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# In the Blacklight of Media: An Analysis of Black Celebrity Anti-Racist Activism

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In the Blacklight of Media: An Analysis of Black Celebrity Anti-Racist Activism

by

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## **Abstract**

This thesis examines black celebrity anti-racist activism as a significant part of contemporary popular culture. Using Beyoncé’s 2016 Superbowl 50 halftime show and NFL quarterback Colin Kaepernick’s 2016 “Take a Knee” protest as case studies, I employ discursive textual analysis to thematically unpack how these celebrities and their political activism is articulated and debated within mainstream news media. My analysis reveals multiple competing discourses that situate Beyoncé and Kaepernick as both inspiring political leaders *and* dangerous, militant figures. Based on this analysis, I argue that news media coverage of Beyoncé and Kaepernick function as a site for negotiation over meanings around historical and contemporary racial politics, pointing to the important work that black celebrity activism does within media cultures today.

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## **CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION**

“Whereas politicians and other public officials are elected into positions from which they speak as ‘representatives,’ this role has fallen on the shoulders of black artists not so much out of the individual choice but as a consequence of structures of racism that have historically marginalized their access to the means of cultural production.”

- Kobena Mercer, *Welcome to the Jungle*

The above quote from cultural studies scholar Kobena Mercer is from his book entitled *Welcome to the Jungle: New Positions in Black Cultural Studies* and is telling in its claim that black artists, including musicians, actors, athletes and authors, often carry with them an obligation to act as ‘representatives’ of the black community. These black artists are often seen as speaking on behalf of their communities and in the process reduced to moral judgments about their character, resulting in their vilification (Mercer, 1994). Similarly, author and activist James Baldwin describes the burden placed on black celebrities in discussing 1960s famed Bahamian-American actor Sidney Poitier. In an essay originally dated in 1968 he writes,

The isolation that menaces all American artists is multiplied a thousand times and becomes absolutely crucial and dangerous for black artists. ‘Know whence you came,’ Sidney once said to me, and Sidney, his detractors to the contrary does know whence he came. But it can become very difficult to remain in touch with all that nourishes you when you have arrived at Sidney’s eminence and are in the interesting, delicate, and terrifying position of being part of a system that you know you have to change. (as cited in Kenan, 2011, pp. 223-224)



Not only does Baldwin capture the burden of representation being place on actor Sidney Poitier, but he also suggests that black artists have a lot more to lose in acting as agents of change by speaking out on systemic racial issues.

Historically, black celebrities have been under pressure to remain apolitical, and those that do choose to engage in activism are often vilified (Duvall & Heckemeyer, 2018). The resulting silence from black actors on issues of social injustice was criticized by actor/singer and black celebrity leader of the civil rights movement, Harry Belafonte. In a 2012 interview, when asked if Belafonte is happy with the image of members of minorities in Hollywood, Belafonte stated,

Not at all. They have not told the history of our people, nothing of who we are...I think one of the great abuses of this modern time is that we should have had such high-profile artists, powerful celebrities (speaking up). But they have turned their back on social responsibility. That goes for Jay-Z and Beyoncé, for example. (Zawia, 2012, para. 9)

However, since this 2012 interview there seems to have been a resurgence in what I'm calling "black celebrity anti-racist activism." For example, the #BlackLivesMater movement has inspired high-profile black celebrities like LeBron James, Jesse Williams, Janelle Monae and Kendrick Lamar to use their respective artistic platforms to speak out on issues of systemic racism (Duvall & Heckemeyer, 2018). As a media studies researcher and critical race studies scholar – and an avid consumer of celebrity content –I have followed this activism closely and was interested in exploring the ways in which this resurgent black celebrity anti-racist activism is discussed and understood within mainstream media culture. This thesis is the result of my exploration and aims to contribute to the scholarly field of celebrity studies.

Celebrity Studies has become a burgeoning interdisciplinary field of inquiry within the humanities and social sciences over the last decade. Indeed, the field now boasts its own journal (*Celebrity Studies*, 2010 --), a bi-annual international conference, and global networks of scholars committed to interrogating the ways celebrity operates both historically and contemporarily. While celebrity activism has a long history (Dyer, 2004), we are witnessing a resurgence of visible celebrity activism, as I allude to above. From Jane Fonda's 2017 trip to the Alberta tar sands to Shailene Woodley's 2016 participation in the Standing Rock demonstrations, to Joaquin Phoenix asking celebrities to forgo their private jets at this year's Golden Globes for environmental reasons, celebrity activism has made recent news headlines in both Canada and the U.S. While often praised, some celebrities have been criticized for their political activism, particularly those who have engaged in explicitly anti-racist critique, a phenomenon I explore in my research.

The black celebrities I focus on in this thesis are playing an integral part in challenging white supremacy and violence against black men and women in both the United States and Canada (Bobo, 2016). In doing so, they are becoming actively involved in the process of social change (Agyemang, 2010 et. al; see also Larkin, 2009). In the wake of the 2016 U.S. presidential election, we saw racial tensions grow worldwide. The divisive discourse that has taken hold in the media of our southern neighbours seem to be finding its way north, permeating the more fringe elements of Canadian media and leaking into the mainstream. With the prevalent use of digital media shedding light on injustices surrounding people of colour, countless celebrities took to social media to voice their frustrations. We saw celebrities turn to activists, using their platform to raise awareness of such injustices. For example, we witnessed musician John Legend tackling inequality and supporting the Black Lives Matter movement head on. He has financially

supported many campaigns fighting social and racial injustice and has taken to social media to speak out on police brutality stating, “we should not have to jump through hoops to prove black people shouldn’t be shot by police during routine traffic stops” (Price, 2016). We also saw basketball star LeBron James speak out on issues of racial injustice at a press conference over the 2018 NBA All- Star Weekend. James was responding to the widely contested “shut up and dribble” comment that was directed at him by Fox News journalist Laura Ingraham. Ingraham, in response to James’ criticism of Donald Trump, stated that James should keep political comments to himself and “shut up and dribble” (Bembry, 2018).

Celebrities of all artforms became the voice of marginalized groups and were met with both applause and criticism. I am interested in analyzing how this type of celebrity activism is discursively constructed within popular media cultures and what this might mean for understanding the radical potential of celebrity anti-racist activism. This thesis asks two primary questions: 1) How is the anti-racist political activism of black celebrities mediated within popular culture? 2) What are the discourses that are produced through this media coverage?

I will explore these questions by examining two 2016 cases studies: (1) Beyoncé’s Black Panther salute during the Superbowl 50 Halftime show in February 2016 and (2) Colin Kaepernick’s 2016 “Take a Knee” protest to raise awareness of anti-black police brutality. I introduce each case study in more detail below.

## **Background of Events**

On February 7, 2016, Beyoncé performed her new single ‘Formation,’ at the Super Bowl 50 halftime show. The video to ‘Formation’ was released the day prior to the performance and was considered to be strife with pro-black messaging with references to Black Lives Matter and Hurricane Katrina (Zaru, 2016). Beyoncé, who was a supporting act to British rock band

Coldplay, emerged onto the football field with her all-female backup dancers who wore black leather attire reminiscent of the Black Panther Party, including afros, black berets and combat boots. Beyoncé, also dressed in a black leather bodysuit, donned a vest that resembled a bandolier of bullets. The two-and-a-half-minute performance resulted in a wide range of media attention that characterized the performance as a political act and linked Beyoncé's celebrity image to that of an activist.

On August 14, 2016, six months after Beyoncé's performance, Colin Kaepernick, a quarterback for the San Francisco 49ers refused to stand for the national anthem during an NFL preseason game. Choosing to sit on the sidelines as a form of silent protest, Kaepernick was protesting what he saw as police brutality and systemic oppression of the black community. However, it wasn't until August 26, 2016 that a journalist tweeted a photo of Kaepernick out of uniform and sitting on the bench during the national anthem, that people took notice. After that game, Kaepernick was asked during a press conference why he chose to sit versus stand during the national anthem, as was customary practice for the players. Kaepernick explained,

I am not going to stand up to show pride in a flag for a country that oppresses black people and people of color, to me, this is bigger than football and it would be selfish on my part to look the other way. There are bodies in the street and people getting paid leave and getting away with murder (Whyche, 2016).

Three weeks later, Kaepernick altered his form of protest after Nate Boyer, a former NFL football player and retired Green Beret suggested kneeling would be a more respectful gesture (Reid, 2017). Kaepernick's act of protest, what became known as "taking a knee," sparked intense debates about systemic racism, patriotism, and mass incarceration throughout U.S. politics (Duvall, 2020).

What drew me to these two case studies was the way in which the National Football League (NFL) served as the backdrop to both Beyoncé and Colin Kaepernick's activism. For years, the NFL has been an integral part of the sports media industrial complex and has been viewed as a racist labor market that "cultivates and caters primarily to conservative white male audiences" (Duvall, 2020, p.3). The NFL has long been associated as "America's Favourite Sport" (Oriard, 2010), with ties to American social, economic and technological histories (Crepeau & Ebrary, 2014). Football, as many argue, has risen as an American institution and viewed as the way "Americanness is performed" (Newkirk, 2017, para.7). Scholars have pointed to the racial hierarchies deeply embedded within the NFL wherein white owners, coaches and upper management hold positions of power and judgement over the majority of black players (Braddock et al., 2012; Dufur & Feinberg, 2008; Duvall, 2020). As such, I consider each case study within the context of the NFL, and the attendant power structures of gender, race, and class upheld by this powerful organization.

Because I am particularly interested in media discourses, I will be focusing on the ways in which these case studies were mediated within news and entertainment media. The world of celebrity, politics, activism, and media are interconnected (Kauffman, 2008). Thus, examining the mediation of black celebrity political activism is constructive in examining the dynamics of power in relation to anti-racist discourse.

### **Theoretical Framework**

This project is theoretically informed by cultural studies. According to Douglas Kellner (1995), popular media culture shapes our very existence in how we see and interpret the world. Everything from music and television to the internet and social networking play a role within our cultural practices. We are, as Kellner (2011) states, "immersed from cradle to grave in a media

and consumer society, and thus it is important to learn how to understand, interpret, and criticize it's meanings and messages" (p. 6). As a critical theory, cultural studies serves a reformist agenda in its aims to not only expose but also challenge the ways in which the privileged, or dominant groups, maintain their power in society. Broadly speaking, cultural studies is interested in the relationship between culture and power and has often privileged marginalized voices and communities, and the ways in which power circulates in society.

As a cultural studies and critical race scholar, I am heavily influenced by cultural theorist Stuart Hall whose academic *and* activist interest in politics and culture closely aligns with my own. Hall understood that media audiences had the power and ability to engage in acts of resistance. In "Deconstructing the Popular" Hall (1981) writes, "Popular culture is one of the sites where this struggle for and against a culture of the powerful is engaged: it is also the stake to be won or lost in that struggle. It is the arena of consent and resistance" (p. 239). Interested in the relationship between social power and class systems, Hall appreciated that identities, such as an individual's race, gender and social groupings, also play a role in determining their place in society. Influenced by Marxism, Hall focused on concepts of power and ideology which are of central importance in cultural studies. As Kellner (1995) claims, "dominant ideologies serve to reproduce social relations of domination and subordination" (p. 8). For example, ideologies of race use racist representations of minorities to suggest a particular way of looking at the world. Furthermore, Hall believed that the forms of communication through media, and text within communication were a great source of power and manipulation, depending on how the messages were perceived.

Cultural studies also reminds us to privilege the voices and the experiences of marginalized communities. In order to do so, I draw upon critical race theory as a lens through

which to read my two case studies. Rachel Griffin (2010) asserts that critical race theory is a “theoretical and methodological force that has the capacity to work from an intersectional perspective to deconstruct ideologies of whiteness, recover marginalized perspectives and fuel progressive research” (Griffin, 2010, pp. 4-5). As such, it provides a necessary framework for conceptualizing the interrelated power structures that shape my case studies.

Critical race theory (hereafter referred to as CRT), was developed by a group of neo-Marxist intellectuals, former New Left activists, law school professors and students, who saw the law implicated in maintaining social privilege and legitimizing oppression. Derrick Bell, an attorney and Harvard law professor, was one of the founders and originators of critical race theory and saw that the law was not neutral and challenged the ways in which white supremacy and racial domination was deeply rooted within law. CRT aims to not only expose but also challenge the ways in which the privileged, or dominant groups maintain their power in society (Crenshaw, 1991; Delgado, 2017; Gillborn, 2015). It serves as a reformist agenda by allowing for a deeper understanding to how structures in society like the legal system, educational institutions and -- for my specific research, media -- work to shape the ways we live and the gravity at which communication is used within those systems in maintaining dominant ideologies.

Critical race theory’s development from the legal system works to challenge the power dynamics that were and continue to be deeply embedded within the law just after the civil rights era. The goal was to “expose and challenge how American legal policy functioned to sustain hierarchical relations of domination and subordination” (Griffin, 2010, p. 2), as well as to critique and shed light on the racism present in the laws and policies that were enforcing hegemonic whiteness and supremacy in the United States upon people of colour.

The purpose of CRT as a scholarship is to critically analyze race and racism by putting people of colour at the forefront of studies in hopes of bringing about awareness, social equality, justice and exposing the underlying white supremacy and oppression that is perpetuated within society. As mentioned previously, there are many tenets of CRT that most scholars adhere to that are extensions of CRT Critical Race Feminism, QueerCrit, AsianCrit, LatCrit, TribCrit. (Yosso, 2005). These function in understanding the daily life experiences of people of colour. The importance of examining the use of language and rhetoric in the field of communication studies in accordance to CRT is also suggested as a tool to elicit change in society. Additionally, communication and CRT scholars can learn from present and historical forms of white privilege and critiquing constructs such as ‘colourblindness’ and its use both nationally and globally to maintain power dynamics. There is no single, common tenet to CRT theorists greater than the key understanding that ‘race’ is socially constructed and that ‘racial difference’ is an invention that is perpetuated and reinforced by society, causing real, material effects on the lives of people of colour. (Crenshaw et.al, 1995; Delgado & Stefancic, 2001; Gillborn & Ladson-Billings, 2010; Gillborn, 2015).

A large component of critical race theory is the idea of ‘intersectionality.’ Intersectionality is a term created by Kimberlé Crenshaw (1989) that, “enables us to recognize the fact that perceived group membership can make people vulnerable to various forms of bias, yet because we are simultaneously members of many groups, our complex identities can shape the specific way we each experience that bias (p. 3).” Intersectionality is a framework that uncovers the structural, political and representational dynamics of multiple forms of subordination. Crenshaw explains that an intersectional approach goes beyond what is deemed as “conventional analysis,” meaning that its focus of analysis is on injuries that may not always be



recognized in order to “ 1) analyze social problems more fully; 2) shape more effective interventions; and 3) promote more inclusive coalitional advocacy.” (Crenshaw, 1995, p.3).

Specific to my research, I focus on the two key elements of intersectionality, per scholar David Gillborn: 1) an *empirical* basis and 2) its *activist* component. The empirical component of intersectionality deals with analyzing social inequities and the processes that create and sustain them more fully. It asks questions like; *how does oppression operate? What factors (specific to my research- race and gender) influence this oppression?* (Gillborn, 2015).

The ‘activist’ component is central to CRT and is derived from its roots founded from the legal system. This component examines resistance and the changing of status quo. As Crenshaw (1995) reminds us,

Although Critical Race scholarship differs in object, argument, accent, and emphasis, it is nevertheless unified by two common interests. The first is to understand how a regime of white supremacy and its subordination of people of color have been created and maintained . . . The second is a desire not merely to understand the vexed bond between law and racial power but to change it. (p. xiii)

Resisting racial oppression is the driving force here. Understanding how racism works is the first step, but refuting the growing mainstream claim that racism no longer exists plays an important role in my research.

Scholars emphasize the importance in challenging the cultural conversations about anti-racist (and even more specifically, anti-black) activism in media coverage (Bell, 1992; Gillborn 2015; Sanderson, J., Frederick, E., & Stocz, M, 2016; Leonard & King, 2009). By employing critical race theory as a theoretical framework, I seek to analyze black celebrity activism and its framing within the popular discourse. This will allow me to illuminate the larger question of how

power circulates in society and the importance of narratives and voice as strategies of resistance. In the following section, I will explain how I used textual discursive analysis as a methodological approach to fully understand and analyze these discourses.

## **Methodology**

A key methodological approach for cultural studies scholars is discursive textual analysis, an approach I utilized in this thesis (Kellner, 2011). Textual analysis, according to Kellner (2011) is useful in its ability to fully grasp the meanings and effect of media culture, whether it be in written language or nonverbal codes. Based in Foucauldian traditions, discourse analysis is a methodological and theoretical approach that is interested in productions of knowledge. According to Foucault, discourse is broader than just language, rather ‘discourse’ “describes the particular kind of language which specialized knowledge has to conform to in order to be regarded as true” (Young, 2007). Foucault describes this as:

A group of statements which provide a language for talking about – a way of representing the knowledge about – a particular topic at a particular historical moment... discourse is about the *production of knowledge* through language. But... since all social practices entail meaning, and meanings shape and influence what we do – our conduct – all practices have a discursive aspect. (Foucault, as cited in Hall, 1992, p. 291)

That is, knowledge is produced through discourse, or in other words, discourse produces a way of knowing and works to frame ways of thinking about certain topics, things, and objects, in order to produce meaning. In this sense, power and knowledge are intimately connected to function as a form of power. Foucault (1997) refers to this as “the regime of knowledge (*savoir*).” In *The Subject and Power* Foucault undertakes a critical investigation of the thematics

of power and asks how it's manifested and exercised. This is a central query in my research: Who has the power to dictate certain narratives disseminated throughout the media? We are reminded by Foucault (1997) that "communicating is always a certain way of acting upon other person or persons...power relations have a specific nature" (p. 337). Foucault (1976) once stated "where there is power, there is resistance" (p. 95). That is, the subject can be both the target and the vehicle of power and go forward as either acting in the name of power to reproduce the norm or challenge it.

Rosalind Gill (2000), explains discourse analysis as "the name given to a variety of approaches that take language and social constructions as their object of study" (p. 23). Specific to media research, there are three historically contrasting traditions to discourse analysis: 1) critical linguistics, social semiotics or discourse analysis; 2) speech act theory, ethnomethodology and conversation analysis and lastly and 3) poststructuralism. In relation to my project, I employ critical discourse analysis, which according to Gill (2000) has an "explicit concern with the relationship between language and power" (p. 24) as well as a "strong interest in ideology -- understood as the ways in which power and meaning intersect" (p. 24). As a method, critical discourse analysis allows me to go beyond identifying and describing my case studies to understanding how both Beyoncé and Kaepernick's activism is constructed and made meaningful in particular ways via media coverage.

