

“In the Arena”: Reflections on Critical Public Engagements in College Sport

Johanna Mellis, PhD
Ursinus College

Derek Silva, PhD
King’s University College at Western University

Nathan Kalman-Lamb, PhD
University of New Brunswick

Abstract: In this paper, we reflect on the challenges, opportunities, motives, imperatives, and strategies of engagement associated with public scholarship about college athletics. Public scholarship has become a trendy topic across the academy as universities increasingly push academic workers to boost institutional brands suffering from purposeful chronic defunding through highly visible engagement in the public sphere. We argue that although public scholarship is a vital part of academic work, principal imperatives driving this form of labor should be political/ethical rather than promotional. It is therefore not enough for academic workers to simply generate data for academic audiences, as without public dissemination, the impact is inherently limited and exclusionary. While public engagement is a necessary and important part of our work, it is fraught with the contradictions inherent to the critique of the same institutions that demand that engagement in the first place, as well as the associated collateral intellectual and personal damage that comes from wading into public debate. We provide an autoethnographical account of our personal experiences as scholars intervening in public discourse around the rights of campus athletic workers and our own encounter with ESPN college basketball personality and former college coach Dan Dakich. This account enables us to trace some institutional and personal strategies for educators to create protective measures, build community, and mobilize solidarity against real or perceived harassment. Such tactics aim to help scholars produce public work that genuinely contributes to societal conversations, challenges prevailing misconceptions, and centers the voices of minoritized, abused, and exploited athletes above all.

Keywords: Public scholarship, autoethnography, alt-Right, college sports, ESPN, harassment

Public Engagement as Political Labor

Public scholarship has undoubtedly become a trendy topic across the academy as universities increasingly push academic workers to boost institutional brands suffering from politicized attacks as well as purposeful chronic de- and underfunding through highly visible engagement in the public sphere. Yet, the focus on public scholarship has also been critiqued as a shift toward the “promotional intellectual” (Williams, 2018, para. 2). Although public scholarship is a vital part of contemporary academic work, it is perhaps taken for granted that the appropriate

Suggested citation: Mellis, J., Silva, D., & Kalman-Lamb, N. (2024). “In the arena”: Reflections on critical public engagements in college sport. *Journal of Higher Education Athletics & Innovation*, 2(2), 163-192.

imperatives driving this form of labor can and perhaps should be political/ethical rather than promotional. For scholars who focus on the working conditions of college athletes, for example, it is not enough simply to generate data for academic audiences; without public dissemination, the impact is inherently limited and exclusionary. Academic-only publications leave little-to-no hope of ameliorating the unjust conditions we all share complicity in as members – with varying power – of the higher education community that faces college athletic workers. Indeed, academic paywalls and other academic gatekeeping techniques are exclusionary by definition. By preventing scholarship from entering public discourse, academic publications exclude from the conversation the very people we study, the people we are complicit in exploiting, and whose health and lives could improve the most. It is therefore a moral imperative for scholars – especially those who occupy relative levels of power and privilege in academia – who study varying forms of exploitation, harm, injustice, and exclusion, to put in the labor to make their work accessible for the communities they benefit from.

Public engagement is simultaneously fraught with the contradictions inherent to a critique of the very institutions that demand that engagement in the first place, as well as the associated collateral intellectual and personal damage that comes from wading into public debate (Cottom, 2017). We offer an autoethnographic account of our personal experiences as scholars intervening in public discourse around the rights of campus athletic workers and our own encounter with former ESPN college basketball personality and college coach Dan Dakich. In so doing, we offer a series of strategies that scholars might engage – centered around protection, community-building, and solidarity amongst educators – to handle online conflicts of their own. Though not exhaustive, it is our hope that these strategies can enable us to keep producing public work that genuinely contributes to societal conversations, challenges prevailing misconceptions, and centers the voices of minoritized, abused, and exploited athletes above all. We examine the stakes of public discursive antagonisms; the gendered and racial forms that harassment can take; and institutional, communal, and individual strategies for grappling with ensuing harassment. We also explore how this experience of media spectacle creates further grounds for solidarity between academics and athletes, as experiences of social media harassment and abuse become increasingly normalized for athletic workers and public scholars alike.

On the Promise and Challenges of Public Work

In the 2004 Presidential Address at the annual meeting of the American Sociological Association, Michael Burawoy (2005) famously called for sociologists to respond to the growing gap between sociological discourses and the social world under study. Burawoy asked sociologists to acknowledge the “umbilical cord that connects sociology to the world of publics” and its “particular investment in the defense of civil society” (Burawoy, 2005, p. 1). Burawoy explicitly called for the development of a distinct form of *public sociology*, whereby scholars would focus on connecting their academic activities with public dialogue within and among public spheres. Similarly, in the 1989 Presidential Address before the American Historical Association, Louis Harlan (1990) noted the importance of structural changes within academia and the need for a new modality of public history to respond to the discipline’s “weakening hold on the general reading public” (Harlan, 1990, p. 3). Indeed, these calls are perhaps reflective of a broader trend among social science and humanities disciplines to make their work more digestible and accessible to various publics in order to ‘save’ their disciplines from the perils of advanced neoliberal capitalism

and its systematic privileging of skills-based educational programs. The growth and development of public scholarship has, to some extent, likely benefited academic departments at elite institutions in the social sciences and humanities through its inherent self-promotional characteristics.

The benefits of public scholarship are clear: various publics can benefit from drawing on research communities' knowledge and skills to address important problems and issues; universities and academic workers can strengthen their teaching and research programs, which enrich the student experience; civil society benefits from democratic involvement of knowledge sectors; scholarly debates are part and parcel to contemporary democratic processes; and research helps us understand myriad forms of harm and inequality experienced by the most vulnerable in society – groups that tend to have little access to higher education and research in contemporary racial capitalist societies (Alter, 2005).

But as Tressie McMillan Cottom (2017) has reminded us, when the top figures in academic disciplines speak of public scholarship such as scholarly association presidents, they typically mean discourse that serves *traditional erudite scholars*. That is, the group that reflects the status quo beliefs and practices of the disciplines. What happens, however, when scholars challenge orthodoxy? When they engage in critical public scholarship that challenges status quo ideas and the groups that benefit most from them?

While the promise of public scholarship is mostly fraught with idealistic and optimistic ends, much less discussed are the significant challenges, issues, and practices that threaten the basis of public engagement praxis. People can choose to respond to public scholarship that challenges status quo assumptions about the social world with a far more combative and overtly dangerous attitude than academic work typically receives. Such risks include harassment, threats, abuse, and even negative professional and personal consequences that are not experienced equitably among racialized, gendered, class-based, and otherwise minoritized individuals and groups (Bhattacharyya & Murji, 2013).

For these reasons, our experiences cannot be universalized. The three authors are racialized as white, are cisgender and heterosexual, and occupy privileged locations within our social and professional worlds. This includes the community we've built through our podcast, *The End of Sport*. We are thus significantly inoculated by our proximity to white supremacy against the worst forms of abuse experienced in both online and in-person environments by people far more historically excluded and minoritized than us. Our shared whiteness, for example, shields us from the harmful racism and misogynoir that our colleagues racialized as Black or Brown often endure. These realities motivate our ongoing commitment to publicly identifying and resisting fascism, white supremacy, etc. on the podcast, Twitter, and elsewhere.

We wish to issue a significant content warning to readers regarding misogyny, threats of physical and sexual violence, and references to white genocide. We consciously chose to share a select number of the harassers' discriminatory engagements and threats. This online targeting shows how Kalman-Lamb and Mellis did not experience harm to equivalent degrees based on their genders within American patriarchal and misogynistic norms. Including the threats enables us to accurately detail how 'the Right' can choose to respond to public scholarship conducted by people

with our positionalities. Furthermore, it allows us to imagine how much worse it can be for people who are more minoritized. These realities can be hard for people to envision until they experience it themselves. Leaving them out of the analysis would, we believe, undercut the necessity of the strategies we propose at the end. It would, moreover, misrepresent our experiences and the trauma that ensued for Mellis especially.

