem protest. After Smith and Carlos both placed in the 200-metre dash (first and third place), they took their places on the award podium. Smith and Carlos were “shoeless, clad in sweat suits and black stockinged feet;” they also wore buttons that read:

“The Olympic Project for Human Rights” (550). During the award ceremony, when the Star-Spangled Banner—the United States national anthem—began, “in a stark break with convention...Smith and Carlos thrust black-gloved fists...above lowered eyes and bowed heads” (550). Smith and Carlos’ epic gesture expresses “high emotion and lofty sentiments and ideas” (Day-Mayer 107). Tommie Smith explained, “[my] raised right hand stood for the power in black America. Carlos’ raised left hand stood for the unity of black America. Together they formed an arch of unity and power” (Matthews 197). Each man’s bodily movement reached out to their audience to express both African-American strife and dignity. Their gesture exhibited strength, but also vulnerability. Smith and Carlos did not only physically endanger themselves through their act, but they exposed themselves to criticisms from those who believed their acts were unpatriotic and disrespectful. Yet, their utopic hope for a more just and equal world for non-white people of the world, pushed them to sacrifice their bodies and futures for their cause.

Smith further explained their gesture: “[t]he black scarf around my neck stood for black pride. The black socks with no shoes stood for black poverty in racist America. The totality of our effort was the regaining of black dignity” (197). In a 2016 interview re-examining the 1968 protest, Smith describes his emotional state at the moment of the protest. When, “the first fist went to the sky,” he noted, he felt jubilation (Haerens 75). His act was “a cry for freedom or a cry for hope” (75). Without speaking, Smith and Carlos cried out. Smith asserts, “it was done because I had no choice...[t]o me it was a responsibility that I didn’t want to do but I had to it because I was the only one at that particular time who could do it standing from that particular platform” (76). Smith and Carlos knew their gesture could gravely affect their lives (perhaps even end them), yet they still felt aroused to action; they

felt they must make injustices against minorities legible to an international audience.

Colin Kaepernick, a quarterback for the San Francisco 49ers, similarly felt such a pull to action. When Kaepernick began his National Anthem protest during the NFL 2016 preseason, he chose to sit on the team bench during the anthem. After these sitting protests were disseminated in the press, Nate Boyer, a U.S. army veteran, published a public letter in *Army Times* addressing Kaepernick's protest. Nate Boyer, not only was a veteran of U.S. action in Iraq and Afghanistan, he also played football in college and very minimally professionally (three games for the Seattle Seahawks). Boyer wrote, "[e]ven though my initial reaction to your protest was one of anger, I'm trying to listen to what you're saying and why you're doing it" (Boyer). After reading Boyer's letter, Kaepernick met Boyer to discuss Kaepernick's protest. Boyer explained to Kaepernick that sitting on the bench during the anthem would be likely to be construed as disrespectful towards soldiers/veterans (disregarding their sacrifice).

The goal of their meeting was to find a way for Kaepernick to protest that would not offend American veterans and soldiers. "We sorta came to a middle ground where he would take a knee alongside his teammates," Boyer explained, "[s]oldiers take a knee in front of a fallen brother's grave, you know, to show respect" (Haerens 79). Through Kaepernick's discourse with Boyer, Kaepernick's protest and gesture shifted. Kaepernick took Boyer's critique and used it to modify his protest. Kaepernick would continue to protest and demonstrate his deep dissatisfaction with race relations in the United States, while also attempting not to express disrespect or to denigrate U.S. veterans. His new gesture, kneeling during the anthem, used melodrama's excessive personalization and excessive expression to

communicate his protest (Gledhill “Rethinking” 218). He custom-made his activist gesture in order to not disrespect American veterans and soldiers, while still maintaining his protest.

## 2.2 Stillness

In melodrama, the audience notices a gesture through its’ still and unmoving nature. Without stillness, a gesture might go unrecognized and unidentified. Gesture, in melodrama, utilizes reserve and economy of motion (Fitzgerald 59). The timing and specific actions of a gesture stand out most saliently when the gesture is performed in a static manner (Day-Mayer 108). While stillness may be accepted in theater and film, athletes are almost never meant to be still. The still athletic body disrupts time “through symbolically abstracting the body from labor” (Farred 36). Grant Farred suggests that for an athlete the mantra follows: “I play therefore I am” (40). While Kaepernick performed his protest during a moment in which stillness was appropriate, Farred’s comments remain relevant to an examination of the stationary African-American athlete. By kneeling during the anthem, Kaepernick visually separated himself from his team and asked the audience to consider his stillness and gesture.

In particular, “for the black athletic body to be at rest is to disrupt the expectations of perpetual performativity” (52). When the black athletic body chooses to rest, this choice will always set in motion “an entirely new and different set of actions” (26). For every black athletic moment of stillness, there must be an “unequal and (hostile) opposite (white) reaction” (28). Farred argues that in the United States, when the black body is “spectacularly still, of its own volition” it performs multiple political functions. The self-immobilized black body disrupts and draws attention, while also connecting itself to “the force of the historical multiple” (27). Throughout the history of the United States, when a black body has chosen to enact spectacular stillness, this behavior has always provoked political reaction (42). The

civil rights movement used such “principled inertia” to gain equal rights (42). When an athlete, such as Kaepernick or Smith and Carlos, enacts stillness, the black male body which normally acts as “a servant of (NBA or NFL) time” becomes temporarily a controlling force—“the keeper of both game and real time” (40). These powerful, still interruptions “transform rest into ideological unrest” (35). While Kaepernick enacted his stillness in a moment of group stillness, through his kneeling, he asks the audience to examine his stillness separately.

White audiences read the spectacularly still black athletic body as provocative and intolerable. “Southern racism,” Farred asserts, “has no effective political response to black at-rest-ness” (49). Racist audiences admonish Kaepernick’s act, they proclaim his kneeling disrespects veterans. Yet, the very act of kneeling was suggested by a veteran, in order to perform a protest that would not denigrate soldiers and veterans. Kaepernick’s still political protest takes up space in a world where he is meant to act as an “object alongside other objects” (Ahmed *Queer* 160). “[T]he experience is one of nausea and the crisis of losing one’s place in the world,” Sara Ahmed stresses, “a loss of something that you have not been given” (160). Spaces are “oriented around whiteness, insofar as whiteness is not seen. We do not face whiteness; it trails behind bodies, as what is assumed to be given” (157). This then allows for non-white bodies to feel “uncomfortable, exposed, visible, different, when they take up this space” (157). When Kaepernick kneels during the anthem, he extends his body into a world that will not take his shape. “The politics of mobility, of who gets to move with ease across the lines that divide spaces,” Ahmed asserts, “can be re-described as the politics of who gets to be at home, who gets to inhabit spaces” (162).

Farred concurrently argues, “the problematic of how black athletic bodies occupy public

space is privileged in order to read how these bodies move in that space and the limitations and possibilities that attach to that mobility” (Farred 34). Through a refusal of “perpetual black athletic motion...[b]y being still and speechless” Kaepernick, Smith, Carlos, and any black athlete who protests in a still manner become “momentarily inexplicable” (34). Their resting bodies activate; they “not only make political action, movement, possible,” they also “make political action necessary” (64). The United States historically “was moved to act, against its southern self” because of black bodies at rest (Rosa Parks, sit-in protesters). Ahmed argues that that we inherit our ability to reach some objects, and not others. She maintains that ‘reachability’ often relies upon an inheritance: a passing down of privilege or position (Ahmed *Queer* 154). “Whiteness is an orientation that puts certain things within reach,” and African-Americans do not inherit this reachability (154).

Harvey Young contemplates a different inheritance African-American bodies receive: stillness. He argues that, “[b]lack bodies in the 21<sup>st</sup> century continue to share in the experiences of their ancestors who were viewed as ‘other,’ unjustly incarcerated, and subjected to limitless violence” (Young 4). Specifically, he proposes that African-Americans continue to carry the trauma experienced through the Middle Passage. While many associate the Middle Passage with motion, Young contends that movement was not the “primary feature of the Middle Passage” (42). He maintains that “[b]etween movement there was a lot of stillness (waiting) even immobile as they moved” (42). “[T]he irony appears: the movement of the captives was predicated upon a delimitation of their spatial options”, Young asserts, “and a concerted effort to render them motionless” (43). This past stillness echoes into the present (49). Smith, Carlos, and now Colin Kaepernick reclaim “the stillness

of the black body and transform into a position of power” (118). Their bodies inherited traumatic stillness which they have converted into politically commanding stillness.