My discursive textual analysis focuses on popular news and entertainment media articles and commentary that was purposefully sampled using the Factiva databases. For each study I collected 50 media articles published within two weeks of each case study, totaling 100 news media articles. In order to capture a wide range of viewpoints, my research includes data from a

variety of media sources that include teen media, digital platforms, fashion and lifestyle media and mainstream news sources.

For the Beyoncé’s case study, I focused my data collection on the week following her two-and-a-half-minute Super Bowl halftime performance which aired on February 7, 2016. For the Kaepernick case study, I focused 25 of my sampled articles on the week after Kaepernick originally “took a knee” on August 26, 2016 and the other 25 articles in the week after Donald Trump reignited the conversation about NFL players protest on September 23, 2017. For both case studies, I collected news and media articles that both celebrated and criticized Beyoncé and Kaepernick for their choices and its political undertones. In order to do this, I read and re-read popular articles in great detail and narrowed it down to a manageable number that allowed me to select entries based on their relevance to the themes I address in this project. In order to gain an accurate and comprehensive representation of *how* I arrived at my analytic themes, I carefully examined the 100 popular media articles within my dataset and paid a considerable amount of attention to which topics and subthemes contributed to the production that characterized the performance as a form of political resistance.

The approximately 100 media reports are purposefully and thematically coded and analyzed through discursive textual analysis. For my Beyoncé case study, I identified the following three themes in the media I examined: (1) Saluting the Black Panther Party which appeared in 40 out of 50 articles (2) Challenging respectability politics, appearing in 19 out of 50 articles (3) A shout out to #Black Lives Matter which appeared in 31 out of 50 articles For the Colin Kaepernick case study, I identified the following three themes: (1) An athlete’s right to protest, appearing in 27 out of 50 articles (2) The politics of “patriotism” which appeared in 29 out of 50 articles (3) Deflection and detraction through democratic racism, appearing in 18 out of

50 articles. These themes became the basis of further categorization of my data which function as a site for negotiation over meanings around historical and contemporary racial politics, pointing to the important work that black celebrity activism does within media cultures today. I came across many interesting discussions throughout my data collection that I am unable to include due to the scope of my project, but I am hoping to return to in future research.

In the following chapter, I provide a review of relevant celebrity studies literature for my project, including celebrity feminism, celebrity humanitarianism and black celebrity anti-racist activism. While I build upon these studies, my thesis uniquely focuses on anti-racist celebrity activism and the ways in which it is mediated within popular media cultures. The third chapter, “The Political Potency of the Black Celebrity,” details my case studies, discussing and analyzing my collected data. Through this analysis I argue that news media coverage of both Beyoncé and Colin Kaepernick function as a site for negotiation over meanings around historical and contemporary racial politics, pointing to the important work that black celebrity activism does within media cultures today. My final concluding chapter provides an overview of my findings and argument and suggests avenues for further scholarly inquiry.

## CHAPTER TWO: LITERATURE REVIEW

The purpose of my research is to interrogate how black celebrity activism is discursively constructed within popular media cultures and what this might mean for understanding the radical potential of celebrity anti-racist activism. As such, I situate my research within three bodies of scholarly literature; celebrity feminism (Gay, 2014; Keller and Ringrose 2015; O'Donnell, 2016; Taylor, 2016; Banet-Weiser, 2018; Renninger, 2018; Hobson, 2020), celebrity humanitarian work (Bishop and Green 2010; Kapoor, 2013; Brockington & Henson, 2014; Duvall, 2015; Wilkins, 2015) and celebrity anti-racist activism (Raymond, 2015; Coombs & Cassilo, 2017; Cooper et al., 2017; Duvall & Heckemeyer, 2018). In exploring these bodies of literature, this chapter looks at several questions: 1) How has the concept of celebrity been understood by scholars? 2) What kinds of activism have celebrities engaged in? 3) How have scholars understood these activisms? These questions are important in the way I frame my two case studies.

This review starts with an overview of the literature that explores what celebrity *is*, and why it makes for an important field of study. Next, I will discuss the three aforementioned bodies of literature relevant to my interest in celebrity political activism. The first explores how celebrities are engaging in feminist activism. The second body of scholarship I review explores how celebrities are engaging in activism outside of America, primarily in the global South. Finally, I will discuss how black celebrities have historically engaged in anti-racist celebrity activism, leading up to the common trends occurring in recent years in the field of celebrity anti-racist activism. I will conclude with a summary of the field's literature, scholarship that informs my own approach to studying contemporary black celebrity activism.

## Studying Celebrity

Scholars have parsed out the different forms and definitions of celebrity and the way in which they work in different contexts (Rojek 2001; Geraghty 2000; Turner, 2004; Holmes and Redmond 2007; Milner, 2010). Su Holmes and Sean Redmond (2010) have cautioned that defining ‘celebrity’ can be tricky as the term has an assortment of connotations associated with it. For example, the term ‘star’ has often been used interchangeably with ‘celebrity,’ but historically, ‘star’ was used most commonly within film studies (deCordova 1990, Dyer 1979, Ellis 1982 as cited in Holmes & Redmond 2010). The term ‘star’ was used within the context of film studies to “refer to a representational interaction between the on/off screen persona” (Holmes & Redmond 2010, p. 4). ‘Celebrity,’ on the other hand, has been used more broadly and outside of film studies to refer to a “contemporary state of being famous” (Holmes & Redmond 2010, p.4). ‘Celebrity’ serves as a window to the public world which helps in defining moments in time -- both past and present through its mediation of film, music, radio and television (Marshall, 2010). Redmond & Holmes (2010), cite Kotler, Rein, and Stoller to offer a simpler definition in which, “a celebrity is a name which once made by the news, now makes news by itself” (Rein et.al, 1997, p. 14).

Chris Rojek (2001) asserts that celebrity can be defined as the accumulation of *attention* capital that is a quality obtained by individuals. However, it can also refer to social groups as a collective, such as sports teams, political organizations and pop groups, or social events like the World Series or Olympics. In terms of the individual, Rojek (2001) breaks down celebrity into three categories; ascribed, achieved, and celetoids. Ascribed celebrity refers to that of inherited celebrity, wherein bloodline is reflective of social impact and social hierarchy which entitles the individual to instant respect and admiration. For example, kings, queens, and duchesses are

positioned as ‘ascribed celebrity.’ Achieved celebrity refers to what I envision as ‘old school celebrities’ in which, according to Rojek (2001), social impact arises from talent and accomplishments associate with successful actors, singers, sports stars, and authors, for example. Lastly, ‘celetoids’ are defined as essentially those individuals who achieve overnight success, typically through scandal. The term ‘celetoid’ is the amalgamation of ‘celebrity’ and ‘tabloid’ which according to Rojek, highlights the influential role of media communication in the process of the making of a celebrity. Rojek states, “celetoids are the accessories of cultures organized around mass communications and staged authenticity” (Rojek 2001, pp. 20-21). Examples of celetoids according to Rojek are one-hit wonders, mistresses of well-known public figures, and lottery winners.

Informed by this research, I understand ‘celebrity’ as an all-encompassing phenomenon, worthy of deeper analysis. In today’s mediated world, celebrity influence is unavoidable and pervading aspects of everyday life. For example, Ruth Penfold-Mounce (2009) explains, “magazines, films, televisions and radio all display celebrities in society influencing fashion, how we furnish our homes, and even the food and drink we consume” (p. 12). Here, Mounce draws the connection to society’s fixation and its influence through mediated promotion, Furthermore, this fascination of public figures results not from their accomplishments, but rather their extensive visibility throughout media cultures (Mounce, 2009).

### *Visibility & Fame*

Celebrity’s contemporary cultural visibility is unmatched in its far-reaching influence across cultural fields and media platforms (Turner, 2004). The concept of fame or celebrity is no longer limited to the confines of television or film, due largely to the pariah-like international paparazzi that feed photos and private ‘exclusive’ information to digital outlets such as TMZ,



supplying the demand of images to feed audiences. As Graeme Turner (2004) has argued, this works to “further intensify the cultural visibility and purchase of celebrity as a commodity” (p. 52) Leo Braudy (1986) explains that the media visibility that comes with fame and celebrity offers up a sense of ‘personal justification’ to the individual being put in the spotlight. That is, in some distorted way, visibility equals fame, and fame promises the ultimate form of social experience. Turner (2004) cites Braudy in explaining the visibility of fame. He states,

It offers a particularly flattering kind of visibility in which ‘all blemishes are smoothed and all wounds are healed.’ Fame is the achievement of a magical moment of perfection, the end point of a process that restores ‘integrity and wholeness’ to the representation of the self. (p. 66)

Media representation and exposure is a key factor in the making of celebrity and works alongside visibility, fame and consumption in the production of celebrity. Turner (2010) describes celebrity as a “genre of representation that provides us with a semiotically rich body of texts and discourse that fuel a dynamic culture of consumption” (p. 13). In the same line of argument, Redmond and Holmes (2007) state that “without consumption, the practices and processes of fame could not exist” (p. 309). Celebrities are made for profit and portray a specific image. Richard Dyer (1986) speaks to this in his book *Heavenly Bodies: Film Stars and Society*. He states,

Stars<sup>1</sup> are produced by the media industries, film stars by Hollywood (or its equivalent in other countries) in the first instance, but then also by other agencies with which Hollywood is connected in varying ways and with varying degrees of influence. Hollywood controlled not only the stars’ films but their promotion, the pin-ups and glamour portraits, press

<sup>1</sup> I will use the word ‘star’ when referencing Richard Dyer’s work but with a wider meaning than ‘star’ in reference to that of film. For the purposes of this literature review, ‘star’ will also be used in reference to ‘celebrity.’

releases and to a large extent the fan clubs. In turn, Hollywood's connections with other media industries meant that what got into the press, who got to interview the star, what clips were released to television, was to a large extent decided by Hollywood. (p. 4)

Here, Dyer draws attention to the ways in which celebrity is consciously produced via media industries such as Hollywood. For example, Hollywood decides who reserves the right to enter into visibility and can therein identify as belonging to an elite status of fame/celebrity. The proverbial right hand to Hollywood is the mass media which acts as both a producer and consumer of celebrity, "voracious in its appetite and glorying in the rise and fall of famous individuals" (Drake, 2007, p. 228). Media provide a stage for celebrities to perform with the hopes that the audience will accept what is being produced for them. Drake (2007) explains that the power of celebrity is dependent upon audiences and the media's investment in the status and profound nature of celebrity. That is, 'celebrity' and 'status' are dependent on audience reception.

#### *Audience, Production and Consumption*

The audience plays a vital role in the production, consumption, and reception of celebrity. Audiences ultimately fuel the 'economic enterprise of celebrity' by purchasing cross-media and cross-platform promotions targeting audiences who want to consume celebrity texts (Turner, 2004; Redmond & Holmes, 2007). For example, 'respectable' media outlets like *Vogue* and *Vanity Fair* are simultaneously providing mainstream legitimacy of celebrity while satiating their audiences need for celebrity. By putting a celebrity on the cover of their magazines, these media outlets are producing 'celebrity' as an object of desire and admiration for the consumption of their audience.

Dyer (1986) stresses the important role that audience also plays in the making of the image of a 'star.' Audience, according to Dyer may not be able to make images *mean* a variety of different things, but they can “select from the complexity of the image the meanings and feelings, the variations and inflection and contradictions that work for them” (p. 5). In other words, the audience is not under the complete control of Hollywood and its original intentions for a given media image or text. Audiences are looking for a way to make sense of the world around them or find a piece of themselves within a given celebrity, film character, or media text.

Marshall claims that by consuming celebrity images, audiences are instructed on how to *be* their 'ideal self' – a pedagogical process. Marshall reminds us, however, that this “ideal self” is a branded and mediated image produced via celebrity. This process allows for celebrities to profit, through branding practices, in their capacity to effectively sell both products and themselves (Marshall, 2010). Celebrity branding is the ideal capitalistic tool in which its influence is vast and unknowing upon its audience. Marshall explains that “celebrities possess emotional connections to their audiences, which is convertible into an affective connection to the associated product that they endorse or embrace in some way” (Marshall, 2017, foreword).

### *The Important Role of Celebrity*

The role of celebrity is wider than a film star, voice on the radio, or image on a magazine. Celebrities *make* meaning in all sense of the term. Holmes and Redmond (2010) draw from Couldry (2009) to posit that by understanding the central role that celebrities play in 'meaning-making' and 'idea formation' within society. Through their role, celebrities help in generating and explaining the social world and its values in functioning as “our privileged access-point to society's center or core” (Couldry, 2009, cited in Holmes and Redmond 2010, p. 3). Celebrities function like the power elite and as such, serve as a reference point for the community,

regardless of the fact that they often do not hold real ‘power.’ In this right, they can be thought of as the ‘powerless elite’ (Alberoni, 2007). Although they are nowhere near the reach of ‘ordinary people,’ in the eyes of the public, this elite group of celebrities are suggested to share commonalities with ‘you’ and ‘me,’ which is suggested by television shows, photographs, press articles or the public-friendly image that these stars present of themselves.

Alberoni (2007) suggests that stars are “members of the community whom all can evaluate, love, or criticize. They are the chosen objects of collective gossip, the channels of which are the mass media of communication” (p.70). This idea of ‘gossip’ is an interesting one in the way that it works in the spectrum of the public self of the celebrity and its importance in ‘meaning-making’ as a cultural phenomenon. Marshall (2010) explains that celebrity gossip, at the intersection of public and private life, was once used by audiences to make sense of how public and private life relate in terms of the production of the self. For example, younger people have relied on the topic of celebrity gossip as a guide which teaches them how to dress, act and engage in social settings (Marshall 2010). Further, a study conducted by De Backer et al. with older adults revealed that celebrities were used in “parasocial activities” (Marshall, 2010, p. 38) meaning,

the celebrity is integrated as if they are part of a social network for conversation purposes, but their parasociality means that this integration into the interpersonal is entirely one way, where the celebrity is obviously not truly part of the social network, but only in a mediated form. (De Backer et al. 2007, pp. 340, 347–348 as cited in Marshall 2010, p. 38)

Thus, celebrities provide cultural meaning for individuals. They are creating a sense of identity and belonging (Turner, 2010). Oftentimes, celebrities fill an emotional gap that is tied to the

social or political climate -- providing a means of identification to exist outside of negative discourses, whether that be race, class, religion, sex etc. (Redmond & Holmes, 2007). Much of this relies on the performance of the celebrity and how that performance is received by the public in revealing his/her true identity. According to Marshall (2010) who draws on the foundational work of Erving Goffman (1959), this performance of the 'self' has informed the production of celebrity for the last century. According to Goffman, an individual's performance of the self is dependent on the context in which they choose to present themselves. This context can come in the form of an 'on-screen'/'onstage' and 'off-screen'/'backstage.' On-screen pertains to a 'show' that an individual maintains or performs before others in which they, themselves (the person doing the performance) doesn't believe in. Goffman (1959) explains this experience as a "special kind of alienation from self and a special kind of wariness of others" (p. 236) Off-screen is the 'true' representation of the self-wherein the individual (or performer) allows him or herself time to reconnect with their 'natural' state.

Sometimes, these two identities -- on-screen and off-screen -- merge as a strategic process, oftentimes by the celebrities' managers, public relations representative, or the star themselves in order to mold into whatever role they are currently promoting. The shift, according to De Cordova (1990) may occur slowly over time, but its "key symptom would become progressively more visible -- that is, the disarticulation of the 'true' identity of the star from the collected personalities they played on screen" (Turner, 2004, p. 15). This shift allows for the celebrity to embody the audiences hopes, dreams and aspirations. Much like the scripting-staging-performing process that happens on-stage, celebrities can transfer this process to off-screen, allowing this shift to say something pleasurable and ideological about the self and the cultural world. The process often serves a neoliberal, capitalist structure, in that these stars exude

the concept of 'if I did it, you can do it to' and that all it takes is hard work. Redmond and Holmes (2007) explain that through this, celebrities

Address and represent (often implicitly) some of the most important political issues of the day, and they can give us both ephemeral and lasting pleasure, even if, in the end, this is a pleasure built on artifice and the lie of the possible. (p. 11)

Analyzing the culture of celebrity is more pressing today than in past historical moments. Social media platforms like Instagram are feeding these neoliberal ideologies, constructing individuals and entrepreneurial actors to communicate the message that 'you too can achieve fame and status' all through calculated self-governing (Abidin, 2018; Duffy, 2017). Instagram allows for the presentation of the idealized 'front stage' version of oneself to appear as the authentic 'true' version, while working as a form of 'impression management,' becoming a dominant way of people presenting themselves on social media. This on-screen 'realness' or authenticity trope is as Brooke Erin Duffy (2017) explains it, "increasingly compliant with the demands of capitalism" (p. 100). There's a reward system in place with platforms like Instagram and YouTube that leads to the creation of 'influencers'. This idea that 'ordinary people' can achieve fame, be seen, and 'truly exist' is a new area of celebrity culture that is warranting further exploration (Holmes & Redmond, 2010).

### **Celebrity Feminism**

The term 'celebrity feminism' has been used widely by many scholars in different ways (Gay, 2014; Valenti, 2014, Keller & Ringrose, 2015; Taylor 2016; Banet-Weiser, 2018). For example, Keller and Ringrose (2015) refer to 'celebrity feminism' as "a form of popular feminism made visible recently by young celebrity women eager to publicly claim a feminist identity" (p. 132) and Sarah Banet-Weiser (2018) describes it as a "spectacular, media friendly

expression” (p. 4). The phenomenon of ‘celebrity feminism’ is often viewed as a contentious relationship between feminist discourses and celebrity media culture (Taylor, 2014; Hamad & Taylor, 2015). That is, as Anthea Taylor (2014) explains, “celebrity has always been central in delimiting the kinds of feminisms (as well as feminist histories) that have become visible in the Western mediasphere” (p. 75). First coined in 1994, Jennifer Wicke argues that ‘celebrity feminism’ or ‘celebrity zone’ is “the public sphere where feminism is negotiated” (p. 757), existing within the “material culture in which we have our being as feminists” (p. 776). There has been longstanding debate amongst scholars and grassroots feminists regarding this recent resurgence of feminism with some celebrating its uptake and popularity by celebrity figures while others express concern over the depoliticising of the movement (Dunne, 2019). While ‘celebrity feminism’ remains controversial, scholars have understood it as an important concept, particularly in our current political and cultural moment.