The events documented herein might be considered a mild iteration of the harassment and abuse that are ubiquitous aspects of political engagement for marginalized scholars and activists from all fields. It is in this context that our intervention is based. We explicitly aim to shed light on some of the challenges associated with critical public scholarship by focusing on our own experiences of harassment and abuse in the online space. We hope that by illustrating concretely the Right's strategies and the language they weaponize against public scholars, more of us can push collectively for institutional protection, actively show solidarity with and assist one another in times of crisis, and enrich communal bonds of support and resistance. As fascism continues to grow globally and locally in the United States (U.S.), our communal resistance and solidarity will be more important than ever. Institutions must understand that people on the Right purposefully attack individual scholars as an avenue to control institutional legitimacy, funding sources, enrollment numbers, higher education, and education as a whole.

Methods: On the Experience of Public Scholarship

Borrowing from Hayano (1979) along with Ellis and Bochner (2000, p. 739), we approach autoethnography as a genre of "writing and research that displays multiple layers of consciousness, connecting the personal to the cultural" However, autoethnographic work does not end within cultural systems. We contend that autoethnographic methods are unique and nuanced tools researchers can use to connect first-person accounts and personal expressions, narratives of the self (Richardson, 2000), and self-stories (Denzin, 1989), with much broader *political* discourses. In this way, we view public scholarship as a mediator between the personal and the political (Jones et al., 2012) and argue that the analysis of those interrelations is a crucial component of academic work as scholarship becomes more and more normalized within academia (Alexander, 2016). Just as sport is *always* political, so, too, are the academic work and critical public scholarship that focuses on sport.

The following analysis is based on our experiences engaging in critical public sports scholarship from 2020 to the present. It includes a variety of mediums such as podcasts, social media (most notably on Twitter), public interviews, and several major mainstream media journalistic and opinion-editorial interventions. We draw our experiences primarily from a number of our encounters with high-profile sports media personalities, such as former college basketball player, coach, and ESPN analyst Dan Dakich, and subsequent interactions with social media users and audiences. In so doing, we explicate some of the strategies that folks who want to engage in public scholarship might find helpful as they navigate polarized spaces like sport.

The core of the conflict stems from a series of Tweets published on Dakich's personal account targeting college athlete Jalen Johnson, which were critiqued by Nathan Kalman-Lamb for 'punching down' an unpaid campus athletic worker (Kalman-Lamb, 2021d). The exploitation of campus athletic workers is a central theme of Kalman-Lamb's scholarly interest and thus

important to his public engagement work, as well as a core element of our podcast's project. Following this first interaction, Dakich began targeting Kalman-Lamb's personal and professional life while other critical sports scholarship community members, e.g., Johanna Mellis, interjected with their own scholarly expertise. Subsequently, Dakich subjected numerous scholars, including Mellis, to targeted personal and professional attacks on his Twitter – known as “X” since Elon Musk changed the name in July 2023 – and radio show. More specific details on this series of events are outlined below.

Based on these interactions with sports media members, we examine the stakes of public discursive antagonisms, the gendered and racialized forms harassment can take, and the forms in which abuse tends to manifest. Perhaps more importantly, we trace possible institutional, community, and individual strategies for grappling with ensuing harassment and the opportunities for building and mobilizing solidarity between academics, athletes, laborers, and critical sports journalists, who all tend to be targeted for online harassment.

We contend that our experience as critical sports scholars and, at times, academics who produce journalistic accounts of the intersections of harm, exploitation, race, gender, and class in sport, may help shed light on some of the challenges, contradictions, and collateral professional and personal damage that accompanies the necessary, important, and critical public work undertaken by scholars across disciplines and substantive areas. The act of willfully engaging in critical public scholarship *does not mean that* we, nor others, consent to public harassment or malicious *doxxing*, threats of harm or violence, or any other form of online or in-person abuse. Doxxing is defined here as the release of personal or identifying information about an individual on the internet. We hope this intervention offers a direct counter-narrative to the notion that public scholars ‘bring it on themselves’ by participating in public critique while, importantly, outlining a set of strategies for those to alleviate the potential for abuse and harm.

The most important contribution of this intervention is our attempt to trace some strategies for scholars interested in critical public scholarship to produce public work that genuinely contributes to important social and political discussions. We also hope to challenge prevailing misconceptions that permeate the public sphere and reinforce and promote social and racial justice that centers the voices of marginalized, abused, and/or exploited athletes above all, which often results in the direct targeting and harassment of those who challenge the status quo. Frustratingly, experiences of social media harassment and abuse have become increasingly common and normalized for athletic workers, critical sports journalists, and public scholars alike.

The Alt- and Increasingly Mainstream Right

Scholars have documented a set of familiar tactics used by those associated with the *alt-Right*, and increasingly by the *mainstream Right*. The alt-Right, or *alternative right*, is conceptualized as an “atomized, amorphous, predominantly online, and mostly anonymous” collection of groups (Hawley, 2017, p. 3). They constellate around a core belief that *white identity* is under attack from liberal elites, academics, and so-called *social justice warriors* (Hermansson et al., 2020) Globally, we are in what Cas Mudde (2019) has called the *fourth wave of postwar far-right politics*, whereby far-right ideas and politics are increasingly becoming mainstream.

One of the Right's many goals in America is to control the learning of history and education, a tactic that aligns with a decades-long conservative strategy traced by historian Nancy MacLean (2017). The alt-Right's alarming shift to the mainstream is visible through the GOP's intense pursuit of an *anti-Critical Race Theory* (CRT) strategy regarding classroom teaching. Their efforts center around the teaching of U.S. history: they seek to deny our nation's foundation in white settler colonialist dispossession and genocide of indigenous people and anti-Black enslavement, and how our resulting, systemic racism continues to oppress and harm groups deemed to be outside the acceptable bounds of white supremacy. Perhaps most well-known are their book bans and attempts to curtail the teaching of themes that address past and contemporary inequities, such as racism, sexism, homophobia, etc., in the classroom at all levels. Attacks on the permanence of tenure have followed in states like Georgia, Florida, Ohio, Texas, Iowa, North Carolina, and more. Similarly, by June 2023, nearly half of U.S. states enacted roughly 60 laws related to banning transgender kids in sports, limiting children's access to LGBTQIA literature, and deciding whom doctors may treat based on sex assumptions (typically trying to eliminate transgender people's access to gender care), etc. (Parks, 2023). By attempting to control education and people's bodies, these laws aim to further entrench their perspective and views of the world in order to protect the status quo from what they perceive to be dangers to their position: feminism; the democratization of power and culture with the rise of social media; changing demographics; and the growing acceptance of Black, Brown, and LGBTQIA+ people's existence, human rights, and influence.

Activists, media personalities, and others with various levels of access to political power are also key figures in disseminating ideas and implementing strategies that harm marginalized communities. Christopher Rufo, Tucker Carlson, Chaya Raichik, Charlie Kirk – and Dan Dakich – often use humor and other tactics to label efforts towards diversity, inclusion, multiculturalism, anti-racism and feminism as evidence of supposedly anti-white movements like white genocide, socialism, and communism, (for more see Beran, 2019; Bjork-James & Maskovsky, 2017; Kusz & Hodler, 2023). This is not to say that Rufo and others are solely taking their cues from the Republican Party (GOP) Rufo for example, is considered a creator of the *anti-CRT panic*: in summer 2020, he urged the White House to implement an executive order to abolish Critical Race Theory training from the federal government on the *Tucker Carlson Tonight* show. Soon after, President Trump flew him to Washington, D.C. to help craft such an order that curtailed how contractors giving federal diversity seminars could talk about race (Wallace-Wells, 2021). Rufo successfully made a name for himself by stoking the anti-CRT fires: not only did he consult on language for over ten state bills restricting instruction or courses, but Florida governor Ron DeSantis appointed Rufo to the Board of Trustees at the New College of Florida in January 2023 (Wallace-Wells, 2021). The seemingly increasing alignment between such figures and political leaders continues to cement the authority and mainstreaming of formerly alt-Right ideas and tactics.