Along with gesture and stillness, melodrama utilizes muteness. This muteness helps the audience focus on the melodramatic figure’s stillness and gesture. While the mute figure can be dehumanized due to this lack, it also often represents a sympathetic, innocent figure “who is meant to evoke great pity” (Raub 443). The mute figure, in melodrama, acts as a center of “pathos and distress” (443). “The mute role,” Peter Brooks asserts, “is the virtuoso emblem of the possibilities of meaning engendered in the absence of the word” (Brooks 62). The audience must read the mute figure’s body language reflecting melodrama’s de-emphasis of spoken word (Raub 443). Emma Raub argues that “the mute role, in a sense, exemplifies and encapsulates the genre as a whole” (Raub 443). The mute’s silence forces her to use visual methods to express her thoughts even “beyond the normal range of language” (443). Physiognomy and gesture act as the mute’s tools in the privileged language of melodrama (443). Through the silence of the mute figure “the language of presence and immediacy, the primal language, is born anew” (Brooks 67).

As New York Times writer John Birch notes, “Kaepernick is now (and may forever be) known for a simple, silent gesture” (Birch). While Kaepernick has since commented on his protest, he remained silent throughout his physical protest. As in melodrama, Kaepernick’s silence draws the audience in to examine and read his body. The professional athlete possesses a strictly disciplined body. Modern norms regulating professional and collegiate sports require performances reflecting immense discipline and control. In order to conform to these norms, athletes must manage every inch of their bodies and must in addition regulate their minds. In *Discipline and Punish*, Michel Foucault investigates the

exercise of power in modern society and the manner in which the exercise of power operates through discipline. While power is often seen as something external to the individual, Foucault rejects this view. He argues that discipline “shapes and produces individuals through techniques of surveillance that reverberate through the social and individual bodies” (Andrews 156). One strand of this biopower developed as a “specific technolog[y] of the body that manipulated and controlled the human form” (158). This disciplinary system created what Foucault named “docile bodies.” These controlled and regulated bodies were simultaneously (i) trained to be as effective and useful as possible and (ii) “subjected to normative judgments, or what Foucault calls dividing practices” (212). Normalizing practices, or dividing practices, separated and excluded the normal from the pathological by enforcing a standard of normality.

After the birth of biopower, “the human form became controlled by the disciplinary regimes practice within specific institutional spaces, which rendered the body socially constrained, politically neutered, but economically productive” (158). The practices that govern contemporary American sports, in particular professional sports, reflect this phenomenon particularly clearly. Professional athletes are generally subject to significant bodily constraints (uniforms, dress codes, penalties for self-expression) that neutralize their ability to express political views (thus forcing them to remain silent). Moreover, while these constraints effectively neutralize athletes politically, they are characterized as apolitical. While athletes possess little political influence, however, they generate significant revenue. John Hargreaves argues that “the body...constitutes a major site of social struggles and it is in the battle for control over the body that types of social relations of particular significance for the way power is structured—class, gender, age, and race are to a greater extent

constituted” (Hargreaves “The body, sport, and power” 140). The body, and in particular the sports body, is the location of major social and political contestation. Colin Kaepernick’s silent act uses traditional athletic muteness (particularly regarding politics) to express his protest through a ‘language of presence, purity, immediacy” (Brooks 66). He silently beseeches his audience to read his body. He contests the docile athletic body through his silent, political act.

Kaepernick’s silence, along with the mute acts of Smith and Carlos, also challenges assumptions regarding African-American expressiveness. Kevin Everod Quashie argues that “[b]lack culture is or is supposed to be loud, literally as well as metaphorically, since such loudness is the expressiveness that articulates its resistance”. Quashie asserts that American culture understands blackness as a culture of “public expressiveness and resistance” (Quashie 11). He argues that currently “black cultural studies lacks a metaphor for characterizing the inner life, a metaphor capable of notice the beauty and intimacy of Smith and Carlos” (20). Quashie understands acts of quiet as the “inexpressible expressiveness of the interior” (22). While silence “often denotes something is suppressed or repressed, and is an interiority that is about withholding...quiet, on the other hand, is presence and can encompass fantastic motion” (22). Expressions of protest such as those of Smith, Carlos, and Colin Kaepernick “are compelling as much for their quiet as for the very publicity of their expression” (24). Their protests destabilize cultural notions regarding African-American athletes. While they use their body in their acts of resistance, they do not enact aggressive masculinity. They perform quiet, still protests to communicate their message of discontent. Their staging of acts that could be considered physically passive counteracts cultural

understandings of black masculinity. These silent actions express needs and desires that perhaps could never adequately be expressed aloud.

An examination of melodrama's classic tropes and Colin Kaepernick's athletic activism illustrates the degree to which the use of such qualities distinguishes his act from other protests. His use of these tropes expresses his frustration and need to communicate to his audience. Thomas Elsaesser, in his studies of melodrama, indicates "that the melodramatic imagination becomes particularly active during periods of intense ideological crisis" (Gledhill "Rethinking" 217). Colin Kaepernick began his protests in August 2016. Donald Trump's presidential campaign, by August 2016, had truly begun to show its potential. Trump's success literally placed African-Americans lives (and other minorities) in peril. Kaepernick's protest in fact emerges from the same set of social conditions that galvanized the Black Lives Matter movement in 2016. While the movement had formed in 2013, 2016 proved a decisive year for the movement. The organization protested the killing of innocent African-Americans by police officers throughout America. The movement spread and opposed almost all facets of Trump's campaign. Kaepernick's actions, his protest, emerged from this political moment. Donald Trump's presidential campaign re-introduced many Americans to a large racist, misogynistic, conservative population of America. While this population had always been there, Trump's campaign brought these types to the forefront. For Americans who disdained these messages of hate and vitriol, this political moment could be seen as an ideological crisis.

Colin Kaepernick, an African-American professional athlete, felt that his people were in crisis. During this moment of political turmoil, he decided to use his position and place in the athletic sphere to condemn America's racist and patriarchal environment. As

Douglas Hartmann notes, regarding the protests of Tommie Smith and John Carlos, “[i]n working *through* sport (or to be more precise, through the ceremonial system of the Olympic Games, one of sport’s most cherished and sacred expressive venues), rather than protesting *against* it...Smith and Carlos challenged an institutional-symbolic system” (Hartmann *Race, Culture* 22). Hartmann argues that while the sports sphere “had made great claims about being a positive, progressive force for African Americans,” the Smiths-Carlos protest pushed sports “to explicitly recognize and represent race, to finally—and formally—live up to its claims” (22). Similarly, Kaepernick, through his protest in the athletic sphere, made much of his audience confront this political moment.

As an African-American man, he understood that placing his protest on the football field would prove most effective. He would confront the very people who planned to vote for Donald Trump in November 2016. Yet, while Kaepernick could have spoken his words of protest at a press conference and left it at that, he felt that a silent protest would express his message with greater power. His actions upset the white patriarchal system *because* of their quiet and still nature. Colin Kaepernick no longer plays professional football because, according to the NFL’s conservative, overwhelmingly white leadership, his protest took up the *wrong space in the wrong place*. Kaepernick’s choice to use his position to express discontent, however, proved successful in terms of visibility. His protest was covered locally, nationally, and internationally. He dominated NFL coverage, general sports coverage, and even broader news reporting. President Obama commented on Kaepernick’s right to enact his protest gesture. President Trump spoke of Kaepernick’s kneeling as disrespect for the United States. Sports analysts and reporters argued over Kaepernick’s activist stance—and its meaning—for weeks. Even before Nike’s revitalization of the

Kaepernick image (2018), he remained a frequent news subject for two years. Kaepernick's gesture—and its melodramatic attributes—have kept his act or message from ever truly disappearing from the American news cycle.

### **3 KAEPERNICK AND THE MEDIA FRAMING**

While my first chapter focuses on reading Colin Kaepernick's protest through the lens of melodramatic tropes, this chapter focuses on how the media framed his initial protest (the first two weeks of protest). While "at one point in time, sports were seen as merely a diversion from other parts of life, and fledgling sport media were no more than a newspaper's 'toy department' staffed by semiprofessionals," contemporary media involving sports are omnipresent in America (Schmidt 2). As a result of the centrality of sports reporting in current American media, sports commentary can often blur into more general cultural commentary (3). Columns regarding Colin Kaepernick's protest appeared in both the news and the sports sections of newspapers. The media's discussion of Kaepernick's protest relied heavily upon an apolitical understanding of the sports sphere and a sports narrative centered upon patriotism and militarism. Media representation of Colin Kaepernick's activism reflects the regular tendency of Americans to separate the athletic sphere from the political. Equally, media representation of Kaepernick reflects the relationship between American sports reporting, particularly the coverage of NFL football, and militarism. American sports reporting relies upon metaphors of war and brands sports as a representative of "American values" and national unity. These features of America's cultural understanding of sport affect the manner in which the media represents athletic protest and activism.