For the purposes of this literature review, I explore three dominant themes that emerged from this particular body of literature. The first, as articulated by Taylor (2014) is the concept of ‘the feminist blockbuster.’ The ‘feminist blockbuster’ refers to best-selling female authors who, in the late twentieth century, became celebrities based off of their popular works of feminist non-fiction (Taylor, 2014; Renninger, 2018). In other words, these celebrity feminists are famous because of their feminism and performance in the media. The second concept that I found worthy of discussion amongst scholars is the media’s obsession of the term ‘feminist’ and its placement onto celebrities. Finally, I will discuss how scholars have understood celebrity feminism from a place of privilege, favoring the neoliberal ethos that places emphasis on a woman’s individual ability to fight against gender inequality (Keller & Ringrose, 2015). This literature is important to my research because it provides a helpful lens in considering the overall implications of

celebrity activism. More specifically, it highlights how the media has framed celebrity involvement in social and political issues that would otherwise be considered unpalatable.

### *Famous because of Feminism*

Taylor (2016) argues that celebrity feminism is itself “an internally variegated phenomenon...is someone whose fame is the product of their public feminist enunciative practices; that is, they are famous because of their feminism” (pp. 2-3). Taylor uses the examples of authors like Naomi Wolf (*The Beauty Myth*), Gloria Steinem (*Outrageous Acts of Rebellion*), Betty Friedan (*The Feminine Mystique*), and more recently Sheryl Sandberg (*Lean In*) and Roxanne Gay (*Bad Feminist*) amongst a list of other authors that have shaped modern Western understandings of feminism over the last 60 years. These ‘blockbuster feminists’ are one form of celebrity feminism, often associated as the ‘grassroots’ or ‘authentic feminism’ that is concerned with liberating women (Hobson, 2017).

The other form of celebrity feminism relates to the women who have already gained celebrity status but “come to identify as feminist at some stage during their career and use their public persona to articulate political positions broadly consistent with feminism” (Hamad & Taylor, 2015, p. 126). Tina Fey, Amy Poehler, Emma Watson and Beyoncé are often used as examples of ‘mainstream celebrity feminists.’ These two different forms of feminism have caused great debate in the academic world (Hobson, 2017; Zeisler, 2016). For example, Janelle Hobson (2017) argues that celebrity feminism is a collective conversation in that it affects academic feminism, just as much as academic feminism influences celebrity feminism. Modern celebrities have a vast and far reaching influence that “does not have to be confined to an identity or a way of life. It is itself a political process, participating in an array of feminist movements” (Hobson, 2017, p. 1005). Similarly, Hamad and Taylor (2015) argue that these feminist



celebrities help feminism in receiving cultural legitimacy. Conversely, in her book, *We Were Feminists Once*, Andi Zeisler (2016) argues that celebrity feminism is merely refashioning the term ‘feminism’ into something trendy and cool, without understanding the true definition of what it means to be a ‘feminist.’ Zeisler (2016) argues, “there’s a fine line between transforming the controversial into the mundane and simply refashioning it into a hollow trend, and celebrity feminism is too often falling ass-first on the wrong side of it” (p.124-125).

Roxanne Gay, author of *Bad Feminist* writes that while celebrity feminists like Beyoncé can be applauded for their involvement as feminists, they play a role of “gateway celebrities.” That is, they serve as a ‘gateway’ to feminism by sparking a public embrace of the term. Conversely, Gay argues that these forms of celebrity feminism can also be deemed as problematic in that they distract from the real meaning of feminism, ultimately creating a false narrative of the term (Hobson, 2017). The issue, as scholars have pointed out, is the media’s portrayal of celebrity feminism (Gay, 2014; Zeisler, 2016; Renninger 2018). In many ways, these celebrity feminists are eclipsing grassroots feminism.

#### *‘Are You a Feminist?’*

The media’s fascination with celebrity feminism has been examined by scholars in recent years (Hamad & Taylor, 2015; Renninger, 2018; O’Donnell, 2017; Banet-Weiser, 2018). For example, celebrities like Shailene Woodley, Miley Cyrus, Katy Perry, Taylor Swift, and Beyoncé have all been asked in countless interviews if they consider themselves a ‘feminist’ to which their responses have gained popularity in both academic and non-academic circles. As Hamad and Taylor point out, in November 2014, *TIME* magazine nominated the word ‘feminist’ to be banished for amongst other reasons, its overuse. In the article, a ‘blurb’ or ‘definition’ of the term was provided to help explain the logic behind the banishment:

**Feminist:** You have nothing against feminism itself, but when did it become a thing that every celebrity had to state their position on whether this word applies to them, like some politician declaring a party? Let's stick to the issues and quit throwing this label around like ticker tape at a Susan B. Anthony parade. (Steinmetz, 2014 as cited in Hamad & Taylor, 2015, p. 124)

Renninger (2017) suggests the question of 'are you a feminist?' discourse has become less about feminism as a political movement and more the need for online journalists to publish stories dependent on analytics and the number of "clicks" earned. For example, Renninger provides a list of articles in which the headline of the article merely mentions the term 'feminism': "Shailene Woodley on Why She's Not a Feminist," *TIME*. May 5, 2014; "Miley Cyrus Opens Up to Tavi Gevinson About Heartbreak, Sex, and Feminism," *Elle*. April 8, 2014; "Ellen Page: 'Why are People So Reluctant to Say They're Feminists?'" *The Guardian*. July 3, 2013; "Girls' Lena Dunham: Women Saying 'I'm Not a Feminist' Is My Greatest Pet Peeve." *Metro*. January 14, 2013; "Katy Perry Is Still Confused By Feminism, Despite Her Best Efforts." *Huffington Post*. March 17, 2014."

Expanding on the *TIME* interview with Shailene Woodley, when asked the question of if she considers herself a feminist, her response was as follows,

No, because I love men, and I think the idea of "raise women to power, take the men away from the power" is never going to work out because you need balance. With myself, I'm very in touch with my masculine side. And I'm 50 percent feminine and 50 percent masculine, same as I think a lot of us are. And I think that is important to note. And also I think that if men went down and women rose to power, that wouldn't work either. We have to have a fine balance. (Dockterman, 2014, para.4)

Similarly, when Katy Perry was asked in a 2014 Australian morning show interview if she was a feminist, she explained “I used to not really understand what that word meant, and now that I do, it just means that I love myself as a female and I also love men” (Perry, 2014 as cited in Renninger, 2018, p. 46). Likewise, in an interview in 2014, Taylor Swift told claimed she didn’t know what the term feminist really meant when she first denied that she was a feminist in 2012. However, it was “her friend” Lena Dunham who explained to her what it “really” meant. In an interview with *The Guardian*, Swift states,

Becoming friends with Lena—without her preaching to me, but just seeing why she believes what she believes, why she says what she says, why she stands for what she stands for—has made me realize that I’ve been taking a feminist stance without actually saying so.” (Hoby, 2014, as cited in Renninger, 2018, p. 46)

Zeisler (2016), warns against this type of questioning from the media in its framing and dissemination of the term ‘feminism.’ She states,

Framing a new, cool feminist image solely in terms of how it departs from an older and much less cool feminist image is a safe way to pat celebrities on the back without putting them on the spot. This is also why in many cases the discussion begins with a question like “How do you define feminism, Famous Person?” which informs everyone that a celebrity’s definition is just as good as the very clear definition of feminism that already exists. (p.126)

Lena Dunham, a self-proclaimed feminist, is often the subject of feminist scholars (Lagerway and Taylor, 2017; Murray, 2017; Dunne, 2019). According to Dunne (2019) Dunham’s particular brand of feminism is more in line with a neoliberal brand of feminism that celebrates individual success and empowerment. Dunham’s feminist stance is a problematic one in that it is “devoid of

political commitment” (p. 1) which according to Rosalind Gill (2016) “claiming a feminist identity-without specifying what it means in terms of some kind of politics-is problematic” (p. 619).

### *The Problematic Celebrity Feminist*

The issue that scholars take with celebrity feminism is that it often privileges a certain type of feminism, in which the equality between men and women is the primary definition, and other identities such as race and class are ignored (Gay, 2014; Banet-Weiser, 2018; Renninger, 2018). For decades now, women of colour have argued that the ‘universal’ equal rights of feminism only means “equal” for white women, rendering the rest invisible (Banet-Weiser, 2018). Hamad and Taylor (2015) point to the obvious whiteness that has been characterized by mainstream celebrity feminism, which has only recently been disrupted by celebrities like Beyoncé.

According to Keller and Ringrose (2015) celebrity feminism, as a form of popular feminism, bears resemblance to neoliberal feminism, wherein “feminism recognises current inequalities between men and women yet disavows the social, cultural, and economic roots of these inequalities in favour of the neoliberal ethos” (Keller & Ringrose, 2015, p. 1). In other words, neoliberal feminists recognize that gender inequality exists, but simultaneously works to deny any cultural or socioeconomic inequalities by encouraging women to focus on themselves rather than structural reform. For example, celebrity feminist blockbuster Sheryl Sandberg’s book *Lean In* and #BanBossy campaign are indicative of this neoliberal celebrity imperative. As Taylor (2016) further explains, Sheryl Sandberg’s *Lean In* is completely devoid of any mention of race, unaware of the oppressions that many women face on a daily basis, further marginalizing a large portion of the female population. Similarly, as Keller and Ringrose (2015) point out, actress Emma Watson’s implicitness in neoliberal feminism by stating in her *ELLE* UK 2014

cover interview that feminism is foremost about choice. Watson states, “feminism is not here to dictate to you. It’s not prescriptive, it’s not dogmatic. All we are here to do is give you a choice. If you want to run for president, you can. If not, that’s fine too” (Candy, 2014, para. 17).

This mainstream form of celebrity feminism is problematic in that it prioritizes the fight against sexism, while whiteness and other forms of privilege remain ignored as cultural values (Renninger, 2018). For example, pop singer Taylor Swift was asked by rapper Nicki Minaj to acknowledge her own white privilege after Swift mistook a twitter post by Minaj as a snub directed at her. Swift was nominated for an MTV video music award and Minaj was not. After Minaj took to Twitter to voice her frustrations at the MTV snub, Swift mistook the tweet as being directed at her and responded with a Tweet that attempted to silence Nicki Minaj’s voice in the name of “feminist solidarity” (Hobson, 2017; Isaksen & Eltantawy, 2019). Similarly, Meryl Streep and her fellow cast members came under scrutiny when they wore t-shirts advertising their film *Suffragette*. The t-shirts read ‘I’d rather be a rebel than a slave’ and was initially meant to bear feminist activist Emmeline Pankhurst’s historical quote. This act of advertising was instead seen as insensitive by women of colour, given their history of slavery (Madison, 2015; Hobson, 2017). As such, celebrity feminism may be something that celebrities genuinely care about, but as Zeisler (2016) argues, it often falls short due to their lack in knowledge of actual feminist issues which inevitably trumps their far-reaching voices.

This scholarship on celebrity feminism provides a useful lens through which we can understand other kinds of social and political activism and its framing within the media. Specifically, this literature is important in that it offers a guide from an intersectional perspective when approaching my Beyoncé case study, which will allow for the most interpretive possibility of my dataset.

## **Celebrity Humanitarianism**

In addition to feminism, celebrities have been involved in numerous other kinds of social and political activism. Often, celebrity activism has focused on non-Western countries, addressing issues of poverty, disease, and girls' education. In this section, I turn my attention to the body of literature surrounding celebrity humanitarianism in the Western World. Specifically, I explore how scholars have understood these activisms as problematic in the ways the media frames celebrity humanitarianism within the context of gender, race, and philanthropy which further contributes to the reinforcement of colonial narratives and neoliberal capitalist ideologies.

### *Philanthropy*

'Philanthrocapitalism' and 'philanthrocapitalist' are relatively new terms that have been used in reference to celebrity. Philanthrocapitalism, promises to "save the world by revolutionizing philanthropy, making non-profit organizations operate like business, and creating new markets for goods and services that benefit society" (Bishop & Green, 2010, p. 1)

Philanthrocapitalists are thus the individuals that are driving this movement. Names like Bill and Melinda Gates, Mark Zuckerberg, George Soros, Ted Turner, Warren Buffett, Richard Branson are well known contemporary corporate philanthropists that have managed to 'do good' and 'feel good,' all while reaching the status of 'celebrity.' Kapoor (2013) argues that the problem with this new form of philanthropy is that you can never take the 'business' out of the 'businessman. Kapoor claims that the issue lies in the "naturalization of global neoliberal capitalism" (p. 48).

That is,

When social ethics become a form of entrepreneurship, when gifts, meant precisely to interrupt market relations and the cycle of profit and exchange, are unproblematically

infused with business calculations, then the hegemony of neoliberalism stands increasingly unchallenged. (p. 48)

The newer form of corporate philanthropy, according to Kapoor (2013), is celebrity-endorsed philanthropy. This type of philanthropy is structured around the individual and capitalist impulse to bolster one's celebrity. This involves the integration of celebrity into non-profit organizations and campaigns, as well as giving to charity via shopping. With their fame, status and influence, celebrities play a vital role in charitable organizations in their public outreach. Wilkins (2015) notes that "critical models of social change recognize that celebrities have more political capital in their ability to select global concerns for public attention than their audiences" (p. 4). In trying to achieve social and political change, charities and non-governmental organizations rely heavily on celebrity advocacy (Brockington & Henson, 2014). For example, 'Save Darfur's' engagement of celebrities in their campaign brought them press coverage that reached an upwards of 500 articles per month in 2005 and the years that followed. With names like Brad Pitt, Don Cheadle, Mia Farrow and Matt Damon, campaigns like 'Save Darfur' rely heavily on celebrity endorsements and donations for sustainability (Kapoor, 2013).

What scholars have pointed to as problematic is that when philanthropists and NGO's like the 'Save Darfur Campaign' team up with celebrities, the excitement and glamour of the celebrity overshadow the actual cause itself. Instead of audiences being empowered to get out and create change in the world for those suffering at the hands of injustice and poverty, they are being bombarded with images of glamorized celebrities, asking them to donate money. In other words, donating money equates to 'doing your part' and is enough to make you 'feel good.' Once again, the audience is commodified as a consumer. Kapoor speaks to this idea in arguing that we as audiences are complicit in the construction of humanitarianism as a neoliberal

capitalist ideology. He also asserts that we are all ideologically interpellated as both celebrities and audiences, but with celebrities being more powerfully positioned. To expand on this, Kapoor (2013) states,

It is they (celebrities) who propagate humanitarianism, covering over, rather than challenging, the social antagonisms of the global order, from which they benefit tremendously both socioeconomically and symbolically. As audience members, we are much less powerfully positioned in this ideological web, and hence we are not so much propagators as followers, supporters, consumers. (p. 45)

Following Kapoor's assertion, Rocavert (2017) explains that it is in this framework that misunderstandings related to charity are fostered. He claims,

Audiences of charity donate, or follow celebrity humanitarians, which serves to palliate, rather than address social ill. Not only is the focus more likely to be on the celebrity rather than the issue, but the social, political, or environmental message becomes part of the broader panorama of reality media and the entertainment industry itself. (p.13)

This association of celebrities to humanitarian causes and charities may ultimately create more harm to those causes (Kapoor, 2013; Wilkins, 2015). In addition to branding themselves as altruistic, and genuine humanitarians, celebrities allow for "Western nations to construct a political community around a heroic figure in the form of a humanitarian celebrity" (Kapoor, 2013, p. 26). While this works well for the celebrity and the affiliated organization in tax exemptions, this can also be a detrimental process wherein celebrities focus will be less according to altruism and will be more concerned with the image they're portraying or brand they're building (Wilkins, 2015). What's problematic here is that in the U.S, media are more likely to focus on celebrities and entertainment and as such, consumers are more likely to be



knowledgeable in celebrities and gossip rather than global issues. In turn, this “discursive power of media celebrities goes further than merely selecting some issues over others: the very explanation of what causes problems and what might solve them is at stake. Celebrity attention to global issues contributes not only to an oversimplification of complex problems (Dieter & Kumar, 2008), but even more problematically to their depoliticization” (Wilkins, 2015, p. 4).

### *Celebrity Reformation: Safety in the Third World*

While becoming humanitarian ambassadors, celebrities have been given the chance to not only appear as heroic figures but also grant them the opportunity to reinvent themselves while remaining apolitical in the safety of the Global South. There’s a transformation process narrative that the media is fixed on when it comes to celebrities becoming activists (Duvall, 2015). For example, Spring Duvall (2015) argues that Sean Penn, Angelina Jolie and Madonna are all members of this elite group of celebrity activists that were transformed in the media from being once labeled as ‘wild’ to now becoming a ‘savior’ via their humanitarianism in the Global South. This form of activism allows for these types of celebrities to remain apolitical while escaping issues of systemic racism and oppression at home.

In the 1980s Sean Penn was characterized as a rebellious, violent bad boy with his sexual exploits and tumultuous marriage to Madonna making front page news. In the early 2000’s it was his outward opposition towards the Bush administration and U.S. military action in the Iraq war that framed him in transnational media as a “discredited celebrity activist” and “anti-American hothead” (Duvall, 2015, p. 6). Between 2002 and 2005, Penn visited Baghdad and Iran on a humanitarian intervention mission, and without even mentioning Bush, Penn was still labelled a ‘traitor’ and attacked in conservative media as “an attention-seeking liberal celebrity who would use any opportunity to attack the Bush administration” (Duvall, 2015, p.7).

However, it wasn't until Penn's trip to Haiti following the devastating earthquake in 2010, that Penn started his transformation as a 'legitimate activist' in the media. No longer was Penn speaking out on issues impacting the United States, taking humanitarian trips to countries like the Middle East or taking part in anti-war activism – all of which were in direct opposition to U.S. interests. Duvall (2015) explains that this shift in interest towards the Third World<sup>2</sup> versus the oppositional interest in the U.S is key to understanding Penn's mediated rehabilitation. She states, "Celebrities who select relatively non-controversial activism, such as natural disaster relief, rather than radical activism such as anti-war protesting, routinely garner more positive narratives in transnational media" (p. 9). Indeed, Penn was no longer seen as a threat to the political hegemony of the U.S.- he was off in the Global South, contributing further to nationalist intoxication that is celebrity humanitarianism (Kapoor, 2013).

This narrative of transformation was not only taken up by the media, but by Penn himself, who has claimed to have been personally transformed by his experiences in Haiti, insinuating that all of his previous activist work was scattered because he was going through personal issues at the time (Duvall, 2015). As Duvall (2015) argues, Penn's transformation that occurred in Haiti was one in which "his political legitimacy is rehabilitated as a result of his purported personal enlightenment" (p. 8). This is another example of a celebrity rebranding themselves via their activist practices for the purposes of Western audience consumption, all the while the victims of these relief efforts become overlooked and further marginalized. Duvall (2015) argues that the celebrity involvement in activism, specifically in that of the Third World, promotes celebrities' images and "neoliberal interventions all while subordinating serious systemic issues in the Third World" (p. 6).