As a result of changing dynamics, educators at allegedly liberal institutions, such as universities and the mainstream media, are increasingly at risk of encountering coordinated harassment campaigns. Viveca Greene (2019) discussed how individuals employed by these institutions are not necessarily the primary targets of such campaigns; rather, the alt-Right seeks to attack the institutions *themselves* to sow distrust. Their other targets are the 'normie' audiences who they believe can be red-pilled or convinced through their slew of campaigns that white

(Greene, 2019), Christian, straight men are under siege and that liberal institutions are complicit in attacking them, undermining their authority, and even seeking to disempower them in society.

Indeed, those associated with the alt-Right don't seek to attack educators and academics individually but as a larger group with institutional influence in U.S. society. Richard Spencer laid bare his intentions in 2016 after George Ciccariello-Maher's Tweet-based controversy. The incident resulted in the latter's institution, Drexel University, rebuking Ciccariello-Maher's Tweets and the faculty member's resignation. Spencer said afterward:

We are a bloc now with power. Institutions respond to us. A year ago, this same university wouldn't have blinked before responding to complaints with a generic "we support the free expression of our teachers" blurb...This is what winning looks like, people. You'd better get used to it (Anglin, 2016).

More recently, in April 2022 at Hillsdale College, Rufo declared a need to "lay siege to our institutions" such as K-12 education (Rufo, 2022, para. 1). Among the "aggressive means," he suggested included "attacking the credibility of our institutions" (Rufo, 2022, para. 20)

The main audience for these tactics consists primarily of white men, young and old alike, who feel as if the left-leaning movements and ideas listed above are actively trying to disempower and disenfranchise them. Within the sports world, these mostly young, educated, technologically savvy white men are often drawn to sites like Barstool Sports and Outkick, which deliberately eschew the political and cultural norms of neoliberal multiculturalism (Kusz & Hodler, 2023). At the time of the incident, Dan Dakich worked as a basketball sports commentator on ESPN and had his own sports talk radio show, *The Dan Dakich Show*, on a local network. Dakich expressed his most inflammatory remarks about us on sports talk radio, which emerged as a place where men feeling threatened by feminism and gay rights – and arguably movements for Black, Brown, and transgender political rights – could return to and express a prefeminist masculinity (Horrocks, 1994) It allows men to reproduce their conception of (white) male dominance through a re-inscription of ideas that support their desire to dominate others (Goldberg, 1998). For example, *The Jim Rome Show* is not simply a "completely obnoxious site of monolithic masculine discourse" in part due to its homophobic tenor; additionally, the show's focus on sexual identity and elision of racism make it a tool for the discrimination and oppression of others (Nylund, 2004, p. 160).

Although some listeners of Dakich's radio show likely overlap with Barstool's audience, many seem particularly drawn to a Bobby Knight ethos: a man who is well known for numerous abusive and violent interactions with athletes on his teams. This isn't surprising, considering Dakich played for Knight at Indiana University in the early 1980s and then coached with Knight for twelve seasons. Knight famously used physical violence against players. Not only did he throw a chair during a 1985 game, but a tape also emerged of Knight choking player Neil Reid in 1997. According to Indiana player Todd Jadow's memoir, *Jadow: On the Rebound*, Knight's physical and sexual violence seemed common and relentless (Cobb, 2022). He punched Jadow in the head, squeezed players' genitals, threw tampons at Darryl Thomas, a Black player, and instructed managers to wallpaper Thomas' locker with photos of female genitalia, and much more. While we would be remiss to attempt a deconstruction of the formation of Dakich's subjectivity, it is easy to

see how Knight's behavior likely deeply influenced Dakich's approach to sports commentating and interactions with others. Knight's behavior maps onto mainstream and even far- and alt-Right ideologies and audiences. As we'll show, Dakich espouses similar views. Being hosted by a local Indiana station, Dakich's audience might not include as many educated and savvy white men as Barstool. But he shares affinities and employs tactics similar to Barstool and its president Dave Portnoy (Kusz & Hodler, 2023).

Our Experience: On the Stakes and Harm of Public Scholarship

Our foremost experience that received intense backlash from our public engagement arose due to sports commentators' unsubstantiated critiques of Duke basketball player Jalen Johnson in early 2021. Johnson announced on February 15, 2021, that he was opting out of the remainder of the 2020-2021 NCAA season to prepare for the NBA draft and recover from a foot injury. He announced this during the middle of the Covid-19 pandemic, months before the U.S. had made vaccinations available to the majority of Americans. The stakes of Johnson's announcement, and the possible risks he accepted by opting out of the NCAA season, deserve nothing but admiration from onlookers. Johnson evidently prioritized his own health and safety amidst notoriously harmful working conditions. Notably, even if his decision was entirely motivated by a desire to prioritize his professional prospects, such a choice would be both entirely personal and eminently understandable given the profoundly exploitative conditions of college basketball. No worker owes unpaid labor to an institution. This, however, is not a widely held position. Though some of us applauded his decision, detractors abounded. As James Dator (2021) described it, "In a sport that so often shows a lack of care for athletes, Johnson decided to take care of himself – and people are mad" (Dator, 2021, para. 3). Indeed, many people – many white men – chose to respond with anger at the 19-year-old Black male athletic worker's self-protective decision. Those with the largest platforms on social media chose to shout their fury from the digital rooftops. Responses included CBS Sports commentator Jon Rothstein decrying Johnson's decision as quitting (Rothstein, 2021).

Our engagement began when Nathan Kalman-Lamb collated multiple commentators' Tweets to illustrate their self-serving hypocrisy. Some of them had over 259,000 Twitter followers compared to Johnson's 22,000 Twitter followers as of January 2022. The sports commentators 'punched down' on Johnson: they were invested in Johnson and others' continuing to play so they could comment and profit *from* the players' exploitation. As Kalman-Lamb pointed out, "Jalen Johnson may not be allowed to get paid for his name, image, or likeness, but why should that stop Seth Davis from cashing in on them?" (Kalman-Lamb, 2021b). By illustrating how many sports commentators chose to use their platforms to publicly humiliate Johnson, Kalman-Lamb demonstrated their commitment to reinforcing and profiting from the exploitation of college athletic workers. Out of all the sports media personalities who decried their anger, then-ESPN commentator and personality Dan Dakich went to the greatest lengths to double down on his stance to continue profiting from Johnson's decision. In one Tweet, Dakich mocked both the premise of Johnson's exploitation and those of us supporting him by saying, "Wait For It...the college basketball media will figure out a way to tell us that Jalen Johnson quitting Duke was because of him being 'exploited'" (Kalman-Lamb, 2021a).

From the start of Dakich's posts on Johnson, he aimed to *control through exclusion* who should and should not be allowed to engage credibly in the discussion over the athletic worker's decision. Dakich's efforts were an inherently political project. Much like how Dakich, Gottlieb, Rothstein, and others within the college sports media complex decried Johnson's opt-out, Dakich attempted to use similar mechanisms to discredit our expertise and keep us out of the discussion's arena. Dakich claimed that due to our lack of experience "in the arena" as athletes or coaches, we had no legitimate position from which to offer our analyses compared to him and his colleagues (Dakich, 2021a).