In his article, “‘A Postgame Interview for the Ages’: Richard Sherman and the Dialectical Rhetoric of Racial Neoliberalism,” Joe Tompkins examines media tumult surrounding a press interview with NFL star, Richard Sherman. Tompkins uses media depictions of Sherman to chart “two dialectical poles of representation: overtly racist denunciations of Sherman as a classless ‘thug’ and counter-representations of self-enterprising talent” (Tompkins 291). Motivated by Tompkins methods, for both of the events I examine, I focus primarily on newspaper articles. In his piece, Tompkins examines “social media and news coverage of the Sherman interview” (297). He analyzed “100 articles from LexisNexis published in the week immediately following the event...most derived from major daily newspapers and popular blogs” (297-98). My research similarly focuses on newspaper and social media reactions to Colin Kaepernick’s actions. For this project, I am interested in premeditated framing of Kaepernick’s activism (rather than impromptu or unprepared comments). I want to understand how melodramatic framing becomes a significant element of Kaepernick’s representation. By examining thought-out responses to Kaepernick’s activism (written pieces for the press), I believe I demonstrate how even subconsciously melodrama permeates most representation of Kaepernick’s initial protests. Regarding Kaepernick’s initial protest, I examine press from the beginning of Kaepernick’s activism (the first two weeks of media responses to the protest). I chose to examine this time period in order to see how the media initially responded to his protests. I believe my research demonstrates how the press instinctually reacts to such athletic activism by reframing its’ goals.

### 3.1 The Mythic Sphere of Sport

Johan Huizinga, in his work *Homo Ludens*, “describes play as a meaningful activity...that is separate from the ordinary demands of everyday life” (Moore 373). This boundary, or “magic circle” separates play, whether it be sports or video games, from mundane day-to-day life (373). “When players enter the system of a game,” ordinary meaning is suspended (375). In this game system, “a new but fragile reality” exists (375). This reality, within the magic circle, “is defined by the rules of the game and ‘inhabited’ by the players” (375). The magic circle is “formalized play” where “established boundaries, spaces and quantifiable and non-ambiguous outcomes” exist (376). While sports are very much a part of our culture, they are often separated from the intellectual sphere, confining “sports to the physical realm, separate from presumably the mental world of politics and culture” (Abdel-Shahid 47). The magic circle of the sports sphere establishes that sport abides by certain rules. These rules dictate that the intellectual and political remain outside the athletic field. Yet, culture, politics, and sport have interacted throughout history, even at “the first recorded Olympic Games in 776 BCE” (Schmidt 3). “The games had a political purpose and helped promote geopolitical unity,” Schmidt argues, while also playing a significant function within the cultural life of Ancient Greece (3). During the Cold War, sports and politics often worked symbiotically, each political side using sports to promote their preferred political system (Communism against Democracy). The common misconception that sport “is a state of nature...[and] an apolitical, egalitarian space” often allows sports commentators to represent sports as an equal playing field (Abdel-Shahid 47). For a professional or an amateur athlete, all that purportedly matters is skill and physical prowess. Therefore, many people influenced by conventional press representations view

sports as an area devoid of racism, sexism, or any other form of prejudice. In our sporting culture, many assume, hard work and skill are the sufficient conditions of success. Sports have been idealized, and placed on an egalitarian pedestal (Hartmann “The Politics” 559).

Douglass Hartmann argues that in American society there is a “remarkable convergence or mutual interdependence...between the culture (some might say cult) of sport and liberal democratic ideology and practice” (559). He argues that the culture of sport and liberal democratic ideology and practice “hold at least two fundamental tenets in common: the idea of fair play within established, abstracted rules of conduct and the notion that the freely acting individual is the fount and source of all creativity, process, and order” (559). Hartmann argues that the synthesis of these ideals is “considered essential for social progress, ethnic harmony, and the greatest possible good society” (559). Yet, these ideals “yield standards of racial justice and civil rights that are thoroughly individualistic and assimilationist” (559). Hartmann asserts that for those who do not experience racial injustice, sports can seem “just and right for everyone, blacks included” (559). Therefore, when protests or politics are brought into the sports arena, many viewers may consider such behavior to be a violation of the sacred, “egalitarian” region that sports occupy in our culture.

This restricted perception of sports has helped to generate a widely shared view that sports and politics should not mix. Yet sport has constituted “a cultural arena” within American society that “provide[s] one of the few public spaces in which otherwise marginalized and disempowered groups can express social grievances and begin to fashion some sort of mobilization on their behalf” (549). As Gamal Abdel-Shehid notes, “[o]ften black sporting heroes have represented the wishes of entire populations who have been

marginalized both politically and economically” (Abdel-Shehid 58). Once official segregation within the American sports world was eliminated, African-Americans were slowly allowed to demonstrate their abilities and talents within sports culture. While the careers of African-American sports giants such as Jack Johnson and Jackie Robinson occurred in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, it was not until the mid-1950s and 1960s that African-Americans became prominent in the American sports arena. The success of these athletes performed an important social function. William Van Deburg writes, “Black sports heroes brought hope to the discouraged and, as dynamic role models, helped motivate those with low self-esteem” (Van Deburg 87). One representative case in which black athletes were able to exploit their position to express social grievances was the 1968 African-American Olympic protest. Tommie Smith and John Carlos, two American sprinters who won medals, raised black-gloved fists into the air as the Star-Spangled Banner was played at the victory ceremony (Hartmann “The Politics” 550). While many people praised Smith and Carlos’ actions, they were also harshly criticized and punished for their behavior. The “vast majority put forward some version of the thesis that sport was simply not the proper place for such a protest” (558). It was clear that while African-Americans could participate in American sports, they could not use their visibility to promote ideas of racial justice—violating the magic circle of professional American football-- unless they were prepared to suffer serious sanctions.

### **3.2 Narratives of Patriotism and Militarism**

The National Anthem, while currently a mainstay at any American sports event, did not always play such a significant role in the sporting spectacle. The playing of the anthem, at sports events, began as a tradition at baseball games. In the latter half of the 1800s, *The*

*Star-Spangled Banner*, along with other national songs, was played sporadically at professional baseball games (Spiegel 26). The “obligatory baseball ceremony of playing and/or singing The Star-Spangled Banner began on 5 September 1918 during the first game of the world series between the Cubs and the Boston Red Sox” (27). At this point, however, the song was only played “on opening day, on special occasions and during the world series” (29). It was only with the coming of World War II that “the custom of playing and singing the tune at every game” took hold (Voigt 86). Now, *The Star-Spangled Banner* is most frequently encountered at sports events. By uniting the National Anthem with sports events, the American athletic sphere steeped its activities in ritual symbols of country, democracy, and freedom (Spiegel 35). By performing the National Anthem on a daily basis, American sports culture explicitly endorses “the core values of ‘The American Dream’” (35).

The National Football League and US military “have shared more than 40 years of history” (Schimmel 82). Even the NFL’s logo exemplifies an intent to brand American football as representative of American values, patriotism, and militarism. The NFL logo, otherwise known as “the shield”, is a red, white, and blue shield showing the initials NFL, a football, and eight stars (representing each division of the NFL). Jansen and Sabo argue that “the language of football has always drawn on military...argot: attack, blitz, bombs, ground and air assaults, offense, defense, penetrations, flanks, conflicts, and battles for territory are standard terms in sportscasters’ vocabularies” (Jansen 3). This claim is particularly true in a post-9/11 sports world. “Since the terrorist attacks in the United States on September 11, 2001,” Kimberly Schimmel asserts, “...military representation at—and involvement in—NFL Games has taken on new dimensions” (Schimmel 82). After 9/11, the “military-

industrial-media-entertainment network” also known as “MIME-NET,” has sprung into action (Der Derian 83). Michael Butterworth argues that MIME-NET “not only forecloses potential deliberation or dissent but also naturalizes the relationship between the military and popular culture” (Butterworth 242). The central employment of patriotic symbols has become so ubiquitous in the NFL that the role of these symbols is not recognized as political. Normalizing traditions have made MIME-NET and its militaristic and nationalist ideology appear apolitical.

### **3.3 Melodrama and Media Representation of Kaepernick’s Protest**

In order to demonstrate the relationship between melodrama and the media’s representation of Kaepernick’s activism, I will examine the degree to which media representation of Colin Kaepernick employed Linda Williams’s five elements of melodrama. Williams’s five elements are: spaces of innocence, victim-heroes, a dialectic of pathos and action, realism, and characters organized by Manichean conflicts between good and evil. Melodramatic pieces do not, according to Williams, necessarily involve all of these characteristics. In particular, Williams’ discussion of realism centers around film and theatre and does not, therefore, prove particularly useful when examining newspaper coverage. I have also chosen not to discuss pathos and action in these newspaper articles since many of these articles were very concise (and therefore could not develop such a component). Therefore, in my examination of Kaepernick, I will focus on spaces of innocence, victim-heroes, and Manichean conflicts between good and evil. In my research, I examined newspaper items from 7 American newspapers selected based on size and regional representation. The newspapers included were *The New York Times*, *The Los Angeles Times*, *The San Francisco Chronicle*, *The Houston Chronicle*, *USA Today*, and *The New York Post*.

