

RESEARCH NOTE: The (Re)-Education of Colin Kaepernick, the social protest he led, and his quest to work in the National Football League

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Abstract: In 2016, Colin Kaepernick spearheaded an activist movement by National Football League (NFL) players by “taking a knee” during the National Anthem before the start of NFL games. His goal was to raise awareness about police brutality and other oppression experienced by the Black community. These protests quickly became controversial and created a media firestorm. This research aims to understand his foundational education – graduating from both high school and the University of Nevada Reno with a nearly perfect 4.0 grade-point average – that laid the groundwork for his (re) education that spurred both his social activism and left him poised to enter a “free-world” economy equipped to make a life after football. Kaepernick’s experience contrasts with so many other Black men who exit the NFL without a strategy or tools for pursuing success beyond the NFL.

Keywords: Colin Kaepernick, race, football, academics, right to work

“Education and work are the levers to uplift a people” –W. E. B. DuBois, 1903

An Introduction to Kaepernick’s Education

This paper aims to theorize the banishment of Colin Kaepernick from the National Football League (NFL) as greater than simply a response to the social protest he led. Based on my reading of the literature on education and radicalization in the Black community, I analyzed the NFL owner’s lockout of Kaepernick as a direct response to his pursuit of an education. More specifically, I see the lockout as a response to his desire for a racialized education that focused on critical race theory and his empowerment as a Black man (Loggins, 2017).

A young Black man coming out of high school, Colin Kaepernick had college-level athletic abilities and high aspirations (Adler & Adler, 1985), but only received one offer to play college football (Pham, 2021). Kaepernick attended John H. Pitman High School in Turlock, California, where he graduated with a 4.0 grade-point average, all while participating in baseball, basketball, and football. Kaepernick’s success on the athletic field and in the classroom continued at the University of Nevada, Reno (2006–2010), an NCAA Division I Football Bowl Subdivision (FBS) school, where he majored in business management and continued to earn a 4.0 grade-point average. Kaepernick graduated in 2011 (Biderman, 2016).

In the late 1800 and early 1900s, when the “dean” of Black scholarship, W.E.B. DuBois, put pen to paper in writing about the role of education in Black life chances, he foresaw before most that education had a prominent role to play. He wanted more and more Black people to take control of their educational choices at a time when there were not many. He insistently called for great energy and initiative. He wanted Black people to control their own lives with experimentation and innovation while keeping education’s fundamentally radical nature in view.

As I will document, the educated Black person has historically been viewed as a threat to white power (Haley, 1992). Centuries of policies and practices, beginning with slavery, have sought to limit the education of Black people as a tool of control. When Black men, who are also high-profile athletes, become educated in ways that transform their racial consciousness, they are often perceived as a threat and denied the right to work in their chosen professions. In this way, Colin Kaepernick is not unique; rather, he stands on the shoulders of those who have come before him. Theorizing Kaepernick’s banishment from working in the NFL through this lens provides a more nuanced analysis and uncovers the roots of the threat he presented. It was not the knee he took; it was his message rooted in transformational (re)education. In the words of DuBois, Kaepernick was keenly aware that education can produce “cultural capital” that is useful for forging ahead without having to depend on someone else (Bourdieu & Passeron, 1977).

Conceptual Framework

In order to understand the total banishment that Colin Kaepernick experienced in the NFL after he began protesting, I situate the argument in several kinds of literature, including the literature on the education of the Black community, the literature on athletes and higher education, and the literature on athletes and social protest. This framing is otherwise known as “the (re) education of the Black athlete.” Analyzing Kaepernick’s banishment from the NFL through the frame provided by this literature allows for a more complex understanding of the perceived threat that Kaepernick represented, as well as the responses of the NFL team owners and, of course, fans.