<sup>2</sup> The term 'Third World' is used when the scholars I have cited have referred to it as such

In addition to Sean Penn, Angelina Jolie is one of the more prominent celebrity activists who has reinvented herself in the Global South. Angelina Jolie had developed a ‘wild child’ reputation for herself in Hollywood. Known to carry around knives while wearing a vial of her then-husband, Billy Bob Thornton’s blood around her neck, Angelina Jolie was forced to submit daily blood tests while filming *Tomb Raider* in Cambodia in 2001 due to previous drug addictions. It was there that Jolie’s activism originated after she was exposed to the hardships suffered by refugees in Cambodia (Totman, 2017). Her experiences there ultimately led to her adoption of her first child, Maddox in 2002 and the subsequent opening of a foundation in his name a year later which helps fund health care, education and conservation projects in rural Cambodia. Now a dedicated philanthropist and UN Goodwill ambassador, Jolie has been praised as ‘super-celebrity’ activist amongst other celebrity activists. In other words, her humanitarian efforts appear more ‘genuine’ with her augmenting her film work with official international humanitarian work (Totman, 2017). Although many scholars have argued that celebrity involvement in charitable organizations and humanitarianism works to reinforce this notion of ‘celebrity as spectacle’ and its appearance of inauthenticity (Barney, 2001; Kellner, 2010; Chouliaraki, 2012; Kapoor, 2013), Lillie Chouliaraki (2012) argues that Angelina Jolie challenges this critique. She states,

Jolie's contemporary “moment”—demonstrates there is significant variation in celebrity claims to authenticity, bearing distinct implications as to the dispositions of altruism it proposes to the West... Jolie's generous entrepreneurialism steps up celebrity impact in relief and development donations. (p.1)

The media has successfully assisted in transforming Jolie into a nurturing, maternal-mannered, global humanitarianism, visiting refugee camps in war-torn countries like Sierra Leone, Tanzania

and Pakistan (Totman, 2017). She has played it 'safe' in illuminating issues of injustice in the Global South, managing to stay away from political and social issues facing the Western World.

### *The Nurturing Caregiver*

Scholars have understood the media coverage of celebrity humanitarianism in the Global South as being anchored in an idealized nationalist notion of womanhood in its relation to mothering and childbearing (Shome, 2011; Chouliaraki, 2012; Kapoor 2013; Wilkins 2015). According to scholar Karin Wilkins (2015), the contributions of female celebrities in the developing Global South further reinforces their positions as 'global mothers' and white transnational femininity. Before discussing how scholars define the humanitarian efforts of celebrities like Angelina Jolie, Oprah and Madonna as problematic, I would first like to discuss how the media coverage of these three women contributes to the further gendering within the world of celebrity humanitarianism.

The media often discursively constructs women in the Global South as being more subservient and passive, placing value through their bodies as 'nurturing' or 'mothering' (Mohanty, 1991; Shome, 2011; Wilkins, 2015). Similarly, terms like 'fairy godmother' and 'nurturer' are also used in reference to Oprah, Madonna, and Angelina Jolie to describe their humanitarian efforts in the Global South. Oprah, for example, has no children of her own, but has been discursively framed throughout the media as playing the nurturing 'godmother' role to the African girls whom she supports in building schools and funding programs. In true 'fairy godmother form', Oprah is depicted as the "celibate maternal figure, neither sexual nor physical in connections with other adults or children" (Wilkins, 2015, p. 17). In contrast, Madonna and Angelina Jolie- both of whom are mothers through childbirth and adoption, are depicted as 'saviors,' rising to heroism by sacrificing time with their own children to help those that are not

their own. Wilkins (2015) argues that “women gain status through their nurturing roles, through caring for children whether they conceive them or not; and when women do not birth children, they are expected to play the role of the mother through adopting children or supporting orphanages” (p. 18). These depictions are further discursively constructed via sexist ideas about women. For example, male celebrities can appear as heroic in their own right and need no comparison to anyone or anything else to be labeled as such. Conversely, femininity must often be equated with motherly, nurturing roles like Mother Theresa or Princess Diana (Kapoor, 2013). While Bono (lead singer of U2) and Bob Geldof (singer and activist) can garner attention in their humanitarian efforts by exhibiting that they can connect with the business world, Angelina Jolie, Oprah and Madonna must exhibit traits that are more recognizable as ‘nurturing,’ ‘empathetic’ and ‘caring’ (Kapoor, 2013). Indeed, this framing works in further contributing to the gendering and hierarchies portrayed throughout celebrity humanitarianism.

Through visual images, female celebrities are likely to be pictured amongst groups of impoverished, suffering children of colour, surrounded by other mothers trying to provide for their children. Not only does this serve in the construction and reinforcement of the ‘politics of pity’ -- that is, reinforcing the need for the West to feel emotions of pity through circulating images and stories about suffering (Chouliaraki, 2012), but these images work in reinforcing traditional gender roles and the types of ideal activism for female celebrities. For example, in her efforts to explain the work behind her Raising Malawi Foundation, Madonna released a 6-minute video invoking the ‘politics of pity.’ In the opening scene, the video highlights people of colour crying and burying children. Wilkins (2015) explains,

Against the backdrop of despair and death, Madonna asks: “How do we break this cycle?” The resounding chorus, through different individuals, such as Reverend Tutu,

sings of power to change ourselves and our nations, and that we share a “common fate.”

We are told: “we have a choice.” Madonna then asks herself rhetorically: “Why did I choose Malawi?” She answers herself: “I didn’t. It chose me.” (p. 12)

What scholars view as problematic is when these privileged celebrities from the West speak for the Global South on issues of poverty. Their glamorous, wealthy mothering personas and “inviting identification with Western publics” (Chouliakari, 2012, p.10) “works to reinforce hierarchies across national and racial lines given their tendencies toward transnational adoptions” (Wilkins, 2015, p.18). Angelina Jolie was asked in an interview whether celebrities have a social responsibility to draw attention to social issues or causes, in which she stated,

I tend not to think about it as a celebrity, but as a human thing. Celebrities just have a louder voice...I have been fortunate enough to have success, be able to shine a light into the camera a little more, financially build something, support people or programs. (Lee 2012 as cited in Totman 2017, p. 22)

Oprah’s humanitarian work is a little different in that it doesn’t avoid the issue of race and according to Magubane (2007) serves as a type of “‘counterpublic’ because it challenges the prevailing stereotypes of black people” (cited in Kapoor, 2013, p. 45). What makes Oprah’s philanthropy different than others, according to Magubane (2007), is that the Oprah Winfrey Academy for Girls in South Africa, was established in a consultative way and is motivated by Oprah’s own experience and awareness of sexual abuse and discrimination. Despite this arguably progressive orientation, the school itself often works to promote neoliberal ideologies, emphasizing individual responsibility over societal blame (Peck, 2008).

## *Masculinity & Colonialism*

Goodman and Barnes (2011) equate celebrity activism with that of sport in their analysis of celebrity practices, arguing that both are competitive arenas. Duvall (2011), argues that competition constructs a ‘hierarchy of legitimacy and authenticity within the ranks of celebrity activism.’ For example, Angelina Jolie and Madonna are pitted against one another in the media in order to “establish which of them performs more authentic motherhood and sincere adoptions of children from Third World space” (Duvall 2011 as cited in Duvall 2015, p.2). Shifting the focus to the masculinized competition in celebrity activism, Duvall examines the highly problematic narratives used by the media to establish the level of authenticity between Sean Penn and Wyclef Jean in the aftermath of the 2010 Haitian earthquakes. Masculinity is produced in relation to race and nationality (Connell, 1995). According to McClintock (1995), paternal white masculinity was constructed from a colonial lens to develop black men as lazy and irrational (as cited in Duvall, 2015).

Celebrity colonialism reinforces neocolonialist attitudes towards countries and peoples of the Global South, often orientalisng non-white, non-Western people whom celebrities attempt to assist, choose for adoption, and claim to represent (Grenwal, 2005; O’Neil, 2006; Clarke, 2009; as cited in Duvall, 2015, p.3). Duvall (2015) argues, that regardless of whether its explicitly stated or not, the legitimacy of male celebrity activism is linked to the performance of hegemonic masculinity wherein the white man is always the savior. By considering factors such as gender, race, nationality, Duvall (2015) states that it “became clear that the competition between Jean and Penn illuminates post-colonial power dynamics and reinforces constructions of the cosmopolitan West and weak Global South” (p. 2).

Whilst Penn's background has been discussed previously, I will give a brief background on Wyclef Jean. Jean, a Haitian native, moved to the United States at the age of nine as a refugee and thus related to marginalized and oppressed peoples. Jean, a well-known musician and member of the hip-hop group The Fugees, founded the non-profit organization called Yéle in Haiti in 2005 and was viewed as an ambassador to Haiti. After the earthquake, Jean became a prominent figurehead in the news, answering questions and shedding light on the travesties being suffered by his people. This time in the spotlight didn't serve him well, as allegations started to surface that his non-profit organization was mishandling money. Shortly after, Jean ran for president of Haiti which brought him more attention -- mostly negative. Journalists, politicians, celebrities and humanitarians alike were in agreement that Jean's bid for presidency would damage the political structure of Haiti (Lynskey, 2010; Duvall, 2015).

Meanwhile, the media continued to frame Penn and Jean in competition to one another to establish who was a more authentic celebrity activist when it came to the betterment of Haiti. Penn's travels and humanitarian efforts in Haiti was being framed as a 'savior' while Jean's refugee status implied a lack of power and agency (Duvall, 2015). Penn's time in Haiti was framed by the media as selfless and generous, whereas Jean was acting selfishly and only helping his fellow Haitians out of obligation to his people, reinforcing the competitive, racial dynamic.

Media attention has traditionally focused on celebrity humanitarianism as the primary way celebrities engaged in political and social issues. This form of activism dominated scholarly work for years, interrogating the way media may frame the legitimacy or authenticity of celebrity activism by pitting a white celebrity against a black celebrity (in the case of Penn and Jean). However, the 1960s saw the coming together of a coalition of both black and white celebrity activists within Hollywood to fight injustice on a local level.



## **Anti-Racist Activism**

In recent years, we've seen an uprising of celebrities committed to illuminating society's consciousness to acts of injustice suffered by people of colour, through anti-racist political activism. Derman-Sparks and Phillips (1997) cite DuBois (1903, 1985) in defining anti-racism as a state of consciousness in which "the more individuals' consciousness reflects identification with their own people's history, culture and desire for liberation, the closer they will be to acting as anti-racists." To Franz Fanon, "the individual rejects the oppressor's ideology and engages in attempts to develop alternatives to awaken the consciousness of his or her people and to participate in the struggle to transform society" (Derman-Sparks and Phillips 1997, p. 28). In this section I focus on how scholars have discussed celebrity anti-racist activism, highlighting three dominant themes. The first theme I discuss is the history of celebrity black activism and its link to the civil rights movement and coalition building. I then discuss black athlete activism, leading to a discussion of contemporary celebrity anti-racist activism within which my two case studies are situated.

### *Historical Black Activism*

The aforementioned definition of anti-racism provided by DuBois and Fanon is important in understanding the role that black celebrities played in the historical movements that took place in the United States in the mid 1960s. Scholars often cite celebrities like Sidney Poitier, Harry Belafonte, Ruby Dee and Sammy Davis Jr. amongst a list of high profile black actors and singers and athletes that were leaders in the civil rights movement, using their celebrity to advocate for political and humanitarian causes (Iton, 2008; Feldstein, 2012; Raymond, 2015; Doyle, 2015). Scholar Emilie Raymond discusses a group that she refers to as 'The Leading Six' who were among a group of black celebrities that according to Raymond were "the movement's

most outspoken, effective, and consistent celebrity activists” (Raymond, 2015, preface). This group included singer Harry Belafonte, actors Ossie Davis, Ruby Dee, and Sidney Poitier; comedian Dick Gregory and entertainer Sammy Davis Jr. Indeed, many scholars also cite these celebrities as being key figures in their struggle for liberating their own people, as part of a larger struggle of others who experience oppression (Iton, 2010; Jackson, 2014;). They saw the opportunity to use their celebrity to shape the broader political discourse on a more local, grassroots level, unafraid of the consequences that could result to their careers. Raymond (2015) argues that the Leading Six played a vital role in changing the racial climate in Hollywood, as well as establishing a blueprint for celebrity politics which remains significant in contemporary popular media cultures.

Stars like Harry Belafonte, Sammy Davis Jr., Gregory Dick and Ruby Dee helped in illuminating the importance in building coalitions in Hollywood in order to aid in the civil rights movement. These stars included, but aren’t limited to, Theodore Bikel, Marlon Brando, Diahann Carroll, Dorothy Dandridge, Charlton Heston, Lena Horne, Eartha Kitt, Burt Lancaster, Paul Newman and Frank Sinatra (Douglas, 1992; Monson 2007; Doyle; 2015; Raymond, 2015). Together, the two groups formed what Martin Luther King would refer to as the “Stars for Freedom” (Raymond, 2015). These stars contributed to the civil rights movement by developing its financial infrastructure and mobilizing constituents in its support. What marks these celebrities different as activists when comparing them to contemporary celebrities in their humanitarian efforts is that they constituted an interracial coalition committed to fighting larger power inequalities on a local level versus a global level. They never considered themselves as ‘workaday activists’ that were on the frontlines participating in the Freedom Rides and Selma campaign. As Sidney Poitier points out, “we weren’t leading the charge. We weren’t at the

forefront getting our heads cracked open” (as cited in Raymond, 2015). Instead, their job was to be visible and generate profits to fund movements, serving as patrons of the movement. What this group of celebrities provided was the financial, legal and spiritual support, that were considered key influences in the movement. In addition, their celebrity voices and interracial coalition provided for a wider reaching audience that helped in shaping the movement, something that the ‘workaday activists’ could not have achieved without their help (Douglas, 1992; Jeffries, 2010; Goudsouzian, 2012; Raymond, 2015).

Sammie Davis Jr. raised the most money for the movement, establishing a role as ‘benefactor,’ whereas Harry Belafonte was the ‘strategist’, having a close relationship with Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. Additionally, both Davis and Belafonte had close relationships with John and Robert Kennedy, ensuring political backing when needed. Ossie Davis and Ruby Dee were the acting intermediaries between ‘radicals’ like Malcolm X, the Black Panthers and mainstream organizations (Douglas, 1992; Jeffries, 2002; Raymond 2015). Moreover, this group of celebrities helped in playing the vital role of facilitators between government officials, the public, and ‘radical’ black militant groups. For example, Gregory and Ossie Davis convinced minister Ralph Abernathy and Coretta King, who were still with the SCLC (Southern Christian Leadership Conference) to endorse their efforts to defend the Black Panthers. Jane Fonda also lent her celebrity and financial resources through her support of the daily activities of the Black Panther Party which resulted in an ‘unofficial blacklist’ of her in Hollywood (Jeffries, 2002; Raymond, 2015).

The civil rights movement drew these celebrities to become more involved in grassroots politics like the Vietnam War (Lucks, 2014). While celebrities like Charlton Heston and Sammy Davis Jr. were in favor of the War, speaking out of patriotism and supporting of the troops, Dick

Gregory, Ossie Davis, and Belafonte all spoke out against the War. Gregory was making connections and drawing attention between what linked the civil rights and antiwar stance (Anderson 1986; Semmes, 2012; Raymond 2015). Appearing at a talk for an audience of ten thousand at the University of California, Berkeley in May 1965, Gregory stated,

I'm not about to fight them Red Chinese [allied with North Vietnamese communists].

When you stop and think that Red China got 688 million people, if them cats ever start singing 'We Shall Overcome,' they gonna do it, baby! (Raymond, 2015, p. 206)

Ossie Davis and Ruby Dee followed suit in the anti-Vietnam war sentiment and participated in a Washington DC march later that year while Belafonte was quoted saying, presumably on behalf of the African American community, "We think that it's not to the best interest of the people of the United States that it continues its adventures in Vietnam" (Raymond, 2015, p.206). Gregory, took a more dramatic stance, refusing not to cut his hair until the war ended and took part in a series of thirty-day fasts which dropped him at one point to 103 pounds – all of which garnered extensive media coverage (Semmes, 2012; Raymond, 2015). Also becoming involved in the Vietnam war was boxer Muhammad Ali. Muhammad Ali, discontent with the rampant discrimination and oppression faced in the U.S. was among the most prominent and outspoken of the professional black athlete activists during this period (Cooper et al., 2017). Muhammad Ali took a stand against the Vietnam War and spoke publicly about his refusal to serve after he was drafted. Black athletes played a big role in anti-racist activism, both in the 1960s to today which I will expand on in the following section and in my analysis.

### *The Black Athlete Activist*

Historically, political activism has been viewed as a necessary means to a healthy democracy. The notion of political and social activists using their voice to shed light on injustice-

to represent the underrepresented, marginalized and oppressed groups of society is critical to the democratic ideal (Romer, 1990). In recent years, scholars have written thought provoking pieces on the role that athletes, specifically black male athletes, have played in activism and their involvement in the process of social change (Agyemang, 2010 et.al; Agyemang, 2012; Kauffman & Wolf, 2010; Wright, 2016; Cooper et al., 2017).

Existing literature on race and sport and the construction of the athlete activist looks primarily to the past to see where activism started (Edwards 1980; Hartmann, 2003; Hartmann 2009; Khan 2012; Cooper et al., 2017). The scholarly focus on the trailblazers from the late 1940s to late 1970s has been prominent. Jackie Robinson is most notably known as the first African American to break the colour barrier in major league baseball in 1947. He's also known for his work in supporting the Olympic Project for Human Rights (OPHR) and his work in boycotting the apartheid in South Africa (Bass, 2002; Hartmann, 1996). Several scholars have focused on the engagement in activism by black athletes in the late 1960s (Bass, 2002; Hartmann, 1996; Khan, 2012; Wiggins, 2014).

Curt Flood and his fight in the Supreme Court have been explored in many scholarly works. Flood refused to accept a trade following the 1969 season, ultimately appealing his case to the [U.S. Supreme Court](#). Flood argued that players are not a teams' property and used the term 'slave traders' to refer to the League's owners and management. His case reached the Supreme Court and seven years later, led to what is now termed 'free agency' in MLB. Flood's activism resulted in the loss of his career and his treatment of an outcast in baseball (Khan, 2012).

Tommie Smith and John Carlos are two significant black activists in sport that scholars often cite (Cooper et al., 2017; Hartmann, 2003; Leonard & King, 2009; Wright, 2016). During the October 1968 Olympics in Mexico City, two prominent African American sprinters Tommie

Smith and John Carlos, donned black gloves and raised fists upon on the podium upon receiving their medals. This gesture and display of activism was to show solidarity and resistance in the face of human rights violations and acts of colonialism that was occurring in the U.S. at the time (Leonard & King, 2009).