I gathered 70 columns/pieces using Factiva and ProQuest databases along with databases from each newspaper. The time span researched extends between August 26 2016 and September 9 2016. This time span represents the two first weeks of Kaepernick's protest.

While the sports sphere seemingly attempts to remain apolitical, recently athletic protests "have been reinvigorated...fueled, in large part by both the social and political climate of contemporary society and by the information sharing power offered by social media" (Schmidt 4). Since many athletes enjoy immense celebrity and attract a large number of followers, their "tweets, posts, or messages get much more attention than those of the average person with a handful of followers" (4). While the year 2016 was "not necessarily unique in the amount of social troubles that individuals faced," it marked a watershed moment in which many issues of social justice "started, not only to gain attention, but also to gain more widespread recognition throughout all walks of society" (11). Many athletes—beginning in 2016—felt an urge to speak out politically through social media, but also through their actions.

Many athletes expressed their political views regarding the 2016 presidential campaign—and victory—of Donald Trump. In "Red Vs. Blue: The Dueling Politics of the NFL and NBA," Ryan Bort notes that "an unprecedented number of sports figures [have voiced] their feelings about the president" (Bort). Some professional sports have tolerated this kind of political engagement, while other sports have sought to deter such behavior. Ken Belson, a writer from the New York Times, describes the NFL "as striving for a neutral stance on thorny political questions [which] is in contrast to the National Basketball Association, which in recent years has willingly taken positions critical of perceived attacks on L.G.B.T rights and Trump's temporary ban on refugees" (Belson). While the NBA has

seemed quite tolerant of political and social protest, “the abiding culture in the NFL, and in football more broadly, dictates that players look inward to the team and do as little as possible to stand out off the field” (Belson). The NFL’s attempted deterrence of political engagement “underscores the lengths it will go not to offend its fans” and to remain non-political (Belson). New York Times writer, John Branch notes that “[t]he N.F.L. and its 32 franchise owners, none of them African-American, may be the most conservative fraternity of leaders in major American sports” (Branch). “At least seven donated \$1 million or more to Trump’s inaugural committee,” Branch notes, “far more than any other sport’s owners” (Branch). Kaepernick’s choice to protest—as a part of the NFL, on the athletic field—demonstrates a break from the conservative culture of his sport. Therefore, it is not surprising that his activism produced dramatic and bold reactions.

“Classic stage melodrama,” Linda Williams states, “usually begins by offering a moment of virtue taking pleasure in itself” (Williams *Playing* 28). Melodrama uses the icon of home “to figure [represent] this innocence” or virtue (28). The narrative in a melodramatic piece often begins with an intrusion into the idyllic and innocent home space. “Even if this space is not literally represented...even if it has never been possessed,” melodrama is often saturated with “nostalgia for a virtuous place we like to think we once possessed, whether in childhood or the distant past of the nation” (28). Melodrama relies on the space of innocence, whether it ever existed, to maintain a sense of virtue and nostalgia.

This concept of a space of innocence clearly corresponds to the athletic sphere, particularly during times of stress. As discussed at the beginning of this chapter, sport is placed on a pedestal of virtue and democratic idealism, within a magic circle where politics and racial injustice purportedly do not exist. While the sporting arena is always considered a

place of virtuous battle, ideas of virtue become particularly salient when the character of the sporting arena is challenged. In introducing politics and activism to the field of the NFL, Colin Kaepernick challenged fans, teammates, coaches, and anyone else watching to consider why the football field was “the wrong place” for his protest. Even though the athletic sphere has always been connected to the political, the response of many sports fans, after Kaepernick’s protest, demonstrated “nostalgia for a virtuous place” that these fans believe that they once possessed (28). One comment, offered by Kaepernick’s former University of Nevada coach, is representative of many viewer’s thoughts regarding Kaepernick’s protest. The New York Post writes, “[e]ven Kaepernick's former...coach, Chris Ault, the only one to offer him a football scholarship out of high school, urged him to find another way to make his point (Li). "I just think there are better venues to express that interest,” Ault stated to The New York Post, “[y]ou never lead by sitting down” (Li). A different and later New York Post article reported that Jets safety, Calvin Pryor, stated that Kaepernick was simply “drawing attention’ to himself, not the problems the country is dealing with...[t]he best thing to do is go about things the right way,” (Braziller). Both Pryor and Ault criticized Kaepernick’s method of protest.

Josh Peter, writing for USA Today, claims “Obama described Kaepernick’s decision to sit during the national anthem before games as ‘messy’ and Kaepernick said that’s an inevitable part of the process” (Peter). Kaepernick’s protest is messy, disruptive, and disturbing to those that consider the athletic field an arena devoid of politics; a space of innocence. Chuck Schilken, from the Los Angeles Times, discusses Jim Harbaugh’s response to Kaepernick’s protest. Initially, Harbaugh said, “I acknowledge his right to do that, but I don’t respect the motivation or the action” (Schilken). Yet, quickly after this

statement, Harbaugh released a tweet editing his former comments. In his tweet, he wrote, “I apologize for misspeaking my true sentiments. To clarify, I support Colin’s motivation. It’s his *method of action* that I take exception to” (Schilken, my emphasis). While Harbaugh could publicly support Kaepernick’s motivation, he could not support his choice to perform a political protest of the National Anthem during NFL games. Jarrett Bell, another USA Today writer, wrote, “[t]wo coaches who have been on the liberal side for years—indicated they wouldn’t accept a player not standing for the anthem” (Bell). A player protesting on the playing field causes even liberal-minded people to experience discomfort. Keven Blackstone, a Washington Post writer, succinctly sums up this sentiment. Blackstone argues that Kaepernick’s protest “exercise[s] the audacity to disrupt a sporting event—which we have been conditioned to believe is a societal safe space, a theater of escape, a spectacle sanitized of any of our ills” (Blackstone).

Another prominent characteristic of melodrama is the victim hero. The representation of the victim-hero and recognition of his/her virtue “orchestrates the moral legibility that is key to melodrama’s function” (Williams *Playing* 29). Just as it requires a space of innocence, melodrama needs “a victim whose visible suffering transmutes into proof of virtue” (29). While Kaepernick has definitely suffered publicly for his choice to protest, he has not been represented as a virtuous victim. Rather, the media have designated American soldiers and military personnel, even cops-- as the victim-heroes of the Kaepernick media saga. Brian Smith, for the Houston Chronicle writes, “[t]he freedom so many have died for and will continue to sacrifice their lives for—the America Kaepernick so ignorantly takes for granted—allows him to be an idiot in the USA” (Smith). Kaepernick’s hopes for a more just and equal America make him an “idiot” because his protest allegedly

attacks America's soldiers and veterans. Mark Sanchez from The New York Post quotes Giants lineman Justin Pugh's response to Kaepernick's protest. Pugh called Kaepernick's protest "disrespectful to all the men and women who put their lives on the line to protect this country...I will be STANDING during the National Anthem tonight. Thank you to ALL (Gender, Race, Religion) that put your lives on the line for that flag" (Sanchez). NFL Coach Ben McAdoo similarly expounded upon his reasons for standing for the anthem: "You know what, the way we operate for the national anthem, we consider it a small gesture to those who served and sacrificed their lives for our country, and for us to play and coach in this great game," (Schwartz). For many NFL coaches, players, and community members, standing for the National Anthem is a form of paying homage to soldiers and veterans—those who put their lives on the line for America. Such positioning then places Kaepernick in opposition to such patriotic sentiments. By kneeling for the anthem, in many people's view, Kaepernick disrespects and belittles soldiers and veterans sacrifices to the United States.

In fact, Kaepernick has explicitly addressed this concern and stated that his protest is not meant to disrespect soldiers or veterans. "Mind you, this idea that Kaepernick's gesture is disrespectful to our military is completely a matter of interpretation," Dylan Hernandez from the Los Angeles Times writes, "Kaepernick certainly emphasized that wasn't his intention" (Hernandez). Hernandez further his statement asserting that not only is Kaepernick's gesture not disrespectful to soldiers, but that how our government treats veterans and soldiers is the truly disrespectful act. Hernandez writes, "You know what I find really disrespectful to our soldiers? How little we pay many of them, the substandard care we often provide them...pay them more and improve their benefits"

(Hernandez). Kaepernick explicitly stated that his protest was not invoked to disrespect the military and even worked with a veteran to attempt to assuage such accusations. Yet, The National Anthem is so closely tied to American ideals of patriotism and militarism that is almost unfathomable, to many Americans, that one could question the flag and anthem without denigrating the military. John Diaz for the San Francisco Chronicle states, “[h]ere’s what bothers me about the 49er quarterback’s protest: its symbolic target. The American flag” (Diaz). Kaepernick’s protest does use the flag as a symbol. He kneels before the flag asking American to stand behind America’s purported virtues of freedom and equality for all. Therefore, many news outlets reframe Kaepernick’s protest. Instead of discussing the race and social justice issues Kaepernick concerns himself with, the story shifts to the alleged degradation of America’s military. Rather than truly create a discourse around Kaepernick’s protest, the media regularly frames the narrative around the sacrificial soldiers, victim-heroes, who put their lives on the line for the safety of Americans.