The Education of the Black Community

Since the first moment that Black people were kidnapped from the western coast of Africa (Bennett, 2016) and smuggled to the “New World,” formal and informal policies and practices enforced rigid restrictions on their education. In the American colonies, the chattel system of slavery spread quickly, as it was adopted across the southern regions and codified into law within a few decades of the arrival of the first enslaved African people. Enslaved persons were defined as less than fully human and white colonists operated with a full understanding that education was power. White power holders therefore created laws that banned all education of people of African descent, including those who were enslaved and those who were free. Within a society founded on Christian principles, the enslaved were expected to adopt the religion of the enslavers. However, even teaching them to read the Bible was strictly banned (Hannah-Jones, 2021).

Given this foundation, it is not surprising that seeking an education was a common resistance practice among the early resistance movements to slavery. Sympathetic whites and abolitionists taught enslaved Black people to read, among them Frederick Douglass. Upon the

formal declarations of the end of slavery, including the Emancipation Proclamation and the passage of the 13th, 14th, and 15th Amendments, formerly enslaved people quickly set up schools. Education was viewed by many, then and now, as an emancipatory practice (hooks, 1994).

Two of the most prominent Black men engaged in the education of the Black community were W.E.B. DuBois and Booker T. Washington. Though they shared a dedication to and a belief in education, they differed in their philosophies of education. Despite their debates taking place more than a century ago, in revisiting them we gain insight into the NFL owners' resistance to Colin Kaepernick.

In sum, Booker T. Washington believed in training the Black community in practical skills that would allow the formerly enslaved persons and their descendants to participate in the existing structures and in service to whites. He was an accommodationist. Washington set up a training school that would later become Tuskegee University to provide Black men with the best education to improve their skills in agriculture, i.e., in both farming and animal husbandry, and domestic service. Washington (1903) emphasized the "introduction of industrial training" into Black people's education that represented, "united and sympathetic interest and action between the two races in the South and between the whites in the North and those in the South." Washington saw the emphasis on industrial training as important for many reasons including allowing the Black community to experience "freedom gradually and sensibly and prevent [their] going from one extreme of life to the other too suddenly," as well as because of the appeal to the interest of white people (Washington 1903). In other words, Washington believed that if one provides the Black man skills, the formerly enslaved persons would be more useful to whites and more successful within the existing hierarchy where work for them was limited to sharecropping and domestic labor. In an interview in 1965 in Ghana, DuBois critiqued Washington in saying that Washington "gave total emphasis to economic progress through industrial and vocational education," and, therefore, the assimilationist and gradual approach he endorsed "appealed to moderation" and "publicly postponed attainment of political rights and accepted the system of segregation" (McGill 1965).

In contrast, W.E.B. DuBois theorized education as a pathway to greater emancipation. If one could teach the formerly incarcerated to read and engage in critical thinking, then there was no limit to what they might pursue, including science, medicine, teaching (whether at the college or university level), politics, and beyond. In contrast to Washington, DuBois was not an accommodationist or assimilationist, rather he believed that once properly educated, the Black man could create and control their own institutions to compete effectively with white, segregated institutions. Embedded in this philosophy was the belief in radical transformation: education was not for training the formerly enslaved and their descendants to be better servants, but rather to be critical of the system of racial hierarchy in which they were embedded and held at the bottom (DuBois 1903; 2002).

DuBois on the other hand preached for a classical education for Black people, one that did not tether the Black community to whites as domestic servants. He believed Washington's approach to a vocational education would create a permanent underclass of Black people. In his book *The Souls of Black Folk* (1903), he called for social equality, the right to vote, and access to a liberal arts education for Black Americans. Like many who would come after him, including

Malcolm X, DuBois understood that once truly educated, the Black man could no longer be controlled.

Athletes and Higher Education

Considering the pervasiveness of white supremacy and racial segregation, it is not surprising that significant racial gaps persist at every level of the educational system. Black children lag behind their white counterparts in achieving standardized benchmarks (e.g., reading and math at grade level), in attending high school, and in high school graduation rates. Though many avenues into higher education remained blocked for Black students for most of the 20th Century, sports often offered a clearer pathway. For example, when southern universities like the University of Alabama, continued to bar Black students from attending, football served as a sort of “back door” for Black men with the athletic talent to access these exclusive and segregated spaces. As a result, for many colleges and universities, (excluding those which are historically Black), athletics was and remains the primary driver of diversity among the student body. As such, scholars have gravitated toward studying the experiences of Black athletes (more so men than women) in higher education spaces (Fuller et al., 2017).

