Lori Latrice Martin

Many Americans view sports as race-neutral and apolitical. However, sports both influence, and are influenced by, society. Athletes, fans, coaches, and owners are not immune from all of the social ills impacting the larger society, including evidence of racial injustices. Protests in sports are not new (Rhoden; Smith). Tommie Smith and John Carlos, elite American sprinters, famously raised fists of freedom in the air on the medal stand during the 1968 Olympics in Mexico City, to protest unequal treatment facing black people in America, and other people of color around the globe. More recently, some black athletes have joined, and led efforts to again protest unequal treatment facing people of African ancestry in America with the hopes of bringing about positive social changes.

The degree to which black athletes today are engaged in social justice issues and are connected to the community has been the subject of much debate (Rhoden). The public protests by Colin Kaepernick, and other high profile athletes, which began in the summer of 2016, have renewed conversations about the role of sports in what could be called unconventional forms of politics or protests. Specifically, Kaepernick chose to first sit and later kneel during the playing of the national anthem when athletes and fans alike are expected to stand as a show, according to many Americans, of honor and respect for the flag, nation, and the idealized values both symbolize. The events of the summer of 2016 had a particularly significant impact on Kaepernick and his supporters. On August 14, 2016, and August 20, 2016, Colin Kaepernick refused to stand during the playing of the national anthem, and no one really paid attention. Kaepernick sat again on August 26, 2017, which caught the attention of a Reporter. A few weeks prior to the protest two black men, Alton Sterling and Philando Castile were killed at the hands of law enforcement officials and their deaths were recorded and shared widely.
A great deal of the discussions has been devoted to Kaepernick’s chosen method of protest. However, little to no attention is devoted to how Kaepernick’s protest contributes to broader ongoing debates, and controversies, regarding racial progress in America and leadership in the black community. In this paper, I show how Kaepernick calls into question the gap between society as it is and society as it ought to be at a time when many Americans believed the country had gotten passed the issue of race. Despite Kaepernick’s, and others, concerns that his actions might not actually lead to changes in the hearts and minds of people, or in social institutions, he nonetheless sought to demonstrate his power and his agency. In doing so, he showed other black athletes, and other black people, that
there is power in the act of protesting. Kaepernick also revealed leadership as a practice and not as a position one occupies, which describes the concept of adaptive leadership (Heifetz, Graslow, and Linsky). Derrick Bell’s 1993 work on racial realism and afro-pessimists helps to explain the enduring racial divides in America that moved Kaepernick to protest. Kaepernick in his chosen method of protest also showed that leadership, unlike conventional definitions of leadership, is not simply a position one occupies. Kaepernick demonstrated—in the tradition of adaptive leadership—that leadership is a practice. Ronald Heifetz, Alexander Graslow, and Marty Linsky (2009) explain adaptive leadership as mobilizing people to tackle tough social problems and initiate change (31). The goal of adaptive leadership is to have a positive social impact. Adaptive leadership builds on the past and involves experimentation (31–37). As an adaptive leader, Colin Kaepernick mobilized black athletes, and others, to respond to one of the nation’s most enduring challenges—racial inequality. Exactly why racial inequality persists in American society is a subject of much debate for scholars, including scholars interested in critical race theory, racial realism, and afro-pessimism.