The San Francisco police also made it clear that Kaepernick’s protest disparaged their work and sacrifice. Martin Halloran, former president of the San Francisco police union, stated that Kaepernick’s protest was “based on a false narrative and misinformation that lacks any factual basis” (Schilken). Halloran feels the law enforcement community is unfairly blamed “for all of society’s problems, including racial divide, in our country. It isn’t fair and it isn’t true” (Schilken). Halloran even approached Roger Goodell, commissioner of the NFL, and expressed his disappointment and distress regarding Kaepernick’s protest. Halloran articulated this when he wrote to Goodell that the San Francisco Police Offices Association hopes “your organizations choose to do the right thing and at least apologize to the many police officers Mr. Kaepernick has disrespected for no apparent reason”

(Schilken). This story line frames the police officers as sacrificial victim-heroes. Halloran, as written in the Los Angeles Times, wishes Kaepernick “could see the emotional and psychological challenges that our officers face following a fatal encounter” (Schilken). Kaepernick’s critique and protest also seemingly disrespects police officers who also are framed as heroes who risk their lives for their country. Colin Kaepernick’s protest condemns American systemic racism—problems larger than just the military or just the police—yet media outlets focus on how his protest is misunderstood, rather than his actual message. This allows for the media to frame America’s favorite heroes, soldiers and the police, as suffering, yet brave idols—the victim-heroes of our story.

“It is the constant goal of melodrama,” Linda Williams argues, “to make visible occulted moral distinctions through acts and gestures” (Williams *Playing* 40). In classic melodrama, central characters are unambiguously good or bad, virtuous or evil. Over time, this trope has evolved. Rather than simply presenting a black and white contrast, more contemporary melodrama places characters in a morally gray area. Coverage of the Kaepernick saga involved both classic black and white contrasts of good and evil and more contemporary exercises in moral ambiguity. Coverage by the most conventional media outlets relied on the classic black and white melodramatic contrast. These media outlets depict Kaepernick as unpatriotic, un-American, and disrespectful, while contrasting his behavior with that of their loyal and principled victim-heroes—American soldiers and military personnel. “A neighbor who said he had lived on the block for more than 15 years,” writes Josh Peter from USA Today, “said Kaepernick’s protest had been met with resounding disapproval by residents in the community” (Peter, Sept 09). Even Kaepernick’s neighborhood and home see him as the villain of this story. Chuck Schilken from the Los

Angeles Times reports Alex Boone, former 49ers player, said, “[w]e’re out here playing a game, making millions of dollars. People are losing their life, and you don’t have the common courtesy to do that [stand for anthem]” (Schilcken). Even a government representative, Duncan Hunter (R-Alpine), asserts that his city’s team, The Chargers, “could never retain a player like Kaepernick...a city like San Diego is too patriotic...I think he would be booed out” (Krasovic). Kaepernick due to his compulsion to speak out for his community becomes represented as an unpatriotic scoundrel.

Yet, the majority of the news outlets have not presented such a black and white contrast. Many, responding to the varying preferences of their diverse audience base, provide a less stereotyped account. Rather than characterizing Kaepernick as simply unpatriotic and disloyal, many newspaper accounts have instead focused on Kaepernick’s allegedly diminished football skills or indistinctness of his protest. According to these accounts, Kaepernick’s activism constitutes an attempt to continue to attract public attention as his athletic skills decline. In portraying Kaepernick as a declining athlete, these accounts do not characterize him as immoral or evil. Nevertheless, these portrayals do belittle the athlete and suggest his “disturbances” (protests) may justify dismissing him from the league. Jarrett Bell begins his column on Colin Kaepernick’s protest by stating, “[i]t is still undetermined whether Colin Kaepernick will recapture the magic he possessed during his first season...Since then his career has been derailed by injuries, ineffectiveness, and organization upheaval.” (Bell). The *New York Times* writes, “It looks very much as though this 49ers season will be remembered primarily for Kaepernick’s protests, not for his play on the field” (Mather). These articles, while centered on Kaepernick’s protest, make sure to plainly belittle Kaepernick’s athletic prowess and worth in the NFL. Some of the harshest

words relating to Kaepernick's performance came from the *San Francisco Chronicle* (the 49ers home newspaper). The *Chronicle* described Kaepernick's performance in a game against the Packers as "miserable" perhaps guaranteeing his repositioning to backup quarterback for the team (Saracevic "Kaepernick Anthem").

While one approach relies on attacking Kaepernick's physical presence on the field, another method of questioning Kaepernick relies on his style of activism. Sally Jenkins of the *Washington Post* writes, "anyone trying to figure out whether to be offended by or congratulatory of Kaepernick runs straight into that vagueness, the amorphousness of his gesture" (Jenkins). She further stresses her point: "[l]et's face it: He's not the most clarion of dissidents...He has offered only a generalized explanation that he doesn't want to salute a nation 'that oppresses black people and people of color,' followed by a soft clarification that he doesn't mean to slight the military or police" (Jenkins). Another *Washington Post* writer asks the question, "Kaepernick evidently has some strong views on this subject, but what are they exactly?" (Swaim). Willie Brown for the *San Francisco Chronicle* writes, "I don't think 49ers quarterback Colin Kaepernick had any idea what he was getting into by declining to stand for the national anthem" (Brown). Not only do these lines of attack interrogate Kaepernick's intellect, but they also question his motivation and understanding of the significance of his protest.

While these reporters question Kaepernick's motives and methods, they do not truly interrogate Kaepernick's stated crisis (he does not want to stand for a flag that oppresses minorities). In reporting an overtly racial event (Kaepernick's protest), almost none of these reporters discuss Kaepernick's racial background, and very few articles contextualize Kaepernick's protest by mentioning the Black Lives Matter movement and police brutality.

The authors avoid using older stereotypes of African-American athletes as merely physical specimens. Yet, while avoiding one troubling practice, most of these articles appear to adopt a new problematic approach. Instead of relying upon overt racial stereotypes, writers now avoid the subject of race as much as possible. David Buffington examines the concept of racial invisibility, or color blindness, in sports reporting in “Contesting Race on Sundays: Making Meaning out of the Rise in the Number of Black Quarterbacks.” He notes that “the majority [of the articles]...declare the end or near end of race as a factor at quarterback” (Buffington 25). While he argues that many of these articles presented the increase in African-American quarterbacks as a positive development, the language of colorblindness employed in these articles is misleading and arguably enables racism by disguising its effects. While the increased number of African-American quarterbacks in the NFL seems to represent a retreat from the overt racism of the past, this progress does not erase the league’s involvement within America’s systemically racist system and history.

Buffington also identifies a second form of disguised racism in these texts: “the silence-equals-progress perspective” (26). In many of these texts, the authors assert that that lack of contemporary discussion about racism in the league effectively establishes that there is no longer a problem. One author cited by Buffington states that “[t]he best sign of progress is when no one notices anymore” (26). Since these views are widely accepted among members of the mainstream media and have the potential to do serious damage by disguising the nature of ongoing racism, they must be taken seriously. Buffington argues that “[b]y promoting this void of discourse, space is denied for discussion of the history surrounding race that affords an understanding of its nuanced manifestations” (30-31).

This tactic of “colorblindness” or “silence equals progress” substitutes one form of unsatisfactory representation for another—color-blindness implicitly endorses the status quo, and all of the racially problematic attitudes and practices that continue to affect the representation of African-American athletes. Reframing Kaepernick’s activism in terms of patriotism allows the media to ignore his plea that racial injustice be addressed. This reframing snubs Kaepernick’s message in order to serve the media’s sense of melodramatic justice. By placing Kaepernick in the role of betrayer of American patriotism, the media can maintain their color-blind representation—patently ignoring Kaepernick and other minority cries for racial justice.

#### **4 KAEPERNICK AND NIKE**

The first two chapters of this thesis examine Colin Kaepernick’s athletic protest and, more specifically, media responses to the first two weeks of his protest. This chapter will examine a media event two years after Kaepernick’s initial protest. In this chapter, I will discuss Kaepernick’s Nike advertisement (released in September 2018). In order to contextualize Kaepernick’s relationship with Nike, I will first discuss the relationship between sport, the media, and capitalism. After a brief history of these relations, I will confine my examination to Nike, a sport brand, and their bond to celebrity athletes, particularly famous African-American professional athletes. I will conclude this chapter by examining a particular Kaepernick Nike advertisement called “Dream Crazy.” I will examine elements of melodrama within the advertisement and the manner in which they work to present a particular image of Kaepernick and his activism. I will discuss the ways in which media representation of Kaepernick differs from Nike’s depiction of him in the advertisement.