Returning to Viveca Greene's point that the alt-Right seeks to undermine the credibility of individual scholars to attack supposedly left-leaning institutions, Dakich likely aimed to delegitimize higher education's involvement in discussing college sport. Although he currently works at Outkick Media, a far-right sports site, Dakich at the time may not have self-identified as a member of the far- or alt-Right. However, Dakich proved extremely comfortable and even gleeful in using far-Right tactics in his engagement with us. Dakich's use of far-Right tactics is better associated in the sport realm with the company Barstool and its founder, Dave Portnoy. After being accused of a misdeed, Portnoy infamously refuses to apologize, reflect, and back down; rather, he goes on the offensive to protect himself and Barstool by portraying himself as the supposed falsely accused to his followers. He seeks their assistance to browbeat the victim(s) and his liberal and left-leaning detractors. His followers – known as 'Stoolies' and who Kusz and Hodler (2023) categorize as the 'white patriarchy' – then rally to his defense in the digital space. This is exactly what happened when two women accused Portnoy of sexual assault in a *Business Insider* article in 2021: an online mob formed to follow Portnoy's lead to harass the *Business Insider* writer, editor, and others who shared the piece on social media. Mobilizing problematic audiences is a strategy that Dakich himself has welcomed, most notably by Tweeting to and reTweeting senior media members at Barstool and inviting them onto his Outkick show.

Dakich's claim was erroneous in at least three major ways: (a) athletic experience, while immensely valuable, is not the only means of generating knowledge about sport and sporting cultures, particularly when the knowledge in question pertains to structures more regularly scrutinized through scholarly training; (b) many sport scholars are former athletes and even coaches, including Johanna Mellis who was a Division I swimmer and later club swim coach; and (c) the expertise gained from years of scholarly training has led to the development of research connections between critical sports scholars and athletes in the arena, which is the basis of public interventions themselves. Our perspectives as sports scholars are not rooted in personal belief; rather we aim to amplify voices that have been systematically ignored by many in the sports media. By ignoring these, Dakich attempted to delegitimize our expertise as scholars of sport studies by claiming that we lacked experience as athletes and coaches in the arena. He aimed to illustrate that we lacked all credibility to engage meaningfully in the discussion.

As more scholars joined the fray to debunk Dakich's unsubstantiated claims with research and evidence to support Johnson's decision, Dakich's engagement devolved. He attacked our personhood and willfully misinterpreted our analyses to support his position, platform, and stability. For example, it was only once Johanna Mellis entered the fray that Dakich resorted to misogynistic language, referring to Mellis and others' points as "b*tching" about athletes from outside the "arena" (Dakich, 2021b). Like much of the right-wing media, Dakich was not interested

in the facts; as Kalman-Lamb and Mellis both Tweeted, he aimed to misunderstand and portray our points as hot takes to be used later to fill airtime and feed the audience for his radio show (Kalman-Lamb, 2021c; Mellis, 2021a). For example, he misinterpreted several of our responses about how the NCAA and universities actively prevent athletic workers from pursuing their education. Instead, he described one colleague’s statement to mean that we were racists because we did not think Black athletes were intellectually capable of getting their education. Dakich shifted from bad-faith critique to baseless personal attacks to deflect from himself. He demonstrated this by questioning if our colleague’s point about athletes’ access to education was “racist or sexist or both” (Dakich, 2021c). He thereby attempted to weaponize accusations of racism and sexism without any theoretical, conceptual, ontological, or empirical basis and seemed to deflect from his own concerns regarding accusations of racism. Dakich moreover employed another common tactic of trolling: rather than always replying directly to our Tweets, he often quote-Tweeted us instead. This tactic enabled him to amplify his perspective on Johnson and us to his followers instead of responding to our critiques. As will be discussed more below, since trolls aim to sow confusion amongst their victims to prevent the latter from successfully taking control of the conversation and narrative, Dakich clearly used this as a strategy to confuse and prevent us from gaining the upper hand.

Although we stopped engaging directly with Dakich once the conflict escalated, he was not ready to stop targeting us for his personal gain – again, much like he’d done with Johnson and several other people in his career. Dakich and his wife failed to lure us back into a debate by subTweeting us and taunting Mellis in particular for blocking them. More distressingly, however, a few days later, Dakich took to his ESPN radio show, the *Dan Dakich Show*, to present his tirade against Johnson and us to his thousands of listeners and gain their support (Kennedy, 2021). In his tirade, Dakich spelled out Kalman-Lamb’s name, stated his office hours, and insulted his physical appearance (Wolken, 2021a). Since then, Dakich has continued to polemicize against professors by frequently Tweeting statements like “professors are the worst of the worst” (see Figure 1). At times, he has used the authors’ personal Twitter profile pictures to signal to his followers that he will be discussing us on his Outkick show (see Figure 2).

Figure 1

Tweet from Dakich’s Twitter account on December 30, 2021



Figure 2

Tweet from Dakich's Twitter account on January 20, 2022



Dakich seems to do this doxxing purposefully. For example, in his February 2021 campaign, he invited his listeners to find and confront Kalman-Lamb online and in person and threaten his personal safety. Dakich's listeners and supporters may be considered *trolls*: an imprecise and debated term used to describe online users who employ tactics like humor and more abusive behaviors that amount to trolling in order to provoke a response from a targeted person or group without the victimized people understanding the trolls' supposedly true intentions (Green, 2019). Trolls use the phrase *just trolling*, Viveca Greene (2019) explains, to defend themselves and avoid accepting responsibility for any harm they and the ideological implications of their actions cause. As illustrated below by the harassment we received from trolls, they strategically seek to blame the victim when they appropriately express the hurt, damage, etc., caused by trolls, claiming that the target asked for it.

Worse yet, Dakich issued what we perceived to be a sexualized threat to Mellis. To demonstrate her own experience as an athlete, Mellis listed the workout sets she used to do while training as a Division I swimmer and then suggested that she and Dakich race one another by "going at it" in the pool (Keeley, 2021; Mellis, 2021b). In listing the workouts and directly addressing Dakich's belief that academics were 'outside the arena,' Mellis unequivocally referred to the act of *racing* one another. Yet Dakich responded to Mellis' suggestion to his listeners by saying, "Well, if you go at it in a pool, that's a public place and then I'm gonna have to get divorced..." (Keeley, 2021, para. 5) Dakich's assertion that he'd need to get divorced if he and Mellis went "at it" in a public pool was not about Mellis as a woman defeating him in a race. Rather, it was about (entirely undesired) sexual advances towards Mellis that would necessitate the divorce.

As Dora Apel explained in discussing the meaning of the rhetoric around racist jokes about Obama, “is not anchored to intent; instead it is produced by the discourses that surround the [text] in the arena in which it circulates” (Apel, 2009, p. 137). The Right’s use of memes, jokes, irony, satire, etc., serves a range of serious, sociopolitical functions that aim to invite people to and build a community around white supremacist ideology, for example. Poe’s law suggests that in the absence of clearly established authorial intent, it can be challenging to distinguish between extremism and satire, i.e., a parody of extremism (Green, 2019). Context, however, matters precisely because it allows for the nuanced understanding of complex socio-cultural relations between an orator and how their language is received and understood. The pattern between Dakich’s racialized critiques of Johnson’s decision, misogyny on Twitter, ‘doxxing’ of Kalman-Lamb, and our perceived suggestions of undesired sexual overtures towards Mellis illustrate Dakich’s beliefs and language about sport, exploitation, racism, sexism, and more. His values and words paint a clear picture of how and why his supporters’ responses to them are harmful to groups that have faced structural and historical discrimination and violence. As Apel (2009) explained, “There is a clear distinction between someone punching up and someone punching down the social ladder” (p. 138). Targeting us also diverted attention away from unsubstantiated opinions regarding the primary issue at hand: Johnson’s opt-out, his agency as a Black man against NCAA racial exploitation, his university, coaches, athletic department, and the media.