Patricia and Peter Adler’s pioneering work *Backboards and Blackboards* (1991), an ethnographic book on Black men collegiate athletes’ educational aspirations, provides an excellent introduction to the academic world of Colin Kaepernick. Adler and Adler’s (1985) work on college basketball clearly shows that young Black men have a high bar to cross when pursuing both sports and higher education. A lot of this has to do with how the recruitment process works. Kaepernick received just one collegiate football offer, even though he was eminently qualified to go to a top-ten school as a student. Adler and Adler describe the complexities of the recruiting process experienced by Black collegiate athletes as:

... fostering their optimism about academics was their naive assumption that after attending college for four years they would automatically get a degree. They never anticipated the amount or kind of academic work they would have to do to earn that degree. Many of them had not taken a sequence of college preparatory courses in high school. Thus, their optimism was based largely on their “successful” academic careers in high school. (“I graduated high school, didn’t I?”) and on their belief that as college athletes they would be academically pampered (“I heard you can get breaks on grades because you’re an athlete”). (Adler & Adler, 1985, p. 222)

Comeaux and Harrison (2011) posited that “college student-athletes have distinct variations (e.g., revenue vs. non-revenue sports; ability, race, gender) in intercollegiate athletics” (p. 236). The above quote from the Adler and Adler piece was once *the* perspective of Black men pursuing both an academic and athletic career. Athletes, like Kaepernick, were hardly considered, and if they were, they were seen as the exception, not the rule. Comeaux and Harrison noted that collegiate athletes’ “academic success will be based primarily on a set of individual characteristics and dispositions, with effects from the social and academic systems within which the student-athlete operates” (p. 237). If a college athlete wants to excel in athletics *and* in academics, they will have to do so without the support of the system.

Understandably, research like that of Adler and Adler relied heavily on the social stereotype of the Black athlete rather than on what Comeaux and Harrison (2011) defined as “effects from the social and academic systems” these individual students are socialized within. In

his essay “The Black Dumb Jock,” Edwards (1984) knew then about the inferior education offered to Black athletes (mostly men). Edwards noted:

...there are implications of the myth of innate Black athletic superiority, and the more blatantly racist stereotype of the dumb [Black man] condemned by racial heritage to intellectual inferiority. Under circumstances where there exists a pervasive belief in the mutual exclusivity of physical and intellectual capability, and where, furthermore, popular sentiment and even some claimed scientific evidence buttress notions of race-linked Black proclivities for both athletic prowess and intellectual deficiency, it should come as no surprise that the shameful situation of the Black student athlete has been for so long not only widely tolerated but expected and institutionally accommodated... Only recently has American society been jolted into recognizing the extensive and tragic implications of widespread educational mediocrity and failure among student athletes, and—no less importantly—that “dumb jocks” are not born; they are being systematically created... For fifteen years we have had a race problem. We have raped a generation and a half of young Black athletes. We have taken kids and sold them on bouncing a ball and running with a football and that being able to do things athletically was going to be an end in and of itself. (Edwards, 1984, pp. 8-9)

In this analysis, Edwards demonstrates that athletics are sold as *the* means for success for Black men. The system of collegiate athletics and professional athletics is built to keep Black men exclusively on the field, allowing whiteness to maintain power elsewhere.