## 4.1 Capitalism and Sport

Contemporary American professional sports are “one of the major spectacles of media culture” (Kellner 38). Sport media culture, “organized around the consumption of images, commodities, and spectacles,” has changed and evolved over the past century. The “structural shift” in America “to a society of the spectacle involves a commodification of previously noncolonized sectors of social life” (40). While nineteenth century sport centered around “amateur recreational participation,” recent twentieth [and early twenty-first] century sport has transformed into a “spectator-centered technology and business” (Real 14). Nineteenth (and early twentieth) century sport saw the “emergence of institutionalized sport as—at least partially—an agent of social control for the urban industrial masses” (Andrews *Sport* 5). “By codifying sporting practice (regulated participation) and sanctioning cathartic release (mass spectatorship),” David L. Andrews argues, “the patrician-industrialist power bloc ensured that sport helped constrain working bodies to the demands and discipline of the industrial workplace” (5). During the latter half of the nineteenth century, sport became a site “of surveillance, spectacle, and profit” helping fill up workers newfound “free-time” (Miller 61). Along with this commodification of sport came “modern forms of domination, such as ‘business administration,’ and techniques of manipulation, such as market research and advertising” (Bourdieu 35).

These developments within the world of sport serve “to help reproduce the consumer society” (Kellner 41). Athletes make massive amounts of money through playing and endorsement contracts—contracts through which they “commodify themselves from head to foot, selling their various body parts and images to the highest corporate bidder” (42). “Televisual sports events...are hyper-commodified through the influence of corporate

monies” and many live professional sports events garner “some of the highest advertising rates in television” (41). Consumerism and commodification saturate the contemporary professional athletic sphere.

#### **4.2 Commodification of African-American Male Athletes**

While professional sport, in America, initially involved primarily Caucasian athletes, African-American athletes enjoyed increasing success in the sports sphere as the twentieth century progressed. “Sports...became an important route for people of color to grab their share of the American dream and cut of the great spectacle of ‘professional’ (read commercial) sports” (50). Kellner notes that, [w]ith the incorporation of black athletes into professional sports they entered mainstream media culture as icons of the spectacle” (50). Many African-American athletes promoted issues of social justice throughout the twentieth century. Yet, Gamal Abdel-Shehid notes that while “many black male sports heroes of the sixties and seventies were overtly political and helped change sporting culture permanently...this is not the case today [early 2000s], as the overwhelming popularity and conservative politics of Michael Jordan, O.J. Simpson, Tiger Woods, and Mike Tyson attests” (Abdel-Shehid 59). The decreased level of political engagement among African-American athletes appears to parallel the increasing participation of African-American sports stars in high profile ad campaigns. This decreased level of political engagement also parallels a change in the representation of black athletes in the mainstream media. Abdel-Shehid cites bell hooks’ research to support the claim that visual representation of African-American men altered significantly in the last decades of the twentieth century. She argues that “[c]onservative change in the politicized visual representation of the black male body began to occur in the late seventies with the commodification of blackness” (60).

While African-American sports leaders in the past were also political figures, from the late 1980s into the early 2000s, commodification has “delinked [the position of the black athlete] from its political foundations” (61). This assimilationist trend can be seen more broadly in television representation of African-American men. Herman Gray, in an article examining representations of African-American men in 1980s sitcoms, argues that the “ideological power [of representations of the African-American male] lies in their confirmation and congruence with the general and dominant assimilationist view of American race relations” (Gray 227). This assimilationist view relies upon ideas of racial invisibility and individualism. These assimilationist techniques also help normalize African-American radical and resistant culture. The notorious image of Smith and Carlos’ protest continues to be celebrated around the world, yet “[m]ost Americans ‘know’ little more than the image itself” (Hartmann *Race, Culture* 8). Their protest is “trivialized, diluted, or even erased altogether, rendering our memories of their gesture either shamelessly sentimental and meaningless on the one hand, or subject to political manipulation, reckless commercialization, and...co-optation on the other” (9).

After the police who beat Rodney King were declared not guilty, a reporter asked Michael Jordan if he had any thoughts regarding the 1992 L.A. uprisings (in response to verdict). Jordan answered, in Todd Boyd’s paraphrase: “I’m more concerned with my jump shot” (Kellner 52). This retort from Jordan signifies his substantial interest in remaining apolitical. Rather than make a comment that could stir up trouble (amongst fans, endorsement contracts, etc.), Jordan flippantly removed himself from the conversation. Michael Jordan was by no means alone in this endeavor. Jordan, “like many athletes corrupted by the sports spectacle and commercial culture, has abrogated his basic political

and social responsibilities in favor of expensive clothes, commodities, and a mega-stock portfolio” (53). “Nike has played a key role in promoting these values,” Douglas Kellner argues, “and is thus a major cultural force, a socializer and arbitrator of cultural and social values, as well as a shoe company” (53). Nike, as one of the largest competitors in the sports commercial market, has changed athlete branding and the sports-commercial landscape domestically and globally.

While Nike existed before Michael Jordan, their symbiotic relationship created “one of the most successful marketing campaigns in history” and “helped make Nike’s corporate logo and swoosh sign one of the most familiar icons of corporate culture” (53). Jordan’s Nike campaigns strikingly combined advertising and entertainment (53). Uniting immense athletic skill and a “well-honed fashion image,” Jordan proved to be the perfect professional athlete to market Nike’s athletic wear (47). As both a great player and a tremendously successful marketing phenomenon, Jordan represents an early example of “the construction of the media/sports spectacle by corporations, public relations, and the techniques of advertising” (46). Even while American popular culture has “regularly taken the line that Jordan’ transcends race,” this claim is patently false (47) and misrepresents the character of Jordan’s contribution to Nike’s marketing efforts. In fact, Nike has specifically used African-American athletes in their ads to represent “difference,” while also putting forth the idea that such athletes are living the American dream—money, fame, and athletic glory (51).

While participation in advertising campaigns of this sort helped to secure celebrity and affluence for Jordan and a small number of African-American athletes, “one could argue that... the transformation offered the consumer with the Nike shoe is a false transcendence” (51). Nike’s consistent use of African-American athletes to promote their brand “presents

the fantasy that anyone can make it in the society of competition and status, that one can climb the class ladder and overcome the limitations of race and class” (48). While the possibility of securing the kind of relationship with corporate sponsors enjoyed by Jordan and a few elite athletes presents an attractive prospect for other African-American athletes, it is truly a unique athlete who possesses the blend of athletic ability, allure, and trendiness that Nike seeks. Although Nike employed African-American athletes in its advertising long before most other companies, the company does not generally treat African-American employees well. “Behind the Nike spectacle, there is, of course,” Kellner asserts, “the unedifying reality of underpaid workers, toiling at sub-subsistence wages and under terrible working conditions” (54). Reports of such labor abuses continue to this day, along with other reports that Nike provides “a hostile and abusive work environment for women” (Creswell). In August 2017, two women filed a lawsuit against Nike “seeking class action status claiming pay inequality and gender discrimination” (Creswell).

#### **4.3 Colin Kaepernick and Nike**

As these charges were being filed against Nike, “a debate raged in Nike’s headquarters” (Creswell) regarding the company’s connection with Colin Kaepernick, with whom Nike still had a contractual relationship. Kaepernick became a free agent after he left the San Francisco 49ers in 2016, but no team signed him. Many viewed Kaepernick’s unemployment as the natural consequence of his on-field protests. His activism led NFL executives to consider Kaepernick to be “radioactive” (Creswell). Not sure how to use Kaepernick commercially, “top executives in Nike’s sport marketing group decided to end the company’s contract with him” (NY Times). Nigel Powell—head of communications for Nike—vetoed this decision, arguing “that Nike would face a backlash from the media and

consumers if it was seen as siding with the NFL rather than Kaepernick” (Creswell). Nike’s deep-seated interest in attracting young urban customers prevented Nike from terminating their relationship with Kaepernick.

Assigning priority to its a young, urban youth consumer base rather than to the more conservative NFL fan consumer base, Nike decided to use Kaepernick in a new ad campaign. Working with Kaepernick would not only make Nike look courageous (taking a provocative position on a social issue), but the ad would also speak to their “core consumers in a very Nike-esque, provocative way that shows it understands them [consumers] and the issues that matter to them” (Creswell). This ad campaign, starring Kaepernick, celebrated the 30<sup>th</sup> anniversary of Nike’s “Just do it” slogan (Carrington). The campaign began on September 3, 2018 with Kaepernick tweeting “a stark black-and-white, close up photo of his face...[o]verlaid on the photo was the Nike swoosh logo” and a few words (Creswell). The words read, “Believe in something. Even if it means sacrificing everything” (Creswell). Billboards of this image of Kaepernick then went up in San Francisco and New York, while the video advertisement followed the next day. The two-minute long video, “Dream Crazy,” generated strong reactions from Nike shoppers. On twitter, hashtags such as “#BoycottNike and #JustBurnIt trended” (Carrington). Many conservative white Americans posted videos and images burning their Nike products. Even President Trump responded on twitter: “Just like the NFL, who rating have gone WAY DOWN, Nike is getting absolutely killed with anger and boycotts. I wonder if they had any idea that it would be this way?” (Carrington). Yet, Nike executives disagree with Trump reporting “record engagement with the brand” (Creswell). The week after the release of the advertisement, “Nike’s stock closed at an all-time high of more than \$85 a share” (Creswell).