Since the original Twitter incident, Dakich has been consistent in his targeting of the authors. Following a series of major media reports, Dakich initially deleted his Twitter account on February 27th, before briefly returning on March 1st. Later that day, following his radio show, he deactivated his account again. In June 2021, he returned to talking about us to label us as racists on *The Dan Dakich Show*. On September 28th, 2021, it was reported that Dan Dakich was no longer employed by ESPN as a basketball analyst and that he would start a new show on the Outkick network, founded by former Fox Sports personality Clay Travis (Benbow, 2021b).

On November 29th, Dakich returned to Twitter and continued to target the authors on that platform. For instance, on January 4, 2022, Dakich again used a personal profile picture of Silva to signal that he would be talking about us on his show while, not unimportantly, accompanying the picture with his own photo and his partner brandishing guns (see Figure 3). Dakich’s family photo belonged to the political tactic of gun-toting holiday 2021 family pictures from GOP politicians Thomas Massie (R-KY) and far-right, professed QAnon supporter politician Lauren Boebert (R-CO) (Cathey, 2021). They posted their pictures less than a week after the horrific school shooting by a 15-year-old in Michigan who killed four students and left seven more injured.

Figure 3

Tweet from Dan Dakich’s Twitter account on January 4, 2022



Dakich's Trolls and the Risks of Ongoing Engagement

Apparent Dakich supporters had commented on our Tweets about the situation for several days, and a handful had emailed us. One emailed Mellis on February 28th with a disparaging but – all things considered – relatively innocuous sentiment. They said, “So you engage with someone on Twitter and tell the [sic] to come at you, then when they do, you claim violence and sexism....now you want to get them fired. Hypocrite cancel-culture [sic] snowflake. Maybe you should be fired.” Kalman-Lamb received a Twitter direct message stating,

You don't even live in the U.S.? You are a joke! If your agenda against Dan Dakich is supported, I sure hope 8 [sic] don't live much longer. This world has gotten overrun with pathetic people like you who believe they are somehow entitled to say whatever they want and then are a victim when someone doesn't agree with your viewpoint and comes right back at you. What a person you are! Big pussy who was never anybody and now thinks they are. Stay in Canada PLEASE!

On March 1st, the three of us made public statements. We recorded and released an *End of Sport* episode that detailed some of what happened up to that point (End of Sport, 2021). Journalist Dana Benbow from the *IndyStar* reached out to Mellis for a comment. Trusting the *IndyStar* for its reporting on the Larry Nassar sexual abuse scandal and Benbow's critical analyses of Dakich, Mellis offered Benbow a lengthy comment. Benbow's (2021a) subsequent piece centered solely around Mellis's remarks. The article seemed to send Dakich's supporters into a fury, as the online pile-on spiked in the days after. Kalman-Lamb also received emails from what we perceived to be trolls. One person wrote emails to both Mellis and Kalman-Lamb using markedly different language to each. They wrote to Mellis on March 1st,

Look in the mirror, he's not going to sexually attack you. You sound like a complete nutcase, not because you have a completely stupid view on college athletics, but because you're a soft person and sound so frail, and you blocked his wife on twitter...If you think this is over, it's not. More people support him than you know. Maybe more people should come to your office hours and visit you to have a nice discussion. That way you just can't randomly block people and not discuss this. You can't hide behind your twitter forever Doctor.

The sender was clear in using not only ableist and sexist language, but also in threatening a physical interaction during the global pandemic.

The same person wrote to Kalman-Lamb:

Dan Dakich is a bit much but you're coming off like a complete bitch. Don't be internet tough guy, because you can't hide behind twitter forever. Have a discussion with the person and prove your point, because the majority of people agree with him and see you and your opinion as some left leaning bitch, and when you cry about doxxing, you sound like a whiny bitch.... Anyway, don't sound like a whiny bitch and man up. Oh, and don't brag that you wrote about a book. Sure, it makes you sound like you know your subject but it also comes off as elitist and snobby...."

Kalman-Lamb was also copied on an email sent to a number of Duke administrators that suggested he should be fired for "atrocious twitter posts" (personal communication, 2021). The sender, who also referenced a recent publication in *The Daily Beast*, was particularly aggrieved that Kalman-Lamb had shared a different email he had received from someone else on Twitter that stated: "Not sure what the ESPN guy said to you but you certainly look like a prick-faced moron so I'm guessing he was right." This emailer deemed that Tweet an egregious act of professional impropriety, suggesting that "Anyone at any other institution sharing emails like this would be fired immediately." After taking their own shot at Kalman-Lamb's "weak chin," they concluded by remarking, "Very sad that Duke pays this person a salary, that is the real story here, absolutely unprofessional and disgraceful. Big Duke fan, too!" (personal communication, 2021)

More dangerously, a self-professed former Indiana police officer told Kalman-Lamb in a reply to a Tweet that he should "Stay out of Indiana." That former police officer continues to monitor and respond to Kalman-Lamb's Twitter profile nearly a year after the original incident. Other emails that Mellis received included language such as:

Aren't you a professor? You were violated? You're lucky you don't really have to work for a living! Why don't you try teaching your students something constructive? Don't you want to teach them how we raped and pillaged the native Americans, so that now, we have to give them back the country! You and your allegedly politically correct m*rons can go back to wherever you came!

You are one one whiny b*tch.

Hey b*tch, I understand you are an Oral expert. I know where your office is. Maybe we can hook up.

Does another whiny ass liberal f***** snowflake need a goddamn tissue?...You people just got six dr. Seuss books banned today you should be f***** cheering in the streets that you f***** took opportunities from children to read and learn. Take your racist whiny head out of your pathetic f***** ass and pack up your f***** hate and get the f*** out of this country. [sic]

Some emails that Kalman-Lamb received included:

Would you please provide me with the written documentation on who/what appointed you judge AND jury on how student-athletes [sic] are to be handled? I will quite interested to learn has a high power. Please include all verifications of your new found authority.

Mellis also received a threatening voicemail from a local number, and an email was sent to Mellis, Dana Benbow at *IndyStar*, and an address related to Dakich himself:

I've reviewed the available evidence and have concluded that Dr. Mellis started a circle in which it appears that she engaged in Ageist attacks and displayed apparent misogyny. She belittled a 50 something year old male with knee replacements and past his athletic prime by challenging him to an athletic event, in which she has excelled. In doing so, she acted in a belittling and demeaning way...She has stated that she has experienced sexual harassment in her athletic career. Perhaps this was an opportunity to strike out...I hope that she was oblivious to her obvious Ageism and misogyny demonstrated in her challenge...I'm speculating that Dr. Mellis sees these two bias being one way: only coming from white males.

The critique about Mellis' teaching in the history classroom suggests that the sender believes in the concept of white genocide: the notion that the 'white race' is "endangered by the increasing diversity of society" due to immigration, interracial relationships and children, as well as diversity initiatives and practices (Berger, 2016, p. 3). According to Greene (2019, p. 64), "In the convoluted logic and language of the alt-right, relations of power are flipped and history is turned inside out...nonwhites are a powerful social group poised to take over the US..." In their mind, our supposed goal of political correctness – meaning that we support antiracism, fight against systemic oppression, and support the decision made by a Black man like Johnson – makes us fundamentally un-American.