Kaepernick was not the only talented collegiate athlete to escape the casting of the “Black dumb jock.” While playing football at Florida State University as a defensive back, Myron Rolle was selected to be a Rhodes Scholar in 2009. After graduating from Florida State and testing his football skills with the Tennessee Titans and the Pittsburgh Steelers, he adjusted to “plan B” and enrolled in the Florida State University College of Medicine, graduating in May 2017. He was then matched to a neurosurgery residency at Massachusetts General Hospital. In an ESPN article entitled “Choosing a Rhodes Scholarship over the NFL? Now that’s admirable,” [Jemele Hill](#) commented on the lack of media coverage of Black collegiate athletes’ accomplishments in the classroom. Hill (2009) notes “It’s not easy to accept the fact that a 75-year-old grandmother ... probably would recognize (Adam “Pacman”) Jones but wouldn’t know Rolle – the most important story in college football – from a vacuum salesman.” Far too often, it is the sport and not academics that drives what Smith termed the “all the eggs in one basket” perspective – when the athlete’s career has ended for whatever reason, the ex-athlete is left with nothing (Smith, 2014). Neither Kaepernick nor Rolle ended up with nothing. In their own ways, both have prospered; because of – rather than despite – their acceptance of higher education.

Though the research on the *experiences* of Black men collegiate athletes is important, the data suggest that since at least the beginning of the 21st Century, Black men who play football and basketball rarely graduate, let alone earn a college degree. Colleges and universities have allowed athletic departments to design “athlete-friendly” curricula with the sole mission to keep athletes eligible, not allowing them to become educated. This is precisely what makes Colin Kaepernick unique. It is also Kaepernick’s baccalaureate education that positioned him to pursue a (re) education that shaped his social activism.

The (Re) Education of Black Athletes

Colin Kaepernick is situated within a long lineage of Black athlete activists who have called attention to the racial injustices occurring in the United States. As a quarterback in the NFL, he first protested the National Anthem during a preseason game on August 14, 2016 (Foltz, 2020). He did so to bring attention to the issue of police brutality in the wake of the then-recent deaths of Alton Sterling and Philando Castile, as well as other inequalities experienced by Black and Brown people in the United States. At that time, he was a quarterback for the San Francisco 49ers fighting for the starting position (Foltz, 2020).

Colin Kaepernick didn't arrive at his decision to engage in social activism arbitrarily. In fact, sometime before he took a knee, he deliberately began his (re) education. According to an exposé in the New York Times (Branch, 2017), inspired and troubled by the seemingly endless war by the police against the Black community after several high-profile shootings of unarmed Black men by the police (Hattery & Smith, 2021), Kaepernick began studying critical race theory at the University of California at Berkeley (Loggins, 2017). As Branch's story reveals, Kaepernick drove an hour each way to the Berkeley campus to attend classes, in which he was an active participant. Months before he initiated the kneeling protest, Kaepernick began posting on his social media about topics he was learning in his studies.

Even after he began protesting, it was clear that his motivations were not a stunt. For example, his first protest took place during a preseason game. Kaepernick chose to sit during the playing of the National Anthem, a tradition that takes place during the pregame portion of an NFL game. Kaepernick drew heavy criticism for this action; he was called disrespectful and unpatriotic. In response, he met with ex-Green Beret Nate Boyer, who advised him that kneeling was the standard practice in the military for showing respect for a fallen soldier. In response, Kaepernick modified his protest, and rather than sitting during the playing of the National Anthem, he kneeled (Foltz, 2020). Though initially other players joined him in his protest, by mid-season Kaepernick had become the target of then-President Donald Trump and the ensuing response to Kaepernick's protest was swift. He played his last NFL game on January 1, 2017 (Foltz, 2020).

Furthermore, as Cooper (2012) explains, C. Wright Mills *Sociological Imagination* – marrying the connection between personal biographies and history – helps us to better understand Kaepernick's dilemma. He is an elite quarterback, a good person with good intentions, but due to the U.S. history of racial discrimination, institutionalized racist beliefs worked against these admirable characteristics, to the point of his banishment from the league at the height of his athletic prowess. It did not matter how good he was on the athletic field, stepping into the racial animus of the U.S. cost him his career.