Understanding Persistent Racial Inequality

Contemporary protests based upon race understand manifestations of racial inequality as structural and have informed discussions about linkages between the experiences of black people today, including black athletes like Colin Kaepernick, with black people held in physical bondage generations ago. The persistent racial inequality Colin Kaepernick sought to draw attention to is rooted in anti-black sentiments. Both critical race theory and Afro-pessimism share “skepticism about the racial progress narrative,” but “Afro-pessimism insists upon the distinctiveness of anti-blackness from other forms of racism. Anti-blackness is the notion the construction of blacks as nonhuman structures the status of all other racial groups” (149). Moreover, Ray and his coauthors say afro-pessimism resists calls for research on race to move beyond the historic black-white binary to include other racial groups. “Afro-pessimism replaces the binary between blacks and whites with an antagonism between blacks and nonblacks” (149, emphases in original). The authors seek to clarify any confusion there might be regarding the differences between anti-blackness and white supremacy. “Antiblackness, not white supremacy, explains the social conditions of blacks across the globe” (149). Afro-pessimism is concerned with slavery and how slavery lives on today (e.g. Saidiya Hartman, Frank Wilderson, and Jared Sexton). A foundational assumption of Afro-pessimism is that “slavery has changed form” (Ray et al. 149). In this rationale, the “meaning of whiteness as human (free, rational) developed in antagonism to the meaning of blackness as nonhuman (enslaved, incapable of reason)” (150). Another feature of afro-pessimism is the “claim that slavery and the middle passage, through the experience of social death [permanent subjugations], gave blacks a different ontology than other racial groups” (150), which Ray and his colleagues claim is new but may be found in sociological works on race and ethnicity published in the past. The “three characteristics” that afro-pessimists claim “define slavery as social death” include “natal alienation, gratuitous violence, and social dishonor” (150), concepts the authors say are new and unique to afro-pessimism that predate the founding of the paradigm. Frank B. Wilderson III is without question one of the founders of afro-pessimism (Zug). Afro-pessimism started in the mid-1990s with a symposium organized by Wilderson and Jared
Sexton. Afro-pessimism fills an important gap in scholarly work on race by recognizing the need to place theories into a particular historical context (Sexton, “Afro-Pessimism”).

According to James Zug, it is heavily influenced by scholars concerned with the idea of the human. Proponents of afro-pessimism claim that black people are regarded as nonhuman, without familial connections, and the subject to terror, exploitation, and violence, without just cause (Zug). Wilderson uses the term "prison-slave-in-waiting" (Wilderson, “Prison Slave” 18) to describe “an ordinary Black person” (19) and thus considers “Black citizenship, or Black civic obligation [to be] oxymorons” (18) because “for black people, civil society itself—rather than its abuses or shortcomings—is a state of emergency” (19). To him, there is a clear “absence of the Black subject” (22). The focus for afro-pessimism is not as much on racial equality but on violence. Kaepernick’s protest draws attention, however, to both. A focus on violence allows for the debunking of myths around accepted philosophical assumptions “because violence not only makes thought possible, but it makes black metaphysical being and black rationality impossible, while simultaneously giving rise to the philosophical contemplation of metaphysics and thick description of human relations” (Douglass and Wilderson 117). The very essence of blackness, according to afro-pessimism, “is constituted by violence with no event horizons” or point of no return (122).

Slavery was not merely a time period for R.L., the anonymous author of “Wanderings of the Slave: Black Life and Social Death.” Rather, slavery was a period characterized by racial domination. The black subject ceased being a slave with respect to any one master and instead became a slave to their appearance, contends R.L. The structural position of the slave made the white elite possible. Slaves were, by design, outside the boundaries of humanity, which is equated with whiteness, contends R.L. (R.L.) R.L. links contemporary policing with slave patrols and relates both to white supremacy. Slave patrols regulated mobility as slaves were tied directly to plantations, while policing regulates movements of blacks according to various forms of spatial configurations. In the case of slave patrols and policing, space was racialized. Afro-pessimism has supporters and critics. Some scholars are not convinced that the “condition of Black life in the modern era is not new or different, but that it is simply a nuanced recodification of the original violence of the plantation” (Barlow 1). A more general critique of afro-pessimism is the absence of a link between theory and application (1). Sexton acknowledges that some criticize afro-pessimism for a so-called rejection of agency (“Afro-Pessimism”).

Freedom and Free Agency

Colin Kaepernick sought to demonstrate his free agency in both meanings of the term. On the one hand, he sought to pursue his right to sign with a team other than the San Francisco 49ers when his contract ended. On the other hand, he sought to exert his free agency as a total human being—not merely as an elite professional athlete—to elucidate issues facing black people in America, including the killing of black men by law enforcement officials and vigilantes. Kaepernick desired to use his high-profile position to join the outcries of many people in the larger black community about the lack of racial progress over the years, outcries, which often fell on deaf white ears. Debates about what racial progress looks like and about whether or not racial progress is even possible will likely continue for the foreseeable future. What is clear is that more and more black people have committed, or recommitted to, efforts to resist private actions and public policies that
disadvantage black people and other people of other. Athletes, like Colin Kaepernick, are great examples of this commitment. Adaptive activist athletes have not only demonstrated a renewed commitment to civic engagement, but also to the exercise of their agency, thus highlighting the limits of racial progress in America.