#### 4.4 Melodrama in “Dream Crazy”

“Dream Crazy,” Nike’s advertisement with Colin Kaepernick, packs many stories and emotions into two minutes of film. The advertisement begins with a young man’s face as he begins to ride a skateboard down the handrail of a staircase. We see footage of him falling, over and over again, as a voice-over declares, “If people say your dreams are crazy, if they laugh at what they think you can do, good, stay that way” (“Nike”). As this sentence ends, the ad turns to footage of a young boy—a wrestler—who has no legs. The ad shows him in competition and then shows the competition projected on the ceiling of the wrestling gym. The ad then picks up the pace and shows us many young athletes performing their sport of choice. The voice-over urges its audience to push themselves; to strive to be the best (in the world—or ever). The audience is shown transgressed gender rules (a young woman plays football and wins homecoming queen) and immense triumphs (a man loses 120 pounds and survives a brain tumor to finally become an Ironman). The ad portrays young athletes and well known-athletes (soccer player Alphonso Davies and LeBron James, throughout their careers) striving for greatness. The ad then cuts to a person, whose afro hairstyle is the focus of the frame, who walks in an urban landscape. As this figure turns around to face the viewer, the voice-over says, “Believe in something. Even if it means sacrificing everything” (“Nike”). The man before the audience is Colin Kaepernick—who can now be identified as the voice speaking over the ad. The ad then returns to its montage of athletic achievements: The United States Women’s soccer team scoring a goal, Shaquem Alphonso Griffin playing football with one hand, and Serena Williams playing tennis over her long career. After this footage, the ad returns to Kaepernick in the streets and he speaks to the camera. Kaepernick says, “So don’t ask if your dreams are crazy, ask if they are crazy

enough” (“Nike”). After this statement, Kaepernick walks away and the camera pans out. The audience can now see more of the city-scape and the many faces shown throughout the ad are projected on the sides of buildings. Over this image of faces, a message is written across the screen: “It’s only crazy until you do it. Just do it” (“Nike”).

Some commentators have called this ad “a stroke of genius,” while others argued that it presents a terrible message (Creswell). The ad polarized American viewers. I argue that the response of viewers to this ad was decisively influenced by their interpretations of the ad’s melodramatic characteristics. Melodrama identifies as good and evil characters who were previously obscure (Williams “Mega” 524). The melodramatic mode requires moral legibility; the audience must know who is good and who is bad, but that does not mean good will succeed. “The pathos of the suffering victim turned into righteous action,” Linda Williams argues, “is part of the alchemy of melodrama’s cultural power” (527). Therefore, an audience member’s previous views regarding the Kaepernick controversy determined whether the melodrama of Nike’s “Dream Crazy” stimulated sympathy or anger. Using Linda Williams’ characteristics of melodrama, I will demonstrate the manner in which “Dream Crazy” employs the elements of modern melodrama. As stated earlier, Williams’ five characteristics of melodrama consist of a space of innocence (or home), a victim-hero, a dialectic of pathos and action, realism (used towards pathos and action), and Manichean conflicts of good and evil.

Melodrama requires the initial establishment of a space of innocence, or home. Williams asserts that melodrama needs “this space in order to support the belief that moral good is possible” (525). In “Dream Crazy,” one can view the setting of the athletic field as the representing such a space of innocence. Throughout the ad, the viewer sees each athlete

in their athletic space: the skateboarder grinding on rails, the wrestler in the gym, soccer players on the field. The athletes in their athletic zones look determined and focused. They play and perform in their home, their sports sphere. These spaces of athleticism sharply contrast with Kaepernick's setting. Kaepernick stands alone in an urban landscape. He is not shown playing football or wearing his athletic gear. Most viewers are likely to be aware that Kaepernick has been barred from the NFL. Unlike the other athletes, Kaepernick no longer has a field to play on or uniform to wear.

Williams' second melodramatic characteristic, the victim-hero, is clearly present in Kaepernick's portions of the ad. "To suffer, to be injured is, according to certain Christian and many other cultural frameworks, to earn empathy and to acquire virtue" (527). When the viewer finally sees Kaepernick's face in "Dream Crazy," they hear him say, "Believe in something. Even if it means sacrificing everything" ("Nike"). While Kaepernick does not state directly that he means his own struggle and sacrifice, the viewer will immediately apply his words to his own activism. Kaepernick publicly protested knowing that it might end his career. He sacrificed his professional career at the age of 29 (only six years into his professional career). While greater sacrifices have been made, sacrificing one's profession and life-long passion for a social justice cause is admirable. When the viewer sees the athletes of "Dream Crazy" playing their chosen sports, they remember that Kaepernick sacrificed his place on the field for something he truly believed in. Kaepernick becomes the ad's victim-hero. The NFL took away Kaepernick's profession (victim), but he will not sit idly by and do nothing. He will continue putting his face and message out for the public.

Linda Williams describes melodrama's dialectic of pathos and action as "a give and take of 'too late' and 'in the nick of time'" (Williams *Playing* 30). In "Dream Crazy,"

the viewer watches Kaepernick in an urban landscape rather than on the athletic field. The viewer may encounter what Williams describes as “the intensely rhythmic tease whose core question is...will we ever get back to the time before it is ‘too late’” (35). The viewer watches the ad and may ask: will Kaepernick ever play professional football again? Is it too late? Or yet, was Kaepernick ‘in the nick of time’? The NFL, through its response to Kaepernick’s protest, has demonstrated its conservative and old-fashioned “patriotism.” While the viewer may wish Kaepernick could be back on the field, returned to his space of home, perhaps he has removed himself from the NFL just in the nick of time.

“Dream Crazy” also utilizes the dialectic of pathos and action through its employment of suspense. Melodrama “combines a fear of loss with the excitement and suspense of action” (38). For the first half of the ad, the viewer (on first viewing) does not know who is speaking over the footage of various athletes. Even when Kaepernick is finally shown, the viewer does not see his face. The viewer sees a person with a large afro, wearing a beige coat standing on a city street corner. The suspense is maintained until Kaepernick turns to the camera and shows his face. Even if the viewer knew Kaepernick was involved in “Dream Crazy,” they would not see his face until halfway through the commercial. “Dream Crazy” uses the dialectic of pathos and action to express melodrama’s “feeling toward a time that passes too fast” (35). “Dream Crazy” also uses William’s fourth characteristic of melodrama, realism that serves the melodrama of pathos and action. Melodrama is often thought of an aesthetically excessive genre in contrast to realism. Williams argues that these “genres” developed together and mutually borrow from each other (38). The realism of the footage used in “Dream Crazy” helps develop the ad’s pathos and action. By using real footage from sports games (that the viewer may have seen before), “Dream Crazy” ignites

the viewer's appetite. Therefore, when Kaepernick enters the screen, separate from the athletes, the viewer sympathizes with him and contemplates his sacrifices.

As noted in Chapter Two, Williams' final characteristic of melodrama, Manichean conflicts between good and evil, has shifted over time. Contemporary melodrama does not always deal with such black and white contrasts (and often instead explores gray areas). In "Dream Crazy," however, Nike returns to classic Manichean contrast. Kaepernick sees the athletes around him, and he speaks to them. He tells them, through voice-over, to push themselves to be the greatest athlete they can be and to "dream crazy" ("Nike"). Through the use of voice-over, Kaepernick becomes god-like, speaking to all the athletes, big and small. Therefore, "Dream Crazy" has a hero (Kaepernick) and a suggested villain (those who stop Kaepernick from continuing with his athletic passion). While the villain remains unnamed and unseen, if the viewer feels sympathy for Kaepernick's situation, they know who is responsible.