Two major issues facing Black people in the broader U.S. and Black athletes, in particular, are the experiences of racial discrimination and social isolation (Cooper, 2012), both of which likely impacted Kaepernick's experiences in the NFL. For example, in the six seasons when Kaepernick was active, from 2012 to January 1, 2017, only 22% of the active quarterbacks were Black, whereas more than 70% were white (Pro Football Reference, 2023). This demonstrates that in the NFL, a league dominated by Black athletes, the coveted position of quarterback remains elusive to Black players.

The Argument: (Re) Educated Black Men Need Not Apply

Athletes, like any member of this society, have a constitutional right to protest systems and institutions that they believe are unfair. The United States Constitution guarantees that as long as the protest is non-violent, one cannot be prosecuted by the government for their dissent. However, there is no law that protects an employee from being fired by their employer in response to the protest, and this is precisely what happened to Colin Kaepernick. In the end, Kaepernick and the NFL settled his collusion lawsuit out of court.

The current research note explores why Kaepernick became the target of the discontent and why the actions of the San Francisco 49ers front office were so swift. Furthermore, why did he never work again when, during this same period and again during the summer of 2020 after the murder of George Floyd, other athletes who were engaged in social protest were not similarly sanctioned? For example, dozens of players in the NBA wore their “I can’t breathe” t-shirts (originally worn after the murder of Eric Garner in 2014) after white Minneapolis police officer Derek Chauvin murdered George Floyd, while others marked their sneakers or wore armbands. Though important, these were simple gestures, and one could argue nothing more than “fad and fashion.” Many of those wearing the t-shirts may have had no more than a surface-level understanding of the systemic nature of the racism they believed they were protesting.

In contrast, the framing provided in this paper suggests that Kaepernick’s approach was not only different, but more importantly, it was perceived by others to be insidious. Kaepernick chose to (re) educate himself and in doing so, adopted what some believe are radical ideas rooted in critical race theory. In short, like others who came before Kaepernick, including Muhammad Ali, Dr. Harry Edwards, and Kareem Abdul Jabbar, the problem wasn’t that these Black men earned an education – it was that they chose to pursue (re) education. For example, though thousands of people protested the war in Vietnam, Ali chose to convert and became a Muslim. Foregoing his “slave name,” he changed his name and engaged in radical racialized rhetoric. He also refused to be inducted into the U.S. Armed Forces.

Edwards (2017), who is often credited with spearheading the racial protests during the summer of 1968, criticized those Black men who were unwilling to sacrifice everything for racial progress. Two of the most famous athletes to protest racial injustice, Tommie Smith and John Carlos, struggled to ever find work again after their famous Black Power Salute at the 1968 Olympics. Even Abdul-Jabbar, who like Ali embraced Islam and changed his name, was unable to find work after he retired from the NBA. What each of these Black men had in common was (re) education. They studied and embraced what we would now call critical race theory, the teachings of Malcolm X, James Baldwin, Maya Angelou, and others. In the context of the slave plantation and interpreted through the lens of white supremacy, their education made them harder to control and oppress.

Conclusion

Although Kaepernick is out of work, he is not broke. He is not broke simply because he prepared himself – unlike so many athletes who do not – for life after football. According to a *Sports Illustrated* article (Torre, 2009):

35% of National Football League (NFL) players are either bankrupt or are under financial stress within two years of retirement and an estimated 60% of National Basketball Association (NBA) players, 78% NFL players, and a large percentage of Major League Baseball (MLB) players (4x that of the average U.S. citizen) go bankrupt within five years after leaving their sport.

On September 4, 2018, Nike, Inc. launched a new ad campaign featuring Colin Kaepernick. By engaging in Corporate Social Advocacy (CSA), Nike showed that despite the “blackballing” of Kaepernick by the 32 owners of national football league teams, he is still worth millions to the Nike brand. As a result of his (re) education, Colin Kaepernick is poised to contribute to society in any way he chooses. In 2016, he chose to use his platform as a quarterback in the NFL to raise awareness regarding racism, police violence, poverty, and other conditions borne out of white supremacy. In the end, as a brand influencer, Kaepernick is having the “last laugh” at all of those sport fans, sport reporters, and NFL owners who despised him for standing up for the rights of Black people.

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