The Case of Alton Sterling

Alton Sterling, according to the Associated Press, was a 37-year old, father of five, and resident of Baton Rouge. He was well-known in his community. He was shot at close range while on the ground in front of Triple S Food Market on the corner of Fairfields and North Foster Drive. In Greg Allen and Kelly McEvers’ NPR program All Things Considered more details were revealed: In the case of Alton Sterling, officers Blane Salamoni and Howie Lake, II were said to be responding to a report of someone with a gun threatening people outside of a store around 12:30 am. Salamoni had been on the Baton Rouge Police Department (BRPD) for four years at the time of the shooting, and Lake had been on the force for just three years. Both officers had complaints against them for prior use of force. The officers were equipped with body cameras. According to the BRPD, the body cameras fell off in the encounter with Alton Sterling. The actual shooting was captured on two cell phone videos. The officers contend Alton Sterling did not comply with their instructions. They also claim they saw the butt of a gun in Sterling’s pocket and that Sterling reached for the gun as they struggled on the ground. The NPR program also stated that Sterling was tasered more than once, a claim confirmed by Associated Press. Allen and McEvers also report that Alton Sterling was shot in his back at least three times. Murphy Paul, Chief of Police, East Baton Rouge Police Department terminated Salamoni’s employment in the early part of 2018, and suspended Lake for three days, after the Secretary of State decided that there was not enough evidence to consider indicting either of the officers. The City of Baton Rouge and other cities across the country erupted in protests. Many people were arrested in the protests and even filed legal action against the police department, based upon reporting by Chris Sommerfeldt. The protesters accused officers of being too aggressive, using unconstitutional methods and hindering their rights to freedom of speech and the right to assemble peacefully (Sommerfeldt). A settlement was reached between the city and the protesters in the amount of $100,000 with each of the 92 plaintiffs expected to receive about $230. The protesters, which included some closely associated with the national #BlackLivesMatter movement, were originally charged with obstructing a roadway and engaging in disorderly conduct. While the overwhelming majority of the city’s Metro Council voted in support of the settlement, Metro Councilmember John Delgado voted against it because he believed such settlements “encourage protesters to act recklessly in the future,” and expressed “no interest in paying $100,000 in taxpayer dollars to people who are coming into our city to protest” (Stole). Delgado ignored the violation of the protesters’ rights. He described the actions of the activists as reckless, but not the behavior of the officers in question or the officers involved in the shooting that prompted the protests to begin with. As in the past, Delgado claimed that protestors were so-called outside agitators, which implies good race relations between black and white people in Baton Rouge. Another important development that followed the killing of Alton Sterling, protests, and the ambush of law enforcement officials a short time later, was the passage of what is referred to as the Blue Lives Matter law and similar laws like it in other states.
More than a dozen states introduced bills to include police officers in hate crime laws despite the fact that all 50 states have laws that make killing a police officer punishable by death without a stated motive, which is the signature of hate crime laws. The proposals and laws call into question the motivations behind the introduction of the legislation, and the passing of the legislation in at least one state—Louisiana. Julia Craven writing about Blue Lives Matter laws says the bills and new law “[expose] an appetite to provide political sanctuary to an already protected class” (“32 Blue”) Craven furthermore reports that some activists describe the moves as “counterproductive, creating deeper divisions between police and the communities they serve” (“32 Blue”). Moreover, critics of the bills and the law contend “that including police in hate crime laws is merely a political statement and an unnecessary one at that.” Collier Meyerson, reporting on the problems associated with the bills and the law, stated that the language of the bills and the law is vague and “at their core, Blue Lives Matter bills [...] seek to turn Black Lives Matter protesters into enemies of the state.”