The sender's critique of how Mellis teaches history – negating the validity of teaching past-present connections – is an attempt to demonstrate that history does not matter, which Angela Davis (2012) has described as a key characteristic of neoliberalism. By reminding and teaching people that racism and other social constructions are "profoundly historical," we can "continue to inhabit these histories, which help to constitute our social and psychic worlds" (Davis, 2012, p. 169). By rejecting the necessity of teaching about white Euro-American dispossession and genocide of indigenous people the sender sought support for their claim of white genocide and reverse racism. The concepts of *reverse racism* and *white genocide* are used as tools to "facilitate the actual kind" of racism and genocide (Cobb, 2018, para. 6). Much like Dakich's treatment, this

is a profoundly political position that likely betrays their racist anxieties. Being accused of racism is no small matter; yet as white scholars, the trolls did not articulate the same kind or degree of racism or misogynoir against us as they conceivably would against colleagues of color.

The emails and voicemail – especially the ones threatening to talk to her in her office, and to enact sexual violence against her – left Mellis deeply shaken. The fact that several of the harassers included their names – and even locations in some cases – personalized the harassment. In no way should an academic have to prepare themselves for such horrific backlash. Despite our best efforts to respond promptly and practically to protect ourselves in case something happens, it seems impossible to fully prepare emotionally, including family members, to confront this behavior. It can lead to significant psychological harm and self-doubt, especially if people close to you force you to defend your actions because they accept the harasser's assertion that you 'brought this on yourself' in some form. Having the comradery of Kalman-Lamb and Silva, their new close circle of colleagues, plus her department and college deans helped to make Mellis feel safe and secure. As Mellis' department chair explained to her during a Zoom meeting in which she started sobbing, perfection is a product of white supremacy. No one should be expected to behave perfectly in a time of crisis like this, as there is no "perfect" response to the ever-changing tactics of the Right. This is illustrative of the importance of mobilizing communities of support when facing these types of conflicts.

Finally, whether it was connected to the interactions with Dakich or not, Mellis was contacted by a journalist for Turning Point USA's "professor watchlist" on November 8th, 2021. The sender asked for details related to her teaching, pedagogy, research profile, and public scholarship. Later that day, Mellis was added to the public watchlist. Led by Charlie Kirk, Turning Point USA has been labeled a right-wing group and has a long history of targeting supposedly liberal academics with its professor watchlist (Gabbatt, 2021). It is an explicit tactic to target and harass university professors, intimidate them into silence and censorship, and jeopardize their professional and personal lives; a practice we might expect but never accept.

Mobilizing Communities of Support: On Strategies for Engaging in Critical Public Work

When we were alerted to Dakich's radio attacks from sports journalist Ian Kennedy's article on February 27th, 2021, we immediately strategized how to respond (Kennedy, 2021). Looking back, most of these strategies centered on building our community of support in the service of self-protection. Being targeted is meant to be isolating. An intense criticism and onslaught of harassment can cause people to question the validity of their stance and their expertise, and negatively impact their mental health. When there is an overwhelming number of harassers, it can threaten one's physical and psychological safety, impact families, forestall work, and more. The non-renewal by Ole Miss of the contract of Assistant Professor of History Garrett Felber in 2020-2021 due to fraught academic and public circumstances highlights the precarious position of the public scholar. Our varying levels of instability also impacted our relative feelings of security and support: Kalman-Lamb was a non-tenure track lecturing fellow at Duke at the time, and Mellis was an assistant professor at an enrollment- and tuition-dependent small liberal arts college. As of 2016, 73% of all U.S. faculty are contingently employed and off the tenure track, meaning they lack traditional protections for freedom of speech (American Association of University Professors, 2018). In an increasing number of GOP-controlled states, tenure itself has

been dismantled (Stirgus, 2021). This means that most faculty members who seek a broad public audience for their research do so at considerable personal risk.

Perhaps one of the most common pieces of advice given to people when they're harassed is to avoid further antagonizing others by not 'feeding the trolls.' This advice can be taken in a number of ways. For some, it might mean not responding to any of the trolls or their harassment, with the idea that radio silence on behalf of the victimized person/group will cause the trolls and the news cycle to move on to their next topic of interest. It could mean putting one's social media account on private and keeping a low profile so that only current followers can see and engage with what a person is saying and doing. Yet the assumption that it is solely up to the victimized person to control what trolls do – and thereby that victimized people are inherently at fault for attracting the attention of trolls to begin with – is firmly grounded in a victim-blaming perspective that releases harassers from being held accountable for their actions. This is precisely what trolls convince their victims to believe: the people they have victimized are asking for it (Greene, 2019). This strategy aims to leave the victimized person without agency or recourse to resistance (Phillips, 2016).

If we blame the victim and not the troll, "The troll still sets the terms of their target's engagement; the troll still controls the timeline and outcome" (Phillips, 2016, p. 160). This is not to completely negate the tactic of going silent, of putting one's account on private, or another similar strategy; a person under attack may legitimately feel at any point that one of these tactics is simply the healthiest path for them. Mellis, for example, upon hearing this advice from others on February 27-28th, felt that this strategy stripped her of agency and allowed Dakich and his supporters to control the situation. Instead, she chose to follow alternative advice and built a community of support in different spheres. It was only after Mellis had recorded an *End of Sport* episode with Kalman-Lamb and Silva, provided comment for an *IndyStar* piece on March 1st – both of which allowed her to feel that she'd appropriately asserted her agency – and anticipated a potential onslaught of additional harassment that she chose to make her account private (Benbow, 2021a).

Tressie McMillan Cottom has noted that it may feel natural to pull away from an academic caught in a controversy. But this can be unproductive at best, and harmful at worst:

We're afraid of being associated with crisis...Rarely are these attacks about a person. The worst thing we can do is isolate our colleague. It's a fear tactic. The real goal [in these harassment and attack campaigns] is to isolate and shame people (Quintana, 2017, para. 5).

Ciccariello-Maher, a former associate professor of politics and global studies at Drexel University, resigned in the wake of a controversy over his Tweets about race and the military. He has spoken about the torrent of harassment and death threats he received and his institution's rebukes against him. He told *The Chronicle of Higher Ed*, "You know that you're in the right, and yet you feel sort of surrounded....You feel as though you're being pummeled and barraged. And especially for people who aren't used to this, this is a very frightening and dangerous phenomena" (Quintana, 2017, para. 9). Community and solidarity are the only real defense against this profound sense of isolation.

As the conflict unfolded, our protection tactics evolved. However, they can broadly be categorized into six overarching strategies:

- (a) Self-protection in the immediacy
- (b) Cementing a close circle of support with other publicly engaged academics to share ideas and gain moral and intellectual support
- (c) Proactively contacting crucial people at our institutions to establish our narrative of what happened and hopefully gain support
- (d) Building support from the broader critical sport journalistic and academic communities
- (e) Reaching out to academic associations for statements of support
- (f) Understanding the power structure: addressing harmful rhetoric in public spaces is not implicit consent to receive targeted harassment and abuse. Protect that space however you can.

Self-protection in the Immediacy

In the immediate aftermath of interactions that lead to sustained harassment, threats, abuse, or other forms of trolling, it often makes sense to initiate temporary self-protection steps. One of the main strategies we have used is to immediately *lock* our Twitter accounts, making them private so that only those who follow our accounts may interact in public ways, e.g., retweeting, quote Tweeting, or replying to Tweets (now this is called “posting” due to Musk changing Twitter’s name to X). To do this, simply go into the application settings, find the “privacy and security/safety” setting, and find the option to select “protect your Tweets.” This narrows the audience for someone’s tweets to just their followers, making it difficult for those not following an account originally to engage with the user or amplify Tweets in any way. It also makes it quite hard for new accounts to publicize the encounter unless they obtain a screenshot and quote Tweet from the user. This step prevents *further* harassment, as the internet army of accounts descending to target a Twitter profile faces the challenges of access to publicly interact with Tweets. Of course, it is not a permanent solution. It will not prevent all abuse or abuse already sustained, but it will quell some opportunities for the continuation of harm that often follows vexatious interactions in the public sphere.