While scholars point to the much needed work to be done on the black female athlete activist (Birrell, 1990; Douglas, 1988, Oglesby 1981), Cooper et al., (2017), do mention the barrier breaking work that Althea Gibson did in the 1950s in becoming the first African American woman to win grand slam tennis tournaments with the French Open and Wimbledon in a predominantly white sporting event. However, the extent of her achievements and activism was highlighted within the span of a few lines. This appears to be the trend in scholarly literature when discussing the trailblazing efforts of black female athletes of past and present. Wright (2016) points out the many barriers that Serena Williams broke playing in a sport that's historically for white, upper-middle class Americans. Wright (2016) also discusses Williams' refusal to play at a mandatory tournament in Indian Wells, California, since 2001 due to racial taunts and briefly mentions the double burden Williams faces by being a black athlete and a woman and the challenge barriers faced based on gender and race.

More recently, scholars have explored the ways in which the Black Lives Matter movement has impacted black activism in the world of athletics (Sanderson et. al, 2016; Coombs & Castillo, 2017; Cooper et. al, 2017). For example, following the Michael Brown case in Ferguson, five St. Louis Rams football players entered the field with hands up in the air to symbolize "hands up, don't shoot." This was the players' way of using their platform to bring attention to the matter of police brutality and Black Lives Matter (Sanderson et. al, 2016; Coombs & Castillo). According to a study performed by scholars Jimmy Sanderson, Evan

Frederick and Mike Stocz (2016), two prominent conversations emerged on social media platforms surrounding these players' actions. One was a "Boycott the St. Louis Rams" Facebook page and the other was the use of the Twitter hashtag "#BoycottRams". The researchers in this study used a thematic analysis of user-generated Facebook comments and Tweets to determine six themes that emerged from the data collected pertaining to the St. Louis Rams Boycott (Sanderson et. al, 2016; Coombs & Castillo, 2017). These themes were generally negative in nature and included racist remarks towards the black players protesting and argued that sporting events are not an appropriate venue for activism.

While Lebron James has been criticized in the past for his silence on China's role in the Darfur genocide (Shelley, 2017), we saw a great shift in his involvement in activism since the killing of 17-year old, unarmed black boy, Trayvon Martin. To protest this act of violence, on March 23, 2015 Lebron James and the Miami Heat basketball team posted a photo wearing hoodies (symbolic to what Trayvon Martin was wearing the night he was shot) and tweeted the photo using hashtags #WeAreTrayvonMartin, #Hoodies, #WeWantJustice (Devine, 2012; Coombs & Castillo, 2017)(See Figure 1). The Black Lives Matter Movement sparked a new wave of black celebrity anti-racist activism that had not been seen since the Civil Rights era, a key trend that I will discuss in the next section.



**Figure 1. LeBron James posted this team photo on his Twitter page with hashtag #WeAreTrayvonMartin. Screenshot from @Bleacher Report**

### *The New Movement*

The Black Lives Matter (BLM) movement began in 2012, after the acquittal of George Zimmerman, a self-appointed Florida neighborhood watchman who shot and killed an unarmed 17-year old black boy, Trayvon Martin. In 2014, after the killings of two more unarmed black men, Michael Brown in Ferguson, Missouri and Eric Garner in New York City, the Black Lives Matter movement started as the hashtag #BLM and became more widespread, becoming a rallying cry for protesters and those calling for justice (Carney, 2016).

Scholars have since explored the ways black celebrities have played a role in drawing attention to the BLM movement (Howell & Giles, 2015; Duvall & Heckemeyer, 2018; Isaksen & Eltantawy, 2019). Celebrity singers, actors and athletes were using their platform and lending their voice through all media platforms to express their concerns over the systemic forms of racial injustice experienced by people of colour (Duvall & Heckemeyer, 2018). For example, Solange Knowles created a category of #BlackLivesMatter era protest music in which she creates songs framing the Black Freedom struggle, urging listeners to ‘resist,’ ‘refuse,’ and ‘reject’ (Joseph, 2018). Similarly, Janelle Monae wrote a BLM themed song entitled “Hell You



Talmbout.” In it, Monae states ‘say his name,’ ‘say her name,’ and references names of black men and women killed by police officers or died while in their custody (Duvall & Heckemeyer, 2018).

Celebrities are also using awards ceremonies to shed light on racial issues. For example, actor and *Grey’s Anatomy* star Jesse Williams’ BET Awards acceptance speech highlighted his frustrations where he called into question the economic and judicial systems of injustice surrounding marginalized people in the United States.

Now, this award – this is not for me. This is for the real organizers all over the country – the activists, the civil rights attorneys, the struggling parents, the families, the teachers, the students that are realizing that a system built to divide and impoverish and destroy us cannot stand if we do. Now, what we’ve been doing is looking at the data and we know that police somehow manage to deescalate, disarm and not kill white people everyday. So what’s going to happen is we are going to have equal rights and justice in our own country or we will restructure their function and ours. (Lasher, 2016)

His acceptance speech ultimately garnered praise and criticism, with some *Grey’s Anatomy* fans writing to ABC demanding he be cut from the show for his speech on ‘inequality’ (Duvall & Heckemeyer, 2018). Similarly, during the opening of the ESPY (Excellence in Sport Yearly) Awards, NBA superstars LeBron James, Carmelo Anthony, Chris Paul and Dwyane Wade took the stage to voice their anger, drawing further attention to the Black Lives Matter Movement (Coombs & Cassilo, 2017). “The system is broken,” stated Anthony, “The problems are not new. The violence is not new. And the racial divide definitely is not new. But the urgency to create change is at an all-time high (Chan, 2016, para. 6)” Chris Paul followed by calling on victims that inspired and moved the BLM movement stating “Trayvon Martin. Michael Brown.

Tamir Rice. Eric Garner. Laquan McDonald. Alton Sterling. Philando Castile. This is also our reality” (Chan, 2016, para9). “The racial profiling needs to stop,” (Chan, 2016, para.11) Wade urged during his speech. LeBron James wrapped up the 3 and-a-half-minute opening segment by urging all other athletes to speak up and use their influence to end the violence (Chan, 2016).

Duvall & Heckemeyer (2017) draw attention to the unique position black celebrity activists are in when it comes to their involvement in this particular form of activism (BLM movement) due to the pressing fact that “black celebrities are challenging deeply entrenched and racialized power structures that have defined the United States for centuries” (Duvall & Heckemeyer, 2017, p. 393). While there has been some work done on the importance of black celebrity activism, as mentioned above, I argue that there still remains little research in the way of critical narratives surrounding celebrity activists and the silencing of such celebrities. I’m hopeful that this thesis helps shed more light in these areas.

In reviewing the existing literature regarding celebrity activism, I argue for the continued study of anti-racist activism, particularly from celebrities of colour. Through anti-racist activism, marginalized groups discover that they are not alone in their experiences and through making their voices heard, can become part of a bigger legacy of resistance. Indeed, celebrity anti-racist activism allows for communities of colour to feel as empowered citizens, “hearing their own stories and the stories of others, listening to how the arguments against them are framed and learning to make the arguments to defend themselves” (Yosso, 2006, p.75). Because of this, I hope to attend to Graeme Turner’s (2010) call to actively foster other forms of celebrity study.

### **CHAPTER THREE: THE POLITICAL POTENCY OF THE BLACK CELEBRITY**

In this chapter, I use discursive textual analysis to explore how black celebrity activism is constructed within popular American news media. I examine how black celebrities use their fame as a platform to play an integral part in challenging the reemergence of white supremacy and violence against black men and women. In doing so, they prompted a wide range of media attention, inspiring intense debates over issues of police brutality, racial inequality, patriotism and celebrity activism. Ultimately, I argue that news media coverage of both Beyoncé and Colin Kaepernick function as a site for negotiation over meanings around historical and contemporary racial politics, pointing to the important work that black celebrity activism does within media cultures today.

My analysis will be split into two sections and additional subsections, based on my two case studies. The first section will discuss Beyoncé's performance during the NFL's Super Bowl 50 Halftime show in February 2016, a two-and-a-half-minute performance that was both celebrated and criticized for its political undertones. I then turn my attention toward my second case study, which interrogates Colin Kaepernick's "Take a Knee" protest during NFL games in August 2016 - January 2017 to raise awareness of police brutality targeting African Americans. Kaepernick's protest generated significant public debate about race and patriotism in sport, and ultimately resulted in him being unsigned, and what many in the media suggest as "blackballed" from the NFL (Fleming, 2017). I want to emphasize that the NFL serves as an important backdrop to both of these case studies, suggesting the importance of the NFL as cultural space that extends beyond merely football.

## **BEYONCÉ: A Moment of “Political Ascent”**

As I discuss in the introduction to this thesis, the NFL is an organization built off of the backs of black athletes who have been used for their bodies by team white owners (Brown, 2014). Furthermore, the Super Bowl, the annual NFL championship game, is a manifestation of a nationalist display, celebrating American dominance and heterosexual hegemonic masculinity (Fischer, 2013). For this reason, Beyoncé’s performance is particularly notable, generating a significant amount of media coverage that explicitly recognized her act as a disruption to the politically-conservative Super Bowl event. For example, Adrian Lee (2016) of *Macleans* points out, “The NFL, has a race problem...so when Beyoncé took the stage in front of millions as part of a Super Bowl halftime show...that performance wasn’t merely worth of all the adjectives she typically earns...it was important -- as a daring statement of blackness in a temple of white America” (para. 3). According to Jon Caramanica (2016) of *The New York Times*, Beyoncé “rewrote” the halftime show as a moment of “political ascent.” Likewise, in an article written for *Vox*, Caroline Framke (2016) explains that what Beyoncé did, “transformed one of the biggest events in sports, corporate synergy, and entertainment into a distinctly political act” (para. 14).

While this coverage highlights Beyoncé as a disruptive figure, much of the media coverage emphasized this by discursively linking Beyoncé’s performance to the Black Panther Party. Indeed, this was a major theme that I found across many of the fifty articles I analyzed, published in the week after the Super Bowl performance (between February 7, 2016 and February 14, 2016). For example, what was most explicitly stated across all 50 media articles from *The New York Times* to *FOX News*, *CBC* to *BBC*, *The Washington Post* to *VICE*, and *Teen Vogue* to *CNN* (to name a few), was that the performance was politically charged and reminiscent of the Black Panther Party of the 1960s. This will be the first theme I explore.

Following this, I discuss media coverage that constructs Beyoncé's performance as resisting dominant respectability politics (Cooper, 2017; Harris, 2003), privileging a black female perspective. This was exemplified through my data and was most apparent in articles discussing stylistic elements of Beyoncé's performance. In my third and final section of this case study, I discuss Black Lives Matter as a recurring theme in my analysis, whereby media coverage focused on positioning Beyoncé's performance as part of the burgeoning movement. As part of this coverage, some media discursively constructed and characterized Beyoncé's performance as "racist," "anti-white" and "anti-police," a discourse that suggests cultural anxiety around the Black Lives Matter movement – especially within more conservative media sources.

#### *Saluting the Black Panther Party*

The Black Panther Party (BPP), originally known as the Black Panther Party for Self Defense, formed in the 1960s, in the wake of the assassination of Malcolm X, and the killing of an unarmed black teen named Matthew Johnson in San Francisco in 1966. The BPP would patrol predominantly black neighbourhoods and protect the community from police brutality and other racially motivated crimes. Known as a revolutionary political organization, the BPP had chapters throughout the United States and internationally with an overarching mission to create social change (Clever & Katsiaficas, 2013).

However, despite their social justice orientation, the Black Panthers were labeled as a communist organization by the FBI in 1969 and were declared official enemies of the United States government. FBI director J. Edgar Hoover declared that the, "Black Panther Party, without question, represents the greatest threat to the internal security of the country" (Bloom & Martin, 2013). Many scholars believe this tactic was used by the U.S. government to discredit their politics, which challenged white supremacy (Clever & Katsiaficas 2013, Rhodes, 2017).

Indeed, fear mongering tactics used by the FBI and other US government officials contributed to the amplification of racial binary divide of white/black, safe/dangerous and further polarization of the black community (Bloom & Martin, 2013).

Members of the BPP often used distinctive stylistic symbols to signal their BPP membership throughout the 1960s and 1970s. For example, through cultural symbols like black leather attire, afros, black berets and bullets strung across the chest, the Black Panther Party expressed their ideological and cultural demands (Rhodes, 2007). In resistance to white values, the afro epitomized the ‘black is beautiful’ movement of the late 1960s and encouraged the exploration of identity among young black women. The Afro bears a social and symbolic meaning and significance (Kwesi, 2000). The Afro originated in a political and emotional climate and expressed defiance of racist beauty norms while rejecting white middle-class conventions and emerged as a symbol of black pride and black power. Kobena Mercer, cultural studies scholar and professor of History and African American studies, argues that any and all black hairstyles are political. He states, “When hairstyling is critically evaluated as an aesthetic practice inscribed in everyday life, they articulate responses to the panoply of historical forces which have invested this element of the ethnic signifier with both social and symbolic meaning and significance” (Mercer, 1990, p. 252).

The Afro wasn’t the only BPP symbol to appear in Beyoncé’s performance. Similarly, Adam Frisk of *Global News* notes that Beyoncé was “flanked by dancers sporting Afros while dressed in black leather and black berets, which some say are similar to the black berets worn by members of the ‘60’s black nationalist organization” (Frisk, 2016). A symbol for militancy and solidarity, the beret was worn by BPP members as an international representation of revolution, being worn by every struggler in the third world (Lopez, 2017).

Much of the media that discursively constructed Beyoncé's performance as an homage to the Black Panthers did so by linking Beyoncé's use of fashion through stylistic tropes to make a political statement. For example, the Afro, along with berets and black leather were prominent topics, discussed in approximately 80% of my media articles, working to reinforce the ways in which Beyoncé was discursively linked to the Black Panther Party through the stylistic tropes of her performance. For example, David Love (2016) of *The Grio* writes,

Did you ever think you'd see so much blackness, or so many Black Panthers in Afros at a halftime show? Or any Black Panthers in Afros at a halftime show? Maybe Beyoncé has tapped into something here, opening up some space for other artists to bring politics into pop culture and to make more of today's music more relevant, reflective of and responsive to the realities in which we live (para.1).

Caroline Framke from *Vox* points to the fashion to describe how there was more to Beyoncé's performance than what met the eye (Framke, 2016), meaning that fashion points to a more political reading of the performance. Erika Huggins, now a professor and former BPP member told *Teen Vogue* that she was "grateful" and in "awe" of Beyoncé for choosing her art to showcase the beauty of black womanhood via the women of the Black Panther Party and the images they convey in black leadership roles (Viera, 2016). Beyoncé's stylist for the performance, Marni Senofonte, explained in an interview with *Essence* magazine that fashion works as a social statement and Beyoncé wanted to showcase strong black women. "One of the best examples of that," she explained, "is the image of the female Black Panther. The women worked right alongside their men fighting police brutality" (Senofonte, 2016, para.6).

Senofonte also told Yolanda Sangweni of *Essence* that Beyoncé's jacket and harness resembling bullets was an homage to Michael Jackson, who was the first black performer at the

1993 Super Bowl halftime show (Sangweni, 2016). Some media outlets picked up on the reference to Jackson, which can be read as celebrating black culture and performers. For example, Alex Needham (2016) of *The Guardian* writes, “Beyoncé marched onto the football field, clad in skintight leather and Michael Jackson-style military gold sashes, with a posse of impeccably choreographed female dancers dressed like the 70’s Black Panthers” (para.1). Likewise, Adrian Lee (2016) of *Macleans* writes that for Beyoncé to perform the song “Formation” on its own would have been powerful enough, but paired with her Jackson-influenced style of dress along with a cross-belt of bullets and the accompaniment of back-up dancers dressed as Black Panthers, was a radical statement of an “unapologetic black woman.”

Other popular media outlets however, described the jacket solely in reference to bullets and omitted the reference to Michael Jackson entirely. For example, Flannery Dean from *FLARE*, wrote, “during the much-hyped halftime show, Bey and her dancers wore Panther-style black berets and her costume was adorned with a *bandolier of bullets*” (Dean, 2016, para.4). Lauren Chanel Allen for *Teen Vogue*’s description was similar, stating “Beyoncé marched onto the field with *bullets strapped to her chest*...all-black backup dancers with their black berets and black afros” (Allen, 2016, para.3). I read the omission of Michael Jackson and the mention of bullets evokes images of military, rebellion and danger, further linking Beyoncé to the Black Panther Party.

Within this narrative of black military-inspired costume, what my dataset emphasizes is that Beyoncé used the half time show at Super Bowl 50, to draw from historically political and controversial figures to effectively challenge a white, hyper-nationalist event. As Michael Arceneaux of *EBONY* points out, “This is Super Bowl, the pinnacle of hypermasculinity...the level of boldness in her (Beyoncé’s) choice to take the most watched program of the year to give



a nod to the Panthers on the 50 year-anniversary of their formation...speaks to how intentional she is becoming in her messaging” (Arceneaux, 2016, para. 3). In a *CBS* article, Daphne Brooks, a professor in the Department of African American Studies at Yale University is quoted as saying, “This is an unprecedented moment in popular music culture. Never before have we seen a pop icon, especially an African American woman, use her platform as a musician, as a celebrity, in order to make some of the boldest, most ferocious, most inspiring political statements about the Black Freedom struggle” (CBS staff, 2016, para.7). *The Atlantic*, referred to the performance as “displays of cultural power coming from specific places, with specific meanings. They were rooted in history, but obviously spoke to the present” (Phippen, 2016, para.13).

Claiming the ode to the Black Panther Party as divisive, Kim Holmes (2016) for the conservative publication the *Daily Signal* rhetorically asks, “But why use the symbolism of the Black Panthers? After all, the group has a long and sordid history of violence” (Holmes, 2016, para.1), later referring to Beyoncé’s message of black power as totalitarian, indulging in “fantasies of violence and mayhem” (Holmes, 2016, para.7). Worsley (2010) reminds us that this construction of black identity is restrictive in its limitations and “narrows the possibilities for black subjectivity, which has an incredibly damaging effect on society’s image and treatment of black people” (p. 5). This type of commentary, critical of Beyoncé’s performance and use of Black Panther imagery, did not dominate coverage, yet existed in primarily conservative publications that have been suspect of racial justice and progressive politics.

These prominent discourses found within my media sample discursively links Beyoncé to the BPP, a controversial movement and works to position her as a political subject informed by historical struggles, as well as an agential performer distancing herself from her older star text.

By picking up on these signifiers of the BPP, the media is recognizing Beyoncé's shift from an apolitical, "safe" artist who appealed to a wide range of audiences to a politically charged performer who centers her blackness and publicly represents change. By opting to engage with what the dominant culture viewed as "defiant black nationalists" Beyoncé created a counter-representation that usurps this notion of respectability in anti-racist activist constructs (Worsley, 2010).