Nike's collaboration with Colin Kaepernick exemplifies "both the promise and perils of consumer-based modes of resistance" (Muhkerjee 2). Ben Carrington and Jules Boykoff, writing for *The Guardian*, ask the necessary question: "is the Nike-Kaepernick partnership a harbinger of 21<sup>st</sup> century activism, or a case study in capitalist co-option?" (Carrington). In the twenty-first century, "neither mainstream nor leftist approaches to activism seem to escape the paradigmatic force of neoliberal capital" (Muhkerjee 2). On the one hand, "commodity activism may illuminate the nettled promise of innovative creative forms, cultural interventions," Muhkerjee and Banet-Weiser argue, "that bear critically, if in surprising ways, on modes of dominance and resistance within changing social and political landscapes" (3). Historically, African-Americans in the United States have organized their

consumption practices for political purposes. Mukherjee and Banet-Weiser significantly observe that “disenfranchised racialized communities organized boycotts of segregated public spaces, collectively invested in independent businesses, and engaged in strategic consumption practices that called into question hegemonic relations of racial power and inequity” (7). Kaepernick’s engagement with Nike can perhaps be seen as a tactic “of social action engaged with rituals and institutions of commerce and capitalist exchange to demand political freedom and equality” (7). Yet, the Nike-Kaepernick relationship is also vulnerable to serious criticism. Carrington and Boykoff argue that any activism that is “divorced from a critique of capitalism” remains limited (Carrington). “The proliferation of commodity activism,” Mukherjee and Banet-Weiser further, “serves as a trenchant reminder that there is no ‘outside’ to the logics of contemporary capitalism, that resistance, to indulge the popular cultural refrain, has, perhaps become futile” (Mukherjee 2). While Colin Kaepernick may not be a modern-day Robin Hood, he has creatively and courageously demonstrated against patriarchy and racial injustice using the platform he had. His resistance, however, has become entangled with the rituals and institutions of capitalist exchange.

Kaepernick exploits melodrama’s resources and attributes in order to protect a set of values he views as sacred. Agustin Zarzoa argues, “melodrama dramatizes...the quality of things and people that should remain beyond exchange, use and value together” (Zarzoa 397). He further asserts that “[m]elodrama polices the boundary between exchange and the realm that lies beyond exchange, that is, the realm of the sacred; melodrama attempts to determine which things...are an adequate object of exchange and which of these should not be exchanged under any circumstance” (397). Through his relationship with Nike, Kaepernick protected and reanimated his vision of the sacred—fundamental racial liberties.

While Nike might initially seem an inappropriate partner for Kaepernick's social justice endeavor, their interest in his status as a cultural celebrity with links to their target consumer base made Kaepernick valuable to Nike, while Nike's widespread global cultural cache provided a new venue within which Kaepernick could present his message. Through his work with Nike, "Dream Crazy," Kaepernick was able to transform his position in the public sphere. He moved from the unfriendly ground of the NFL, where a mythological meritocracy and color-blindness is sacred, to the broader cultural sphere in which he can, as a semi-public intellectual, expound his message on behalf of the protection of liberties that lie in the realm beyond exchange.

## 5 CONCLUSION

In *On the Wire*, Linda Williams argues, "[m]elodrama...wants us to know what justice could be" (Williams *On The* 106). She notes that this commitment to justice is "not in anyway objectively just" (114). The justice that "could be" in melodrama depends upon who is telling the story. When Colin Kaepernick began his activism, he decided—knowingly or unknowingly—to perform melodrama. His choices surrounding the style and substance of his protest reflect some of melodrama's most classic tropes: gesture, stillness, and muteness. Kaepernick enacted this protest because he believed injustices were occurring throughout the United States. "I am not," he stated, "going to stand up and show pride in a flag for a country that oppresses Black people and people of color...[t]here are bodies in the street and people getting paid leave and getting away with murder" (Inman). His actions, he felt, were his most powerful way of addressing issues of racial injustice in the United States. He therefore sacrificed his career to address these injustices in the hope of bringing about change. As Linda Williams argues, "melodrama, not tragedy...has the true ability to dissent"

(Williams *On The* 106). Kaepernick judged that his fight for justice justified sacrificing his professional career as a football quarterback. He sustained “the utopian hope that justice might be done” (113) and unconsciously chose to exploit the tropes of melodrama to express his protest.

The general media response to Kaepernick’s actions sustained the atmosphere of melodrama. The media maintained the melodramatic focus on a stark contrast between “right” and “wrong,” but assigned different meanings to those terms than Kaepernick had in his protest. The media, while perhaps moving towards a more diverse membership, still remains predominantly white and male. This claim is particularly true of those in power with decision-making authority. For this group, patriotism, respect for symbols of national authority, and respect for military sacrifice embody American honor and righteousness. Those who fail to show adequate respect for these qualities (e.g. Colin Kaepernick), must face public discipline. Imposition of such discipline is simply a requirement of justice. Therefore, much of the media employed common melodramatic tropes such as a space of innocence that must be protected, virtuous victims, and Manichean conflicts between good and evil, to represent Kaepernick’s initial protests—and, in particular, to identify Kaepernick with the “evil” rather than with “good.” Surprisingly, when examining a protest involving racial injustice, most newspapers chose to ignore the topic of race. Most did not, in fact, discuss either Kaepernick’s racial background or his association with Black Lives Matter. Press reporting of Kaepernick’s protest presented the facts without mentioning the context that defined its meaning. Rather, the press attempted to preserve the illusion of sports as a space of (colorblind) innocence. The media, in its effort to preserve this illusion of a colorblind space of innocence, stripped Kaepernick’s actions of all meaning.

This is not a trivial error. In ignoring Kaepernick's message regarding racial injustice, the media reframed and entirely redefined Kaepernick's protest—which, in press accounts, becomes an expression of his alleged hate of America and the flag; his failure to show respect for American soldiers and veterans. This representation of Kaepernick's actions invites hatred, white American patriarchal hatred, as a "just" response to Kaepernick's "disrespect." Sara Ahmed argues that narratives of hate "work by generating a subject that is endangered by imagined others whose proximity threatens not only to take something away from the subject (jobs, security, wealth), but to take the place of the subject" (Ahmed *The Cultural* 43). Many white Americans already feel endangered and threatened by the rise of minorities in positions of power, they feel they will be replaced by "the other." Therefore, when the media specifically framed Kaepernick's protest as an attack on the central values of white America, hate-fueled vitriol was the predictable patriarchal American response. "The emotion of hate works to animate the ordinary subject," Ahmed argues, "to bring that fantasy to life, precisely by constituting the ordinary as in crisis, and the ordinary person as the *real victim*" (43). When Kaepernick's protest supposedly attacks American values, hate animates the average white-American. No longer are the minorities that Kaepernick fights for the victims, white America is now the victim of Kaepernick's contempt.

Yet, the melodramatic discourse does not stop there. The media, and more generally white-America, represent Kaepernick as ungrateful, disrespectful, and undeserving of his position in the NFL—and even his position in America. Kaepernick, as a rich African-American athlete, had an obligation to remain silent and play football—and, in particular, an obligation not to espouse political and activist positions on the athletic field. After two years

of back and forth regarding the Kaepernick protest, however, Nike—in 2018—invites Kaepernick to create “Dream Crazy.” In “Dream Crazy,” the Kaepernick-Nike union creates a masterpiece of melodramatic proportions. In two-minutes, the ad utilizes Williams’ five melodramatic characteristics in a story of redemption and injustice. In the ad, Kaepernick becomes a victim of the conservative, conformist NFL. Due to his activism, he will no longer play football as a professional—his life’s goal and passion. The ad acknowledges the injustice to which the NFL subjected Kaepernick and offers itself as an act of redemption. *No*, the ad concedes, Colin Kaepernick can no longer play football professionally; and *no*, he will no longer be able to earn his salary by playing in the NFL, but Kaepernick’s message remains, and he will be paid (by Nike). Unlike the NFL, Nike’s ad acknowledges that political activism is potentially consistent with sports culture and even encourages future athletes to engage in such activism.

Even a limited examination of these three events—the initial protest, the media response to the initial protest, and “Dream Crazy”—reveals the presence of melodrama in the representation of each incident. While many define melodrama as a type of aesthetic practice or genre, it is in fact “a way of viewing the world” (Gledhill “Prologue” I). Melodrama’s ever-changing modality allows it transform from century to century. “Melodrama is the form by which,” Linda Williams argues, “timely social problems and controversies can be addressed” (Williams “Tales” 215). Yet, Williams significantly asserts that “perceptions of justice and injustice will always be relative. It might be the injustice of slavery in one melodrama (*Uncle Tom’s Cabin*), the injustice committed by former slaves in another (*Birth of a Nation*)” (215). We must not ignore melodrama’s powerful hold over American culture. “Melodrama does not so much confront how things are but asserts how

they ought to be,” yet this “ought to be” is relative and changes from person to person. Melodrama, in the hands of white, patriarchal Americans, calls for hate and fury towards those who try to make a place for themselves (and their fellow humans). Melodrama can thus be frightening and intimidating in the hands of those who seek racist, patriarchal, American “justice.” Melodrama, in the hands of the “right” person, can be exceptionally radical and valuable. Colin Kaepernick, who has used melodrama—and had it used against him—will survive. His name and story remain in the papers and across the internet, even three years after his protests. His involvement with Nike’s global brand commodifies his activism, but also revives his message and gives his voice global influence. Will Kaepernick continue to move his melodramatic form of activism towards more radical and uncompromising politics? Or will his protest and activism remain in the commercialized, commodified sphere of Nike’s “Dream Crazy?” His media saga is likely to both to persist and to leave sufficient room for the next melodramatic event on the horizon.

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