It is possible to use the platform’s privacy settings and protection protocols in other ways to prevent abuse. For example, a strategy we have adopted has been to report and block accounts engaging in harassing or abusive content; even mobilizing our communities of support (more on this below) to assist us by doing the same. This strategy does not often yield any permanent results, i.e., suspension of accounts, but can result in the deletion of abusive content by the platform itself. Frustratingly, since Elon Musk bought Twitter, this strategy seems less effective; Musk’s changes have wrought instability that has perhaps intentionally rendered the report function more obsolete than before for those of us resisting fascism. We have also used internet privacy tools such as DeleteMe to regularly search for and remove our information from websites and search results. If this strategy is adopted, we recommend consulting faculty and staff contracts and collective agreements to ensure this falls within professional development funds that can be paid by the institution. It is part of our ongoing research program and should not be a personal burden.

To be clear, we suggest self-protection as a *temporary measure* to help prevent further abuse. It often will only take between 24 hours to one week to let the wave of harm pass, as discourse on the internet moves quickly. In the meantime, it is likely that the abuse will continue. Another self-protection strategy we have used is to document and save *everything you can* in a protected folder on your computer. This may cause trauma to folks being targeted; you may be reading emails or taking screenshots of messages that are incredibly harm-inducing. We recommend asking a trusted person to do this labor for you. It is important from a legal perspective to document all interactions that result from your online public work. Most institutions have strong legal language in contracts with faculty and/or collective agreements around academic freedom that protect online communications that can be linked to your research. Consult your contract and/or collective agreement to ensure this language exists and to understand your rights and institutional obligations to you as a faculty and/or staff member. The overarching political *war on higher education* from the GOP surrounding issues of racism, sexism, transphobia, Critical Race Theory, intersectionality, feminist theories, and other academic discourses, makes legal and institutional protections dynamic terrains (Pérez, 2017; Ray, 2020; Ray & Gibbons, 2021). Frustratingly, our current neoliberal, scarcity mindset of higher education forces the responsibility upon all of *us* who engage in public scholarship to ensure and strengthen protections around academic freedom in the public sphere. However, that discussion is beyond the scope of the present intervention.

Developing a Small Academic Community of Support...and Listening to Advice

The three of us developed our community through the *End of Sport* podcast long before our interactions with Dakich; the conflict merely encouraged us to expand that community. At some point during our Twitter interactions, we reached out to the other academics involved in the conversation, comprised of scholars from sociology, history, and communications/media. Commiserating and sharing ideas about how to address the conflict and erroneous claims presented online enabled us to quickly establish a rapport of solidarity over the situation. It also helped us work towards some of our other strategies, as explained below, in service of self-protection. Ultimately, this community – combined with the broader community we developed with people who publicly supported us – remains the most enduringly positive outcome to emerge from the incident. Since the Dakich incident, Mellis has also reached out to scholars enduring online harassment (especially for the first time) to offer solidarity, an ear, and possible strategies if they want them. Though admittedly, this can be emotional as well as intellectual labor, it continues the community building from February 2021. Her work has led to the enrichment and development of new friendships and bonds of solidarity in the last few years.

Establishing Institutional Narratives in the Hope of Gaining Support

This strategy is heavily influenced by Tressie McMillan Cottom's (2017) reflections on public scholarship. Immediately after hearing about Dakich's radio show, we thought about how to present the situation to our institutions. Fortunately, we had anticipated backlash from our earlier co-written pieces about the inhumanity of holding college sport during the pandemic and therefore started developing the groundwork for our support system long before the Dakich incident. For example, Mellis sent those earlier articles to her chair, Deans, and the College's communications staff. These actions helped to establish with Mellis' supervisors her practice of co-producing

research-based analyses for the public sphere and their positive impact on the public reception of Ursinus College, a small liberal arts school of 1,500 students, including over 35% athletes. We had increasingly paid attention to how the Right targeted other academics, such as Sami Schalk, who thankfully has spoken openly about what she's endured and the steps she took to protect herself. Unlike Schalk and other colleagues of color, the three of us are all white and thus remain shielded from horrific racist attacks that others engaging in public work endure. The clear anti-Black and anti-Brown racism that pervades the discourse of far-, alt- and increasingly mainstream Right leaders and followers – plus their avowed intention to maintain white supremacy – results in their increasingly virulent racist language and tactics against scholars of color. Dakich did refer to us as racists, i.e., that we are the “real” racists and not him, in a June 2021 show; using that word and its association with ideas about us as *race traitors* is a strategy displayed throughout the conflict. However, it impacts us much differently than it would a scholar of color being accused of reverse or anti-white racism.

Kennedy's article came out on February 27th, a Saturday. We knew that we needed to establish the narrative of what happened with our institutions in order to gauge their reactions and gain their support – and do so before they received emails, phone calls, or tags on Twitter from people targeting us using the issue against us. As stated, the goal here was self-protection and prevention of any further harm. Sometimes it is not possible for people to find out exactly when they are being targeted in the moment. For Mellis, this meant contacting her department chair, the College's deans, and communications people. Mellis knew she had her chair's support and that Ursinus appreciated her public work, as the school had shared her co-authored pieces to boost the institution's profile. Taking the proactive step of sending evidence of the Twitter interactions, the radio show, and explaining what happened allowed Ursinus' leadership to hear our side of the narrative. The ability to set the narrative and tone of these discussions can help academics who are under attack avoid being forced on the defensive by one's institutional superiors. Though she did not ask them for it, the College's communications staff immediately sent separate statements of support internally and externally to the public.

At Duke, Kalman-Lamb was contacted by the chief of campus police, who asked to be kept apprised of “particularly concerning or threatening communications” and offered to “have a team talk about safety planning” (personal communication, 2021). He was prompted to connect with administrators when he received an email copied to the university. At that point, Kalman-Lamb reached out to his immediate superior by phone to explain the situation. This led to the director of the Thompson Writing Program sending an email of support to two deans at the university. To Kalman-Lamb's knowledge, there was no further institutional escalation beyond that point. Mellis's institutional support especially should be offered at a bare minimum in all circumstances. Although we acknowledge the added labor of this work, we urge tenured folks especially to work within their institutional frameworks to ensure similar responses for *all* scholars.

Building Support from Critical Journalist and Academic Communities

Due to the relationships that we have developed on the *End of Sport* podcast and in our public scholarship, we knew and trusted several critical sports journalists prior to February 2021. We quickly reached out to a few of them to get their perspective on Dakich's harassment and call-to-arms on the radio. We suspected that his actions defied the norms of acceptable behavior for

journalists, but were not sure. We did enough research on Dakich to understand that he'd made discriminatory comments about people before and received little punishment. As sports journalist Dan Wolken noted in the wake of our incident, Dakich's radio show had a disturbing past, including comments that we would consider being bigoted about college athletes' tattoos, former NBA player Dwayne Wade, Michigan State fans, a high school student called a "meth head," and even a 10-year-old boy (Wolken, 2021b). The support of journalists matters because they can affect the discursive frame through which an incident or event is broadly understood by the public.

While waiting for our institutions to respond to our emails, we connected with other leading figures beyond our own small circle of support. This was done to help build the case that our institutions could not discipline us without potentially facing criticism from the academic community and the press. Again, with the goal of self-protection, this support helped us weather the storm and ensure that Dakich could not control the discursive terrain through which the conflict was constructed.

Statements of Support from Academic Associations

Of all the strategies we mobilized, we surprisingly met the most resistance from academic associations when we spoke to them about organizational support, i.e., releasing statements on our behalf. The frustration at a general sense among academic associations to refuse resources or even statements of support, in particular, left us asking: what purpose do academic associations serve if they do not attempt to publicly recognize the increasing risks their members take in dismantling elitist hierarchies regarding knowledge dissemination and expanding the profile of one's field, and support them outwardly in times of crises? What are we paying membership dues for if they won't do this for members?