### *Challenging Respectability Politics*

The "politics of respectability" is a term coined by scholar and author Evelyn Brooks Higginbotham. In Higginbotham's book *Righteous Discontent: The Women's Movement in the Black Baptist Church, 1880–1920*, she describes what is meant by the term "politics of respectability." Higginbotham explains how the women of the Baptist Church would encourage and impose traits that were deemed 'appropriate' by the upper black elite and white America in order to uplift and reform black Americans (Harris, 2003). In other words, the "politics of respectability" describes a strategic form of self-presentation historically adopted by black women to reject images perpetuated by white racist stereotypes (Pitcan et al., 2018). The politics of respectability dictate that black women have historically had to be conscious of how they perform black stereotypes in order to be seen as valued members of society (Collins, 2004). Additionally, it was expected that black women would gain the same middle-class standing as their white female counterparts, if only they assimilated the dominant values concerning gender roles (Collins, 2004).

This ideology of respectability politics is propagated by both white and black elite and is used to control marginalized people of colour into behaving in ways that are deemed 'appropriate' (primarily in behavior) by "linking worthiness for respect to sexual propriety,

behavioral decorum and neatness” (Harris, 2003, p. 212). Women of colour believed that in order to enhance their position in society, they needed to create a counter-narrative to negative stereotypes like that of the “angry black woman” and act in accordance with behaviors and attitudes prescribed by dominant norms (Pitcan et al., 2018). Many black women believed that by acting in accordance with “respectability,” that is, pushing back on stereotypes, de-emphasizing sexuality and upholding, would enhance their position in society – at least, that was the promise of respectability politics. Paisley Harris (2003) explains that respectability has two audiences; “African Americans, who were encouraged to be respectable, and White people, who needed to be shown that African Americans could be respectable” (p.213).

However, as Brittney Cooper (2017) acknowledges, respectability politics ultimately operate to silence and render black women invisible. Having to fight against this idea of “respectability” in order for their voices to be heard, black women had to simultaneously fight to prevent their contributions (intellectually, culturally, socially and politically) from being silenced by white feminists and black men (Cooper, 2017). As such, we may understand respectability politics as a strategy that reinforces racist, sexist and classist notions of ‘appropriate behavior.’ As Joseph (2016) further explains, “black respectability politics have become a way for elite African Americans to police and blame poor (or perceived-to-be poor) Blacks, instead of focusing the lens on either interpersonal or institutional racism” (p. 304).

Challenging the concept of “respectability politics,” scholar Ralina Joseph (2017) introduces the idea of performing “strategic ambiguity” for black women that are “caught between hypervisibility and invisibility” (Joseph, 2017, para. 5). Joseph explains “strategic ambiguity” as,

A *strategic* and mindful choice; it is also *ambiguous*, deploying a primary facet of post-race, *not naming* racism. It is *ambiguous* in that its explicit goal is to simply claim a seat at the table; it is *strategic* in that inclusion provides an opportunity to repudiate racism (Joseph, 2017, para.3).

Strategic ambiguity doesn't result in the complete silence and repression of women of colour but rather offers a means to push back against inequality by speaking through code (Joseph, 2018). It is a "tool of respectability politics that minoritized subjects use to resist intersectional oppression" (Joseph, 2018, p. 87). Women of colour have complicated and critiqued respectability politics (Chong, 2008; Vargas & Ramírez, 2015; Ward, 2008), understanding it as a tool that's used to keep oppressed communities, oppressed which limits their ability to challenge hierarchical systems (Pitcan et al., 2018).

Throughout my dataset, I found that media coverage pointed to the ways in which Beyoncé problematizes the concept of respectability politics, challenging this notion of 'acceptable blackness'. For example, Danielle C. Belton at *The Root* states, "What if I told you that to be black in a public space, with all eyes on you and choosing carefully how to handle that spotlight is a form of politics, a negotiation between the self and the world that all black people must make?" (Lee, 2016, para.7). Andrew Rosenthal for *The New York Times* mentions how Beyoncé managed to "get white political establishment to sputter outrage by daring to celebrate her identity and mention racial politics at a public event" (Rosenthal, 2016, para.1), while another article for *Macleans* describes the performance as "peak Beyoncé, having summited the peak, an unapologetic black woman" (Lee, 2016, para.5). In an article written for *The New Yorker*, Carrie Batten (2016) refers to Beyoncé's performance as "politically charged, visually daring, sexy, confrontational, revelling in Southern black femininity" (para.1). Based on the

above definitions of respectability politics, I read this as a direct challenge of respectability politics in the way Beyoncé performed her femininity. As mentioned earlier, respectability depends on acceptability and performance of gender and sexuality and Beyoncé's pushed back on this ideology, ultimately threatening hegemonic masculinity (Schippers, 2007). For example, Mayor Rudy Giuliani denounced Beyoncé's performance on *Fox News*, calling for "decent, wholesome entertainment" (Chokshi, 2016, para.3).

Within this narrative, Beyoncé's performance is often constructed as defiant in challenging Western representations of the feminine ideal. Her refusal to subscribe to respectability politics signifies a black political subjectivity that aligns with her use of Black Panther imagery. The media's framing of Beyoncé's performance as an "unapologetic" or "boisterous" black woman (Holand, 2016; Lee, 2016) position her as engaging in a racialized form of self-expression that ultimately redefines the bounds of respectability (Joseph, 2018). In doing so, the media is also highlighting the black American experience, specifically the black American woman's experience.

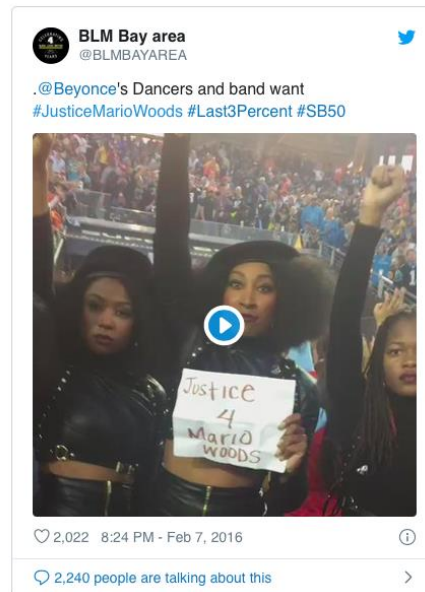
#### *A "Shout Out" to Black Lives Matter*

While many of the articles I examined emphasized the historical connections between Beyoncé's performance, the Black Panther Party, and the legacy of respectability politics, several writers also drew important connections to contemporary racial politics, particularly the Black Lives Matter movement, as I describe in chapter two.

BLM emerged at a time when "post-racial" or "colour-blind" ideology was prominent. Post-racial ideology is the idea that due to racial progress, racism no longer exists, and society should forgo the discourse on race (Bonilla-Silva, 2015). According to Joseph (2012), post-racial narratives stem from the ideology of colorblindness wherein race no longer matters. Within this

discourse, notable black people like Oprah Winfrey, Condaleeza Rice, Michael Jordan and Will Smith are often held up as evidence that racism is no longer a problem because people of colour are able to attain fame and fortune (Taylor, 2016). Moreover, through the 2008 election of Barack Obama, America's first black president, it was widely heralded that we live in a post-racial era (Teasley & Ikard, 2010). The BLM era challenged this "post-racial" or "colour-blind" ideology by shining a light on the racist incidences that were still occurring throughout America. As an anti-racist group, the BLM allowed for racial inequalities to be brought to the forefront of people's consciousness again within mainstream media. Upon analysing my data, I found that Beyoncé's performance was discussed in conversation with the Black Lives Matter movement and classified as an act of resistance in a week where another unarmed black man, Mario Woods, was shot and killed by police in San Francisco. In an article written for *The Grio*, David Love describes Beyoncé's performance as a "shout out" to the #BlackLivesMatter movement (Love, 2016, para. 4) by bringing black bodies to the forefront of the public's consciousness. David Zirin of *The Nation*, explains "She (Beyoncé) acted because so many people have put themselves on the line to make #blacklivesmatter not just a hashtag but a new morality." "This is what hope and change actually look like" states David Zirin of *The Nation*, "it comes in the black berets amid Budweiser and toe-fungus ads, telling 100 million people to remember the Black Panthers and to remember Mario Woods" (Zirin, 2016, para. 8). After the performance, a video posted on

Twitter of Beyoncé’s backup dancers (Beyoncé was not present), was posted on the Black Lives Matter Twitter Page after halftime (see Figure 2).



**Figure 2. Video of Beyoncé’s backup dancers holding a sign that reads “Justice 4 Mario Woods” screen shot from BLM Bay Area Chapter Twitter Page.**

Likewise, Deena Zaru, a CNN reporter who covers news at the intersection of culture and politics, suggests that Beyoncé’s performance was more of a tribute to Black Lives Matter. Zaru points to reactions from BLM activists which include statements like, “Our goal (BLM movement) is to disrupt the status quo and bring the message wherever the message may not be heard” and “at its core, she (Beyoncé) is reminding us that the economic justice is a key component to liberation work” (Zaru, 2016, paras. 10-11).

Many of these articles connect the Black Lives Matter movement to Beyoncé’s performance through her “Formation” song – which she performed as part of her Super Bowl set -- and music video, which was released only one day before the Super Bowl. With implicit images of police brutality, black womanhood and Hurricane Katrina, the video’s focus was on the many issues facing the black community. The images referencing police brutality range from sinking police

cruisers, police sirens, and an army of SWAT officers. In one scene, a young black boy in a hoodie dances in front of a line of riot gear-clad officers who, along with the little boy raise their hands in the air with a quick camera cut to graffiti which read “stop shooting us”- a reference to Trayvon Martin (see Figure 3). The video also shows Beyoncé, atop a New Orleans marked police cruiser, sinking into a body of flood waters (see Figures 4-5). In addition to the opening images of the video showing parts of a city under water with the words, “What happened at the New Orleans,” being uttered was reminiscent of the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina by which black residents were disproportionately affected (McFadden, 2016). The *Atlanta Black Star* described the imagery as “resistance and spirituality while condemning police brutality and the government’s failure to prevent Black Death and trauma following Hurricane Katrina” (Bediako, 2016, para.1).



**Figure 3. Black Boy in hoodie with arms in the air, opposite police in riot gear with arms up**



**Figure 4. Beyoncé atop a New Orleans marked Police cruiser**



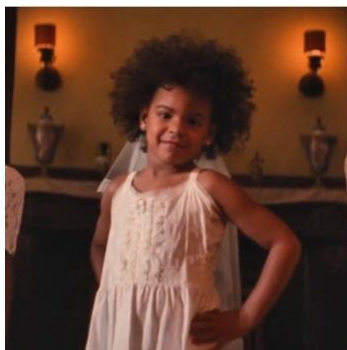


**Figure 5. Beyoncé atop a New Orleans marked Police cruised submerged in flood waters**

The video also centers black culture and black femininity, with publications like *Teen Vogue* describing it as indicative of Beyoncé “standing up in her blackness, unapologetically” (Hill, 2016, para. 1). Images of women in braids, Beyoncé’s daughter Blue Ivy in an afro, and Beyoncé standing in front of a plantation while flipping off the camera, all depicts an image of empowered, black self-love that doesn’t adhere to unrealistic standards of beauty (Vanegas, 2016) (See Figures 6-8).



**Figure 6. Beyoncé and surrounding women sporting natural hair (braids and afros)**



**Figure 7. Blue Ivy with natural afro**



**Figure 8. Beyoncé flipping off camera in front of plantation**

John Caramanica (2016) of *The New York Times* describes the Formation music video as a, “high-level, visually striking, Black Lives Matter-era allegory” (para. 7) Caroline Framke (2016) of *Vox* refers to the video as “proudly steeped in black American culture,” (para. 9) and “overtly political” (para. 9). Carrie Battan of *The New Yorker* writes “The video is everything the halftime show historically has not been: politically charged, visually daring, sexy, confrontational, revelling in Southern black femininity. Deena Zaru of *CNN* claims the video to serve as “rallying cries to the BLM movement” (Zaru, 2016, para. 6).

Indeed, writers discursively linked Beyoncé to the Black Lives Matter movement by explicitly detailing the imagery and symbolism within the “Formation” video, which was reproduced in the Super Bowl performance. By releasing the video the day before the Super Bowl, the media quickly linked the message from the “Formation” video to the Super Bowl performance. According to an article written for *The New York Times*, the video “Formation” is among one of the “most politically direct work she’s (Beyoncé) has done in her career” (Carmanica et al., 2016, para. 1).

The use of song and dance has historically been linked to forms of resistance that dates back to chattel slavery (Worsely, 2010), and this descriptive narrative of the video paired with

the breaking down of its lyrics work in shaping public perception of Beyoncé's performance as a 'political act.' For example, Carrie Battan (2016) writes for *The New Yorker*,

This is a political song, yes. Beyoncé's backup dancers were sporting outfits that made reference to the Black Panthers. But it was performed with such showmanship that I'm sure many American halftime-show viewers, those who were not paying obsessive attention to the "Formation" video, were none the wiser. They might have been viscerally wowed by the sheer physicality and logistical complexity of Beyoncé's dance routine, captivated by the song's hook or delighted by the cheeky dance-off between Beyoncé and Bruno Mars once the song was finished...Or they might have just been unaware of the overarching symbolism (para. 4)

Jessica Wong from the *CBC* explains how "taken as a whole," (para. 7) (Beyoncé's Super Bowl performance paired with the Formation video) resulted in criticism from conservative supporters and politicians like NY Republican congressman Peter King who called the performance and Beyoncé "anti-cop" (Wong, 2016, para. 9) and the "Formation" video "shameful" (Aidi, 2016). Alex Needham of *The Guardian* referred to the video as "a politically charged affirmation of black female pride and the lyrics "My daddy Alabama/momma Louisiana/You mix that negro with that Creole make a Texas bamma/I like my baby hair, with baby hair and afros/I like my negro nose with Jackson five nostrils" as the "most politically charged song" (Needham, 2016, para. 1). Carrie Battan (2016) of *The New Yorker* noted how Beyoncé didn't "dilute" her performance of "Formation" like she could have, presumably to appease white America. And finally, *LA Times* writer Randall Roberts describes both the song and video as "exuding defiance" (Randall, 2016, para. 5).

In addition to the more celebratory commentary I detail above, critical voices raised issues with “Formation.” For example, conservative writer and commentator Michelle Malkin commented, “Cuz nothing brings us together better than an angry @Beyoncé shaking her ass and shouting ‘Negro’ repeatedly” (Arceneaux, 2016, para. 3). Likewise, *Fox News’ Fox and Friends* host Anna Kooiman accused Beyoncé of hypocrisy after she was escorted by police to the Super Bowl and had the audacity to “give a salute to the Black Lives Matter movement” (Roberts, 2016, para. 9). This media rhetoric is operating in the same way the CIA and FBI planted the idea of the BPP being a “militant” organization. The media perpetuated a similar idea in using words to describe Beyoncé and her backup dancers as ‘militant,’ ‘troops’ ‘army’ and ‘defiant.’

The above criticisms often function to suggest that Beyoncé’s connections to both the BPP and BLM are indicative of her promoting “anti-white” sentiment. Indeed, the conversation stemming from a majority of conservative media articles framed Beyoncé’s support of the Black Lives Matter as “anti-white,” similar to framing of the members of the Black Panther party as being ‘dangerous.’ As such, media sources are producing a particular discourse about Beyoncé’s performance by tying her politics to the BPP and advocating it read as “anti-police.” For example, in an article written for *Global News*, Adam Frisk writes “...following the halftime show, the hashtag #BoycottBeyonce began to trend on Twitter where some social media users accused Beyoncé and her song “Formation” as being anti-cop and “pro” Black Lives Matter (Frisk, 2016, para. 9).

Tomi Lahren, host and conservative political commentator for *TheBlaze* also joined in on the controversy stating,

Now the Super Bowl halftime show has become a way to politicize and advance the notion that black lives matter more. Beyoncé, really? What is the political message here?

What is it they are trying to convey here? A salute to what? A group that used violence and intimidation to advance, not racial equality, but an overthrow of white domination.

Your husband was a drug dealer. For 14 years he sold crack cocaine. Talk about 'protecting black neighborhoods.' Start at home. (Morrison, 2016, para. 2)

In an article written for *The Guardian*, Amber Jamieson points out that Ariel Kohane, a volunteer from Ted Cruz's presidential campaign called Beyoncé's performance "demeaning," (Jamieson, 2016, para.15) stating that Beyoncé should be "more constructive and she should be trying to create peace and harmony instead of divisiveness." Kohane additionally added, "I think it was awful, terrible, it didn't even belong in the Super Bowl. It didn't have anything to do with football at all" (Jamieson, 2016, para. 14). He further went on to explain how he found the lyrics to Beyoncé's song "demeaning to police officers" but when asked which lyrics he was referring to; he couldn't come up with an answer.

The controversy spread globally with the United Kingdom's largest media company, Global removing the Super Bowl performance of "Formation" and anything related to the performance from the company's website (Thomas, 2016). William Bigelow of *Breitbart* explains Beyoncé's performance as "an oblique reference to the violent, anti-police Black Panthers" (Bigelow, 2016, para. 2). In an article published in *FLARE*, Toronto City Councillor Jim Karygiannis is quoted saying "Perhaps immigration Minister John McCallum should have her investigated...If someone wore bullets and supported (a radical group) here, they would not be welcomed in the United States -- that's for sure" (Dean, 2016, para. 2). Although the article tries to dismiss Karygiannis's statement, it still lends credence to the concept that the BPP is a terrorist organization.

An article published in *TIME* (2016) describes the ‘boycott Beyoncé’ protest that was planned by an unnamed organizer that asks,

Are you offended as an American that Beyoncé pulled her race-baiting stunt at the Super Bowl? Do you agree that it was a slap in the face to law enforcement? Do you agree that the Black Panthers was/is a hate group which should not be glorified? Come and let’s stand together. Let’s tell the NFL we don’t want hate speech & racism at the Super Bowl ever again! (TIME staff, 2016, para.4)

But the Panthers, as Andrew Rosenthal of *The New York Times* points out, were “no more racist than, say, the governor of Alabama or the state troopers in Selma in 1965, or the Democratic National Committee in 1968, or the Chicago police force in that year, or today. At least the Panthers could claim some provocation for their rage” (Rosenthal, 2016, para. 10).

One of the most outspoken critics of Beyoncé’s performance was Rudy Giuliani, former New York mayor known for his “law and order” and often perceived as racist approach to “cleaning up” New York City (Regalado, 2019, para. 4). Within my dataset, I found that Giuliani, currently acting as Donald Trump’s personal lawyer, is cited repeatedly, providing him significant space to disseminate his message. As such, we must problematize how who gets cited in media and within what context shapes the particular discourses that circulate and get amplified across media venues.