The most proactive and supportive association was one of which none of us was an active member: the Association for Women in Slavic Studies (AWSS), a subsidiary of a larger organization Mellis belongs to, the Association for the Study of Slavic, East European, and Eurasian Studies (ASEEES). A past president of AWSS initiated a discussion with Mellis on Twitter on February 27th to share that they were putting our incident on their upcoming agenda to see if they could support us with a statement and talk to ASEEES about joining their efforts. Their proposal took a significant amount of intellectual and emotional labor off of Mellis, which is crucial in times of crisis that require victimized people to put in significant effort to protect themselves. That several top members are active on Twitter allows them to be proactive in cases such as this. They released their statement on March 3rd, 2021, and ASEEES signed on to it (Bukovoy, 2021). By that time, Mellis reached out to a close colleague on Twitter in a smaller organization focused on her nation of study, the Hungarian Studies Association, and they promptly released a statement that they shared on Facebook on March 3rd (Hungarian Studies Association, 2021).

Mellis emailed the North American Society for Sport History (NASSH) of which she was a committee member, while Silva contacted the North American Society for Sport Sociology (NASSS). NASSH agreed to develop a statement, which they released on March 6th (Journal of Sport History, 2021). On March 3rd, Silva sent an email to the NASSS listserv urging the community of sports scholars to show support and solidarity to Mellis and Kalman-Lamb on the

basis of how attacks such as this attempt to systematically delegitimize work done by all critical sports scholars. An excerpt of the email reads:

The purpose of my email to you all today is to urge us as scholars, researchers, teachers, and NASSS as a scholarly community made up of sports scholars, to show support and solidarity to Drs. Mellis and Kalman-Lamb. As we know, sports media is often complicit in the promotion of racism, sexism, and violent misogyny that is embedded in sports, sporting culture, and sporting practices. Drs. Mellis and Kalman-Lamb have been part of a vocal opposition to sports media and their role in creating and sustaining a system of racialized, gendered, and class-based exploitation that continues to harm campus athletic workers.

Regardless of where you sit on the issue of exploitation of campus athletic workers, we all have a vested interest in pushing back against those who seek to delegitimize, mock, target, harass, or otherwise devalue the work of critical sports scholars in favor of the promulgation of the status quo. As a scholarly community, we have a professional and ethical obligation to protect members of our community – despite differences of opinion or scholarly disagreements – from those who seek to devalue the necessary and important work that we do.

After a series of back-and-forth interactions with NASSS leadership and dozens of direct emails from members showing support, it was noted that, despite releasing several statements of solidarity in the past, often expeditiously published, the organization's Political Advocacy Committee would have to collect signatures to release a public statement of solidarity. After requesting and receiving a document providing statement language from Silva, NASSS leadership sympathized while indicating that "this is such an important conversation we need to have as an organization," but refused to issue a statement of solidarity. Rather, NASSS leadership suggested that Silva, Mellis, and Kalman-Lamb take on additional labor to organize a session on the topic at the next annual meeting.

This interaction highlights some of the structural and institutional barriers within our own academic communities that public scholars face. Scholarly associations tend to promote the importance of public engagement yet fail to provide the support necessary when that public work results in abuse. Indeed, the issue here is that we view online attacks and harassment as existential threats to our profession of critical scholarship. Put differently, online targeting of academics has become a purposeful and relatively successful strategy to silence critical scholars in hopes of advancing certain political ideologies. If the organizations in which we pay dues and purport to have members' best interests in mind fail to support work being done by members in real, tangible, ways, it presents fundamental issues for the ongoing professional development of the field. NASSS ultimately invited Mellis to give a keynote speech about the experience alongside esteemed journalist Shireen Ahmed at its April 2022 conference. Afterward, the president gave a public apology to Mellis. The opportunity and apology, however, could not fully address the harm done by the organization's actions in February-March 2021 that led to increased isolation and a legitimization of online targeting.

Public Critique is Not Implicit Consent to be Harassed and Abused

An important lesson we learned through these interactions was to understand that illuminating and critiquing harmful rhetoric that exists within our substantive area of scholarly interest is *not* the same as targeted, vexatious, and abusive behavior. There is a difference between calling out harmful discourse, practice, and action that exists in the social world and being abused because your work points that out. It is crucial for all scholars to understand and acknowledge that *public critique is not implicit consent to be harassed and/or abused in public space*. Indeed, we view suggestions that ‘you do this to yourself by calling out bad behavior’ as emblematic of the issues we are trying to solve by engaging in public critique; part and parcel of our work is to illuminate and counter harm, injustice, and inequality. If we use public scholarship to those ends, we are actually *doing* the work that we claim is vital to our research (and to research participants). The suggestion that, by virtue of participating in public critique, one consents to harmful responses is not only problematic from an epistemological standpoint. It is also incredibly hypocritical of scholars who are supposedly interested in alleviating social problems and counterproductive to that overarching project. We therefore reject the premise of this approach and instead work to strategize ways to collectively counter this narrative through our ongoing public engagement work.

Conclusion

Public scholarship is important work. Not only is it important to mobilize the knowledge created by a traditionally closed academic system and make it more accessible to broad audiences, it is also important for the promotion of civil society, critical dialogue, engagement, and liberation from oppression. We maintain that a foundational principle of academic research is to shed light on the harms, injustices, inequalities, and inequities that exist in the social world and illuminate them for all to see. In our view, public engagement should not be principally about self-promotion, but is part and parcel of our research and our moral obligation to the people and groups in which we co-construct our scholarship. We thus urge our colleagues to promote the use and uptake of public scholarship.

Despite this more optimistic view, we must acknowledge and address the risks associated with such engagement in the public sphere. We need, in our view, to be prepared for the possibility of corresponding attacks and abuse faced in response to public engagement. Part of that preparation means the ongoing development of practical strategies to respond to and alleviate to the best extent possible, the harm caused by our public engagement. In this paper, we explored some of the stakes of public discursive antagonisms, the gendered and racial forms that harassment can take, and institutional, communal, and individual strategies for grappling with ensuing harassment. We also explored how this experience of media spectacle creates further grounds for solidarity between academics and athletes, as experiences of social media harassment and abuse become increasingly normalized for both athletic workers and public scholars alike.

These strategies are simply starting points; they are not static, but dynamic processes that will undoubtedly change for us as we continue our public engagement project. If we were to promote one strategy above all, it would be the importance of building and mobilizing our scholarly and non-scholarly communities of support to alleviate some of the harms associated with online abuse sustained from public critique. Of course, building communities of support is not

always easy or equitable across modalities of identity, class, and privilege. That recognition is important to consider in our scholarship and our institutional and social contexts. It is our responsibility as a community of scholars to acknowledge and recognize the challenges inherent in public work, as well as the inequitable manifestation of risks taken by scholars who engage in this work, to do everything in our institutional and social capacities to support it.

This means recognizing, supporting, and rewarding public scholarship as academic labor. We must continue to push our institutions to approach public scholarship holistically and not just as a complement to our academic work while they simultaneously use it for their branding. They need to act on the belief that they have a vested interest in protecting us; because by attacking us individually, the Right attacks the legitimacy of higher education. Increasing public distrust in higher education through individualized attacks facilitates the Right's aim of molding it through relentless funding cuts, fascist legislation, media campaigns, and other political maneuvers to serve their oppressive ends. Institutions must develop a practice of responding robustly in defense of faculty and staff under assault. They moreover need to recognize public work in hiring practices, tenure, and promotion decisions. It also requires strengthening language in our collective agreements that public scholarship is a form of academic labor protected by academic freedom and intellectual property rights. Holding our institutions accountable to protect their workers from harm, abuse, and harassment experienced in response to this academic work is key. This work is valuable, particularly contemporary, and should be *valued* and *supported* as such.

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