For example, a *TIME* article titled “New York City Protest Planned Against Beyoncé’s Super Bowl Halftime Performance” is a short, one-page article that centers around Giuliani’s comments, quoting his statements made on Fox News at great length stating;

This is football, not Hollywood, and I thought it was really outrageous that she used it as a platform to attack police officers who are the people who protect her and protect us and keep

us alive. What we should be doing in the African-American community, and all communities, is build up respect for police officers, and focus on the fact that when something does go wrong, OK. We'll work on that. But the vast majority of police officers risk their lives to keep us safe. (Chan, 2016, paras. 2-3)

In another article written for *Business Insider*, Anjelica Oswald centers the article around the Eventbrite website's #boycottbeyonce posting, additionally including the mention of #BlueLivesMatter, and #AllLivesMatter. Additionally, the post cites that the protest and calls for a Beyoncé boycott came after conservative pundits took to media outlets, voicing their opinion of the "Formation" halftime show. As Stuart Hall reminds us, the study of discourse would include the elements of how this knowledge about the topic acquires authority, a sense of embodying the "truth" about it, constituting the 'truth of the matter', at a historical moment (Hall, 2013, p. 30). In other words, the media act as a key source in informing audiences on what to believe, feel and how to act.

Yet, ample criticism of Giuliani's comments also circulated. Lauren Channel Allen (2016) points out in an article written for *Teen Vogue* that "pro black and black-centered messages are not automatically anti-white" (para. 5). The performance, Allen states, "centered black women, asked cops to stop killing us, and encouraged black economic empowerment. Her performance was dedicated to blackness -- not as the conservative media would have it, solely the Black Panthers, to whom her dancers' costumes paid tribute" (para. 8). Subversively, Allen further discusses Rudy Giuliani and his "anti-blackness" rhetoric, referencing him as the "godfather of the inherently racist Stop and Frisk act" (Allen, 2016, para. 9), which historically has given the power to police officers to target, stop and frisk a disproportionately amount of people of colour, specifically young black and Latino men.

In a piece written for *The New York Times*, columnist Andrew Rosenthal wrote a piece titled “Beyoncé’s Halftime Show Inspires Ridiculous Criticism” in which he picks apart Rudy Giuliani’s comments from the *Fox News* interview with the intention to mock and discredit Giuliani. For example, Rosenthal states “Rudy Giuliani, the former mayor of New York who cannot seem to grasp the idea of gone and forgotten, offered, as he does, the most ridiculous take on the issue” (Rosenthal, 2016, para. 4), while the *Nation*’s David Zirin refused to cite ring-wing commentators explaining, “I am not going to link to the statements, ranging from the historically ignorant to the unabashedly racist, because that’s their game” (Zirin, 2016, para. 3). Instead, he points to how Beyoncé’s performance worked to open up a space to have a real conversation about the Black Panther Party, “beyond the caricature” (Zirin, 2016, para. 4).

It is this point that encapsulates what my analysis reveals – that the coverage of Beyoncé’s performance functioned as a critical space for the negotiations of contemporary racial politics, including representation, police brutality, and discrimination. Scholar Sarah J. Jackson (2014) points to the vital role the media play in “constructing, interpreting, reorganizing, and explaining the linkages between racial ideologies and social structure in our society” (p.3) Beyoncé’s performance worked to bring the black experience to the forefront of people’s consciousness as the systemic oppression of black lives dominated the media cycle once again. Jackson (2014) reminds us that “black celebrities, —with their bodies, personas, and expressive forms—have unique potential to challenge dominant definitions of race and nation even as they are limited by them” (p. 3), while integrating into the activist role.



## **COLIN KAEPERNICK: Kneeling for Equality and Justice -- Not Just an Anthem**

In this section, I continue my discussion of the National Football League (NFL) as a white nationalist organization that is rooted in maintaining the cultural and institutional power of white men (Brown, 2014; Fischer, 2013; Kooistra et al., 2003). It is for this reason that Colin Kaepernick's silent form of protest prompted international media attention and ultimately resulted in his blacklisting by the NFL.

On August 14, 2016 during an NFL preseason game, Colin Kaepernick, a quarterback for the San Francisco 49ers refused to stand for the national anthem. Choosing to sit on the sidelines as a form of silent protest, Kaepernick was protesting what he saw as police brutality and systemic oppression of the black community. However, it was the NFL season opener game on August 26, 2016 that prompted media attention after an image of Colin Kaepernick sitting on the bench during the national anthem was tweeted by a *NinersNation* writer and went viral (Martin, 2018) (see figures 9 & 10).



Jennifer Lee Chan

**Figure 9. & Figure 10. Lee Chan's Twitter post and corresponding image of Colin Kaepernick sitting on the bench during the singing of the national anthem.**

As a result, Colin Kaepernick became the subject of intense media debate surrounding issues of social activism in sports, patriotism, racial inequality and police brutality. For example,

multiple media outlets, including *TIME*, *The Washington Post*, *CBS*, *The Guardian* and *CNN* cited Kaepernick's interview with *NFL media* after the August 26, 2016 game in which he stated,

I am not going to stand up to show pride in a flag for a country that oppresses black people and people of color, to me, this is bigger than football and it would be selfish on my part to look the other way. There are bodies in the street and people getting paid leave and getting away with murder. (Wyche, 2016, para. 3)

These comments garnered both immediate praise and public outrage that was exemplified in my dataset. For example, Justin Carissimo (2016) of *The Independent* writes how some NFL fans began posting photos of themselves burning Kaepernick jerseys, while *NBC News* points to some opponents of Kaepernick that called him a "hypocrite" for speaking on issues of racial injustice despite being a wealthy professional athlete. These discussions were intensified a year later on September 22, 2017 after President Donald Trump inflamed the controversy at a rally in Alabama, in which he referred to the protest as disrespectful and unpatriotic. He was quoted at the rally stating, "Wouldn't you love to see one of these NFL owners, when somebody disrespects our flag, to say 'Get that son of a b\*\*\*\* off that field right now! Out! He's fired. He's fired!'" (Graham, 2017, para. 2).

These comments added to the controversy surrounding protests in the NFL regarding racial politics, patriotism and a player's right to protest wherein Colin Kaepernick was once the focus of debate and intense public scrutiny (Haerens, 2018). Indeed, these particular sentiments closely align with the three central themes that I found within my dataset that work to discursively construct Colin Kaepernick as a revolting activist. For the purposes of my analysis, this case study will be based in conversation with both aforementioned events, focusing half of my 50 sampled articles on the week after Kaepernick started his protest (August 26, 2016 –

September 4, 2016) and the other half in the week after Donald Trump reignited the conversation a year later (September 22, 2017 – October 1, 2017). The first theme I explore within this timeline are the historical debates surrounding a player’s right to protest and the backlash against athletic activism. Following this, I discuss media coverage that calls into question concept of patriotism -- both within the NFL and the larger American landscape, the second theme I found across my data. Based on my analysis, I problematize how the framing of “patriotism” in respect to Colin Kaepernick is deeply rooted in racist nationalism (Fischer, 2014; Haerens, 2018). In the third and final section, I discuss ‘new racism’ as a theme in my analysis, whereby media coverage focused on Colin Kaepernick’s racial and monetary background as a means of deflecting the real issues surrounding the protest (Leonard & King, 2009). As a part of this coverage, some media employ language shaped by “new racism” to characterize Colin Kaepernick as a “hypocrite” or “unqualified” to protest, a discourse used to defend hegemonic formulations of whiteness while demonizing black protest.

### *An Athlete’s Right to Protest*

When Harry Edwards wrote the book *The Revolt of the Black Athlete* in 1969, he did so with the intent on shining a light on the climate of athletic activism. He was hopeful in the direction black athletes were headed. The revolt encompassed a time where sports and politics merged. It was a time, where right on the heels of the Civil Rights Movement and the rise of Black Power, black athletes were willing to sacrifice their own privilege and status for the greater good (Edwards, 2017). Now, almost 50 years later, as Louis Moore (2017) for *Vox* news points out, “the story of activism compromised is repeating itself” (para. 2). Much of the media within my dataset discursively characterized Colin Kaepernick’s protest as a precarious form of activism by comparing him to prominent historical black athlete activists, while emphasizing the

risky nature of his protest. By positioning him amongst the ranks of Muhammad Ali, Tommie Smith and John Carlos and Kareem-Abdul Jabbar, the media played a role in renewing historical conversations about the role of athletic activism in sport, specifically in tumultuous political climates.

For example, Morgan Jerkins (2016) for *Rolling Stone* points out, “the role of the famous black athlete has been a polarizing one for as long as sports have dominated American headlines” (para. 1). Expanding off this theme, Mahita Gajanan (2016) for *TIME* writes, “Criticism lobbed at Kaepernick also recalls the wrath Muhammad Ali incurred after refusing to enlist in the Vietnam War in 1967, one of the most notable moments of an athlete standing up for his beliefs” (para. 5). In other words, these athletes function as precarious athletes not only because of their historical position in contexts marked by social change and uncertainty, but because of their unstable role that oscillates between celebrated and derided figures – depending on the audience and context.

The late 1960s was a tumultuous time in the United States, primarily for people of colour. The country was entangled in countless protests over the Vietnam War and the assassination of Martin Luther King Jr. It was a time of civil unrest. There was a need for black athletes to use their platforms to speak out on the struggles for social justices that were limited by discourses that omit and thereby silenced the multiple experiences of people of colour (Leonard & King, 2009). In 1967, Muhammad Ali marched down the streets of Harlem to protest the Vietnam War. Ali spoke publicly about his refusal to serve after he was drafted. He didn’t believe in fighting against another oppressed group overseas while he witnessed his own people suffering at the hands of the same people that were condemning him for not fighting in the army. Ali’s outspoken form of protest resulted in him being locked out of boxing for three years, at the

peak of his talent. Speaking to the similarities between Kaepernick and Ali, Morgan Jerkins (2016) of *Rolling Stone* writes, “what Kaepernick and Ali as black athletes unleash through their political activism is a rupture in what is expected of them and how their allegiance to this country has never been rightfully earned” (para. 6).

Joining Ali in the marches of Harlem was NBA superstar Kareem Abdul-Jabar. Abdul-Jabar, formerly known as Lew Alcindor, changed his name after he publicly declared that he was converting to Islam. Because the Nation of Islam during the late 1960s to early 1970s was associated with the Black Panthers Movement, Abdul-Jabbar was harassed by the IRS on the orders of President Nixon and it ultimately cost him money in loss of endorsement deals. Abdul-Jabar still stands by his actions stating in an interview, “I know that it has cost me,” he said. “But being able to assert an identity that is in harmony with who I am, what my ancestry is all about and what my moral and political feelings are all about, that was the most important thing” (Stacey, 2017, para. 12). *The Washington Post* (2016) cites similar comments made by Colin Kaepernick in which he states,

This is not something that I am going to run by anybody. I am not looking for approval. I have to stand up for people that are oppressed...If they take football away, my endorsements from me, I know that I stood up for what is right. (Boren, 2016, para.6)

Similarly, in October 1968, during the Mexico Olympic games, 200 metre gold and bronze medal sprinters Tommie Smith and John Carlos donned black gloves and raised fists upon on the podium during their medal ceremony. This form of protest was to bring attention to the injustice facing people of colour in the United States. Before approaching the podium, the two men took off their shoes to protest black poverty, wore beads and scarves to protest the lynching’s of black men and women occurring in the U.S. and when the national anthem played,

they lowered their heads, and raised their fists to show solidarity and resistance in the face of human rights violations (Hartmann, 2011).

The punishment for this Olympic rule violation was quickly enforced. Smith and Carlos were ordered to leave the Olympic Stadium and upon returning to the U.S received countless death threats from people outraged by two black men disrespecting the country and the flag. Smith and Carlos were both vilified by upper elites, were abused through media outlets, and their athletic careers were ultimately over due to their commitment to raising political consciousness (Hartmann, 2003). Relatedly, Kaepernick's decision to sit on the bench during the national anthem -- which in September of 2016 evolved from sitting on the bench to taking a knee -- was a symbolic protest, aimed to draw attention to what he saw as police violence and systemic oppression of people of colour in his own country. The result, like Smith and Carlos, was his ultimate blacklisting in the NFL after his contract with the San Francisco 49ers expired.

Kaepernick's actions, as described in an article written for *NBC*, "inspired a spirited debate online about what role athletes can and should play in terms of political debate, and whether or not paying respect to 'The Star Spangled Banner' is a bridge too far" (Howard, 2016, para. 22). In alignment with this narrative, *The Atlantic's* Matt Vasilogambros (2016) points out that athletes have the ability to bring important issues to the national stage, stating, "Kaepernick's actions have brought on a debate surrounding 'The Star Spangled Banner,' as well, with several authors bringing up the song's ties to slavery. It shows how powerful a moment it is when professional athletes speak up and take political stands" (para. 13). Jamelle Bouie, journalist for *The New York Times* tweeted the irony in the outrage following Kaepernick's protest stating "Two months ago: 'We should all admire Muhammad Ali's

courageous stand for his beliefs’...Today: ‘Colin Kaepernick is ungrateful’ (Slover, 2016, para. 8). Expanding on this irony, Adam Howard for *NBC News* writes,

It is worth noting that while Smith, Carlos and Ali, are now honored for using their platforms to speak their mind--they were all vilified during their heyday, as excoriated for many of the same reasons as Kaepernick is today. (Howard, 2016, para. 25)

Indeed, while many media outlets praised Colin Kaepernick’s right to protest, some media -- especially within conservative media sources, discursively constructed Kaepernick as “un-American,” “disrespectful” and “unpatriotic,” a discourse which questions what it means to be a good American citizen.

### *The Politics of “Patriotism”*

In this section, I will demonstrate how media coverage of Kaepernick’s protest functioned to perpetuate hegemonic ideals about whiteness and masculinity. Fischer (2014) suggests that “hegemonic portrayals of masculinity are oftentimes embedded in this symbiotic relationship between sports and the military (p. 205).” Within this narrative, I will focus on the relationship between the NFL and military and its link to portrayals of patriotism, which informed media coverage of Kaepernick’s activism.

The NFL has a long history of carefully structuring its brand to appeal to a conservative, “all-American” population, one that has been rooted in patriotism since the mid 1940s (Haerens, 2018). In 1945, after WWII had ended, the NFL commissioner wanted the “Star-Spangled Banner” to be played to unite players, fans, and officials. By the late 1970s a policy was enacted that the anthem would be played during pregame activities, but players would remain in the locker room until the anthem had finished before making their way onto the playing field

(Haerens, 2018). In fact, players weren't mandated to be on the field for the playing of the anthem previous to the year 2009.

Although the NFL has long held a strong affinity towards militarism (Butterworth, 2012; Fischer, 2013; King, 2008; Stossel, 2001), it wasn't until 2011 that the NFL really began promoting a culture of militarism with its veteran appreciation ceremonies, Air Force flyovers, and 9/11 commemorations. For example, its "Salute to Service" was created in November 2011 to celebrate and highlight the U.S. military. What was supposed to be a campaign that ran for the entire month of November, was casually incorporated into everyday life by way of branding structures in the league (Rugg, 2016), further implicating itself, as Butterworth and Moskal (2009) argue, "in a structural relationship between government, the military, and entertainment industries" (p. 413). The NFL's ties to the military further constructs the league as "not just a compassionate corporate citizen passively embodying 'American values,' but as an ideologically active and authoritative American public institution" (Rugg, 2016, p. 21). Additionally, Fischer (2014) attributes these commemorative displays as "sport/war tropes that serve to construct portrayals of hegemonic masculinity" (p. 205).

In 2015, the NFL's ties with the military were exposed under what became known as 'paid patriotism.' Based on a joint report released by Arizona senators Jeff Flake and John McCain, the U.S. Department of Defense spent \$6.8 million to pay for patriotic displays during the games of professional sports teams. The NFL received around \$6 million dollars of those funds. The practice has since been banned, but according to Haerens (2018), it left many thinking that the NFL's connections to the military and patriotism was merely a ploy to appeal to conservative fans. Further contributing to this discourse was Donald Trump's speech and the reactions it garnered at a rally in Huntsville, Alabama. As previously mentioned, on September



22, 2017 Donald Trump addressed what an article in *The New Yorker* describes as a “mostly white crowd” (Remnick, 2017, para. 2) wherein he famously stated that NFL owners should respond to protesting players by saying,

Get that son of a bitch off the field right now, he's fired. He's fired!... For a week, (that owner would) be the most popular person in this country. Because that's a total disrespect of our heritage. That's a total disrespect for everything we stand for... You know what's hurting the game? When people like yourselves turn on television and you see those people taking the knee when they're playing our great national anthem (Remnick, 2017, para. 3)

Working to further discursively construct Kaepernick as “un-patriotic,” Trump sent out a Tweet the day after the abovementioned rally stating,

If a player wants the privilege of making millions of dollars in the NFL, or other leagues, he or she should not be allowed to disrespect our Great American Flag (or Country) and should stand for the National Anthem. If not, *you're fired*. Find something else to do (Remnick, 2017, para. 6).

Further appealing to his base supporters and drawing on his *Apprentice* brand, comments like the above lead to polls reporting that 83 percent of Republicans were in opposition of NFL players kneeling during the national anthem while 43 percent of Independents and 25 percent of Democrats were against it (Sabin, 2018). These statistics further contribute to the political divide and discourse that the NFL is crafted to appeal to a conservative and patriotic image (Haerens, 2018). In an article for *NBC News* sportswriter David Zirin told NBC News that,

The quarterback position is so bereft in the NFL, I'd be surprised if they cut him and I'd be shocked if another team didn't take a chance on a player with his skill set. If that

happens? We'll know that the right-wing politics that dominate NFL owners' boxes was more powerful than their desire to win (Howard, 2016, para. 21).

Khaled Beydoun (2016) for *The Undeclared*, a news platform owned by ESPN that explores the intersections of race, sports and culture, describes how conservative pundits, “assailed Kaepernick’s ‘lack of patriotism’” as “the variant strands of American hate convened to unleash on the quarterback protesting the oppression of black people and people of colour” (para. 1). For example, in an interview on the conservative talk show *The Steve Malzberg Show*, U.S. Representative Steve King claimed that he would have “fired Kaepernick for ‘undermining patriotism’ by exploiting his professional platform for his political statement (Massie, 2016, para. 4).

Media outlets like *The Nation* (2016) and *The Washington Post* (2016) highlight the backlash from football fans that equated Kaepernick’s form of protest as unpatriotic or disrespectful towards to flag. (See Figure 11 and 12).



Figure 11. Fans hold sign and flag in response to Colin Kaepernick’s protest

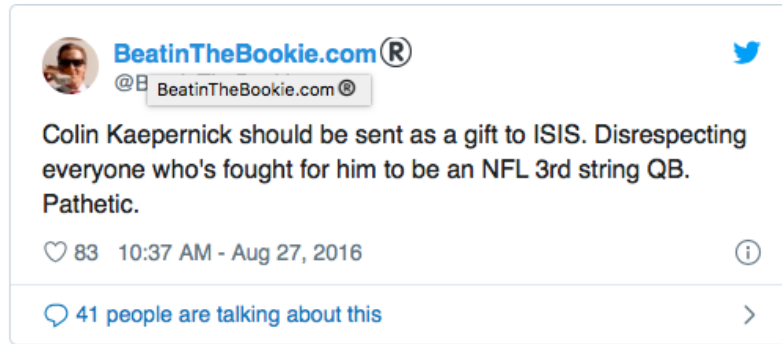


Figure 12. Football fan tweets reaction to Colin Kaepernick's protest

Additionally, as Maya Rhodan (2016) of *TIME* reports, Kaepernick's former teammate, Alex Boone referred to Kaepernick's actions as "disrespectful" stating,

That flag obviously gives [Kaepernick] the right to do whatever he wants. I understand it.

At the same time, you should have some... respect for people who served, especially people that lost their life to protect our freedom (para.5)

By continuously referring to Colin Kaepernick's as a 'disrespectful' and 'unpatriotic' display towards the military and the flag, the media has molded Kaepernick's silent protest into an expression of American nationalism. For example, Rod Dreher (2016) for *The American Conservative* writes,

It is no small thing to refuse to stand for the National Anthem. It shows disrespect towards the nation, which is to say, All Of Us. It is to say, "I'm not part of you." If that's how one feels, then there's no gainsaying it, but it's a big deal. (para.5)

Wesley Morris (2016), writer for *The New York Times* explains this framing of Kaepernick's 'patriotism' as a symptom of racism. He states,

When a black American protests the demoralizing practices of American government, there is always a white person eager to unfurl the welcome mat to Africa. This is where racism and patriotism tend to point: toward the exits. For some, we learn, being American

is conditional on behaving like a grateful guest: *You belong here because we tolerate your presence.* (Morris, 2016, para. 5)

Responding to a need to problematize how black athletes fit in to the social and political world, the aforementioned article highlights and calls out some of the more conservative and racist framings that are reproduced through media texts.

Indeed, football and politics have always been intertwined. For example, *Vox's* Tara Burton (2017) explains,

For better or for worse, football has always been political, if not politicised. The popularity of American sport culture is deeply rooted in the history of a particular kind of American muscular Christianity, a conflation of nationalism, nostalgia, piety, and performative masculinity. From the football stadium to the basketball court, American sports have been as much about defining a particular kind of male and typically Christian identity as they have been about the game itself. (Burton, 2017, para. 5)

Louis Mooren (2016) for *Vox* explains, “Trump has turned the players’ protests into a wedge issue. This is part of an old playbook from the right to increase their support by attacking civil rights protesters” (para. 6). These “wedge issues” are divisive and racist in nature and discursively reminiscent of what Malhi and Boon (2007) would explain as “democratic racism.”

Black male athletes are typically expected to play a non-threatening role wherein their bodies are valued over their brains (Collins, 2004), facing stereotypes of being ‘brawny’ versus ‘brainy’ and thus are neither expected nor welcomed into political or social debates (Coombs & Castillo, 2017). Conversely, white male athletes are continuously praised for their hard work and mental skill (Eastman & Billings, 2001). This stereotyping further contributes to the marginalization of black athletes who use their platforms to advocate for social or political

causes (Kaufman, 2008). The oppositional framing of Kaepernick's 'patriotism' creates for further tension amongst media outlets. By providing a counter narrative to conservative media's more racist commentary, the praising of Kaepernick's anti-racist activism works to challenge the ways race and racism have impacted prevailing social structures, discourses and practices circulating within media culture.

### *Deflection and Detraction Through Democratic Racism*

Democratic racism is "an ideology that allows the coexistence of both egalitarian values and racist attitudes, beliefs, and behaviors, is often expressed by the dominant group through powerful discourses that shape social reality for many minority individuals" (Malhi & Boon 2007, p. 125). I've found this concept to be particularly useful to understand the discursive terrain in which debate over Kaepernick's protest occurred, as I argue that nowhere is covert democratic racism as evident as it is in professional sports. Democratic racism ultimately works to ensure black athletes' social mobility is limited to the constraints of their athletic ability (Yosso, 2005). In the context of democratic racism, racist discourses are manifest in very subtle and subversive ways that intend to blame the target of racism while simultaneously denying that racism exists (Lorenz & Murray, 2013). As part of this discourse, financial compensation is often held up as indicative of a *lack of racism*.

For example, conservative *Fox News* commentator Tucker Carlson (2016) posed the question, "when did rich people become victims? When did people stop laughing at the idea that someone who makes 10 million dollars a year can get caught up in 'I'm the victim'" (Baier, 2016, p. 1). Upon being reminded by a reporter that Kaepernick didn't say he was a victim but was rather protesting, Carlson doubled down stating, "He did." Carlson continued, "The next time some overpaid entertainer or athlete or politician stands up and says 'boo hoo, people are

mean because of x, y, and z, ' laugh in their face, including this guy" (Baier, 2016, para. 3).

Along these same lines, Sean Hannity (2016) of *Fox News* referred to Kaepernick as a "spoiled brat, out of touch, super rich athlete. He, in his own life, has suffered no oppression, he's free to share all the money he wants, he lives in the greatest nation on earth" (Serwer, 2016, para. 7). Here, democratic racism is operating in the way that blame is being shifted onto Kaepernick's 'attributes' and individual choice to protest, shifting the focus away from *why* he's choosing to protest (Leonard & King, 2010).

Similarly, in an article for *The Washington Post*, retired Army Col. Kelly Criger criticized Kaepernick, stating,

Kaepernick should protest 'the right way' by funding scholarships for minorities, donating football equipment to inner-city schools or writing about the problem. You're not a freedom fighter leading your people out of bondage. You're an ill-informed athlete who's only fanning the fires of racism by sitting on the sidelines for a principle that you only understand through a simplistic pop narrative that's little more than a hashtag campaign. (Lamothe, 2016, para. 3)

Under democratic racism, also referred to as 'new racism'<sup>3</sup>, white normative behavior is being disguised under the enactments of 'rules and regulations' to control disruptive behavior (Lorenz & Murray, 2013). For example, in a new national anthem policy enacted after Kaepernick's protests, NFL owners rule that players can no longer kneel during the playing of the national anthem without leaving themselves open to punishment. The new rules would also

<sup>3</sup> While "new" and "democratic" racism can be recognized as two separate theories, for the purposes of this section, I draw upon insights from Lorenz & Murray, 2013 that uses them interchangeably.

allow for the players to stay in the locker room during the playing of the national anthem if they preferred. Additionally, the league had the option to fine individual team members, were they found violating the policy (Haerens, 2018).

In *Black Sexual Politics: African Americans, Gender and the New Racism*, Patricia Hill Collins explains that an outcome of new racism is its heavy reliance within mass media to manipulate ideas. “These new techniques,” as Collins explains, “work to obscure the racism that does exist, and they undercut antiracist protest” (Collins 2004, p. 54). For example, many media articles within my dataset focused on Colin Kaepernick’s monetary success, racial background and familial upbringing, “disrespect towards to military” (as mentioned above) and ties to Islam to detract from the protests, which I argue is in alignment with ‘new’ or ‘democratic’ racism. For example, the “Kaepernick is a Muslim” narrative began circulating after *Fox News* (2016) suggested that Kaepernick’s activism began around the same time he started dating radio personality Nessa Diab, who is Muslim. The article states,

Kaepernick, who was notably photographed with Bible quotes tattooed on his biceps when he first came into the league, also posted a greeting in July acknowledging ‘a lot of people’ who he knew fasting during the Muslim holiday of Ramadan and wishing them ‘a Happy Eid!’ He also was heavily critical on social media of Republican presidential candidate Donald Trump’s proposed ban on Muslims. (Fox News Staff, 2016, para. 4)

In an article for *Vox*, journalist Victoria Massie (2016) describes how Rep. Steve King also suggested that Kaepernick is Muslim by stating, “I understand that he has an Islamic girlfriend...this has changed him, and he has taken on some different political views along the way...this activism that’s sympathetic to ISIS” (para. 5). While this coverage highlights Kaepernick as a disruptive figure, it also works to discursively manipulate Kaepernick’s activism

as tied to Islam, further breeding anti-Islam sentiment and spurring his perceived ‘hate for America.’

Other media sources like *The Atlantic* (2016), suggest that because Kaepernick is biracial, light skinned, and adopted by white parents, people on social media mock his protests, rendering him less “oppressed” because of his close proximity to whiteness. For example, in the same *The Atlantic* article, Rodney Harrison (a retired black NFL player), not realizing Kaepernick is half black, criticizes Kaepernick’s protest as inauthentic stating that Colin Kaepernick wasn’t black and therefore, “cannot understand what I face and what other young black people face, or people of colour face (Serwer, 2016, para. 7).” These statements work to deflect away from the substance for Kaepernick’s protest and instead, as Collins (2004) points out, “undercuts” the protest.

What’s surprising is how similar discourse used by the dominant groups to dismiss and deflect from the protests were also utilized by people belonging to minority groups. For example, in an interview with CBS Sports, Hines Ward, a former NFL player and visible minority of Korean and African American descent, told *CBS Sports* (2016) that he doesn’t agree with Kaepernick’s method of protest stating,

Our national anthem stands for our freedom for all Americans regardless of color. It symbolizes the very reason Kaepernick is able to speak his mind and exercise his first amendment rights. If you want to make a point or take a stand, go straight after the root of that cause. Don't disrespect the whole country or the organization that's paying you millions of dollars to play football. (DeArdo, 2016, para. 3)

Democratic racism is used as a mask to deflect and detract away from the real reasons Kaepernick is protesting and is instead focusing him as a privileged actor. As far as Colin



Kaepernick being “disrespectful” towards the flag, the military and the nation, in an interview with *ESPN* (2016), Kaepernick said he has “great respect” for the men and women who have served, but said the freedoms they are fighting for are not being realized by everyone in America. “They fight for freedom, they fight for the people, they fight for liberty and justice, for everyone. That’s not happening,” Kaepernick said. “People are dying in vain because this country isn’t holding their end of the bargain up, as far as giving freedom and justice, liberty to everybody.”

Colin Kaepernick, as suggested by my dataset, has been discursively constructed by the media in the context of a revolting activist. By using the NFL stage as a site to protest the violence and mistreatment of the black community, Kaepernick has ignited intense controversy regarding racial politics, patriotism and a player’s right to protest, becoming part of a legacy, similar to that of his predecessors. Ultimately, Kaepernick garnered both praise and criticism from media outlets with two very different commentaries circulating within media culture. Ultimately, Kaepernick successfully placed the discussion of systemic racism and police brutality at the forefront of popular discourse.

In this chapter I utilized discursive textual analysis to explore how Beyoncé and Colin Kaepernick’s activism was constructed within popular American news media. Both Beyoncé and Kaepernick used enormous platforms to reach audiences and challenge the emergence of white supremacy and injustice facing communities of colour. I have highlighted how the rise of Black Lives Matter inspired both case studies, drawing media coverage which ultimately served as a site for negotiation over meanings around historical and contemporary racial politics. Ultimately, this media coverage points to the important work that Beyoncé and Kaepernick’s activism does within media cultures today and through making their voices heard, can become part of a bigger

legacy of resistance. I now turn to the consider the larger implications of my findings in the conclusion chapter.

## **CHAPTER 4: CONCLUSION**

In a piece published on the *CBC* news website on February 10, 2016 journalist Jessica Wong references New York Republican congressman Peter King's statement in which he claims, "Beyoncé may be a gifted entertainer, but no one should really care what she thinks about any serious issue confronting our nation." Comments like King's are not uncommon, and its repeated referencing throughout publications in popular news sites like the *Huffington Post*, *Washington Post* and *USA Today* speak to the need to further examine celebrity anti-racist activism as an important part of contemporary media cultures. The primary goal of this research project was to analyze how celebrity activism is discursively constructed within popular media cultures and what this might mean for understanding the radical potential of specifically black celebrity anti-racist activism. Through textual discursive analysis of purposefully selected media examples, I found that news media coverage of both Beyoncé and Colin Kaepernick function as a site for negotiation over meanings around historical and contemporary racial politics, pointing to the important work that black celebrity activism does within media cultures today. My findings contribute to the growing field of celebrity studies, providing important insight into the critical narratives surrounding black celebrity anti-racist activists and the mediated silencing of such celebrities.

### **Project Overview and Key Findings**

Throughout this thesis, I have referred to anti-racist activism and the work being done by black celebrities within contemporary media culture. Here, I would like to reiterate what these case studies are suggesting about the framing of black celebrity political activism and why it matters. While I identified three distinct themes within each case study, collectively, there

appeared an overarching theme within the media to frame both Beyoncé and Colin Kaepernick as disruptive, militant figures amongst a media culture that is struggling over the meaning of celebrity and anti-racist activism. The longstanding stereotype that celebrities are uninformed and unequipped to comment on social issues has been used to delegitimise celebrity activists through popular media discourses (Duvall & Heckemeyer, 2018).

Critics, like the abovementioned Congressman King, often push the agenda that celebrities have no place in politics and should thus avoid speaking out on matters of political and social justice. However, it is the power that these black celebrities wield that is most concerning to these critics (Howell & Parry Giles, 2015). Duvall & Heckemeyer (2018) assert that as perceived authority figures, celebrities “have the power to rally others to join movements and potentially create real systemic change” (p. 393). By drawing on historical and contemporary experiences of racial injustice, black celebrities like Beyoncé and Colin Kaepernick exhibit a level of awareness and expertise on political issues facing the United States that can’t be refuted.

The media I have analyzed in this thesis point to the ways in which black celebrity activists are met with an impossible double-bind; while they are relied upon by the black community to act as representatives, voicing the social injustices experienced by people of colour, they are often subject to racist critique of their activism, expected to remain silent and “*shut up and dribble.*” In this sense, their activism is significantly more risky, a risk that Jackson (2014) claims is “more acute in the case of black celebrities who, by way of their race, are treated as even more spectacular and are further removed from access to institutional power than their white counterparts’ (p. 9). Nonetheless, black celebrities like Beyoncé and Colin Kaepernick have become inspiring political figures, signaling to the black community that

barriers can be broken. Even if their original intent wasn't to be seen as an 'activist,' they became aspirational figures to those equity-seeking groups to keep fighting.

### **Limitations and Considerations for Future Considerations**

This research explored just two examples of contemporary anti-racist activism. While Beyoncé and Colin Kaepernick's forms of protest garnered significant attention, other black celebrities have also been using their platforms to draw attention to issues facing people of colour. Celebrities like filmmaker Ava DuVernay, rapper J. Cole, NBA star LeBron James and actress Issa Rae have all used their respectable platforms to engage in political or social issues through activism. As such, there is ample opportunity for scholars to continue studying celebrity anti-racist activism through these figures.

In particular, scholars must pay more attention to the ways that *gender* shapes celebrity activism. Until recently, many scholars had explored the world of sport and celebrity activism from a position that reinforces the patriarchal hierarchy, favoring the experiences of men (Collins 2004; Douglas, 1988; Hooks, 1981; Rudolph, 1977). With the U.S. women's soccer team winning gold at the 2019 World Cup, we saw co-captain of the team, Megan Rapinoe, gain popularity not just in her athletic ability, but also for her activism. Indeed, this prompted scholars to further explore the world of female athletic activism (Schmidt et al., 2018; Gibbs, 2019; Surya, 2019). However, a gap in scholarship -- sport research in particular -- has failed to define and explore the experiences of women of colour from a political lens. Burton (2015) argues that, the experiences of black women could be viewed as unworthy of further exploration and research because they're considered as outliers. Feminist scholars continue to argue for critical analyses and having discourses with women of color about their experiences and only by doing this can major concerns be addressed (Smith, 1992). In line with celebrity activism, a conversation

among scholars whose work takes the analysis of black female athletes in the realm of activism-- beyond a narrow focus on the male athlete, would be worth further investigation.

Second, this research only examined specific media coverage of Beyoncé and Colin Kaepernick's activism. While the dataset I collected from popular news and media articles produced productive results, a broader expansion of popular digital media platforms like Instagram and Twitter could have allowed for a different framing of Beyoncé and Kaepernick's activism within media cultures today. Studying social media would also allow scholars to determine how celebrities like Beyoncé and Kaepernick respond to both their critics and their fans through social media, pointing to the multi-layered conversations happening online.

Finally, this study only examined how both Beyoncé and Kaepernick's activism was constructed and made meaningful in particular ways via media coverage within a specific timeline. While this was done to narrow the scope of the project, opening up the timeline could have revealed more themes such as celebrity commodification and economic branding.

To date, both Beyoncé and Kaepernick have continued their anti-racist activism, which has arguably become part of their celebrity brands since 2016. For example, Colin Kaepernick's was the face of Nike's 2018 "Believe in something, even if it means sacrificing everything" advertisement. The two-minute advertisement touches on controversial social issues by highlighting athletes like Serena Williams, LeBron James and the U.S Women's soccer team-- all known to be active in raising awareness on social and political injustices ("Nikes Dream Crazy," 2019). The unveiling video starring Kaepernick garnered 80 million views on Twitter, YouTube and Instagram- receiving both praise and backlash (Creswell et al., 2018). In 2017, Beyoncé and Colin Kaepernick were brought together on one stage at the 2017 Sports Illustrated Awards where Beyoncé presented to Kaepernick the Muhammad Ali Legacy Award (an award

that honours athletes who use their platform to further change). Before handing the award to Kaepernick Beyoncé took a strong stance on Kaepernick's activism by stating,

Thank you Colin Kaepernick. Thank you for your selfless heart, and your conviction. Thank you for your personal sacrifice. Colin took action with no fear of consequence or repercussion only hope to change the world for the better. To change perception, to change the way we treat each other, especially people of color. We're still waiting for the world to catch up. It's been said that racism is so American, that when we protest racism, some assume we are protesting America. So, let's be very clear. Colin has always been very respectful of the individuals who selflessly serve and protect our country and our communities and our families. His message is solely focused on social injustice for historically disenfranchised people. Let's not get that mistaken. (Aniftos, 2017)

While the lines of celebrity, politics and activism are often blurred, I argue that they are more interconnected than ever, particularly within the current media climate. Through this project I found that examining black celebrity political activism and its narratives is constructive in highlighting the dynamics of power in relation to anti-racist discourse.

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