Another Day, Another Death in America: The Case of Philandro Castile

Just as the killing of Alton Sterling shocked the Baton Rouge community, the nation, and the world, the killing of a young, beloved, cafeteria worker also had a lasting impact on police killings and responses to them. Philandro Castile was shot by Jeronimo Yanez in Minnesota only one day after the killing of Alton Sterling. Castile was riding in a car with his girlfriend and her four-year old daughter. Yanez shot Castile shortly after Philandro Castile informed him that he had a weapon while Castile’s girlfriend broadcast the aftermath of the shooting on Facebook live (Karnowski). With total disregard for the safety of the girlfriend and the four-year-old or the humanity of anyone in the vehicle, Yanez ended the life of a beloved member of his community. Like many other officer-involved shootings, Yanez was not found guilty of second-degree manslaughter in the killing of Philandro Castile, reports Nick Visser in his article, “5 Disturbing Statements.” Yanez was encouraged to leave the force and received a buyout in the amount of at least $48,500, acknowledges Amy Forlitit in her article “Police Officer Who Shot Philandro Castile.” Sadly, Alton Sterling and Philandro Castile were only two of the nearly 260 people killed by police during the year Kaepernick started his protest. Of the at least 258 people killed by police in 2016, 39 were unarmed, 4 died after the use of stun guns, and 9 died in custody (Craven, “More than 250). Most of the black people killed by police were shot to death. According to the article about one-third of the unarmed people killed in 2016 were black men, although black men only make up about six percent of the population. It is not hard to see how Kaepernick and others were motivated to do something even if they were not sure that their particular actions would lead to transformative changes.

The Real MVP: Kaepernick Mobilizing a Movement on the Gridiron

Colin Kaepernick was careful to keep the focus where it ought be—on the unjust killings of Alton Sterling and Philandro Castile and other examples of racial injustice, although many people from fans, owners, to the President of the United States tried to direct attention
elsewhere. Perhaps some might question whether growing up in a white household may have influenced his protest. It is more likely than not that the events of the Summer 2016 weighted heavily on his consciousness. Moreover, his close relationship with teammate Eric Reid—who is from the very place where Alton Sterling was killed—likely played an important role. Reid joined Kaepernick early on in his period of protest. Martin and McHendry write about how even some of Kaepernick’s supporters made the protests more about Kaepernick’s right to protest as opposed to ongoing racial injustices. In a relatively short time period there were lots of conversations about “the culture of compulsory patriotism” (88). It seemed as if people from the stands to the front office demanded that Kaepernick not only stand during the anthem but also explain his stance. Controversies surrounding Kaepernick’s kneeling during the anthem prompted his white adoptive parents to break their silence. The Kaepernicks were stunned by what they described as a false narrative, which claimed they did not support their son and that his actions were unpatriotic and un-American (Johnson). Colin Kaepernick’s parents cited comments from Admiral Harry B. Harris Jr. as illustrative of the types of misrepresentations of Kaepernick’s motivations that could be found across various media outlets. Harris alluded to Colin Kaepernick’s protest by stating that the men and women who fought after the attack on Pearl Harbor never failed to acknowledge the national anthem (Johnson). Not only were Kaepernick’s actions viewed as un-American, but in many ways his actions were viewed as anti-white. Affirmative stands for civil and human rights for historically disadvantaged groups have historically been viewed as anti-white. One need only look at the characterizations of #BlackLivesMatter. Some white Americans view supporters of #BlackLivesMatter as racial ambulance chasers, while some others view #BlackLivesMatter as a terrorist group, like in the report by Tom Kertscher in “Pro-Sheriff David Clarke Group Says Clarke Called Black Lives Matter Hate Group, Terrorist Movement.” #BlackLivesMatter—described by organizers on the official website as a movement building project—is not only viewed by some as anti-white and anti-police, but it is also viewed as outdated by those who declared racism a relic of America’s past. Far too many white Americans see no connection between slavery and the current state of race relations in America. For some white Americans who believe the country is a colorblind society, people of African ancestry gained freedom when slavery ended, or at the latest, with the end of the modern day civil rights movement. Underlying criticism of Kaepernick’s protest is the idea that professional athletes should “shut up and play.” Professional athletes, especially professional black athletes, should be seen and not heard. These male athletes are far too often perceived through the “dumb jock” narrative. They are not viewed as total persons with lived experiences that allow them to see how, for some white Americans, racism is not viewed as normative and part of the very fabric of American life, but it is something that arises or disappears at the whim of people seeking to create problems where none exist. People who view professional black male athletes in this manner seek to minimize and discount the reality of the conditions that prompted Kaepernick’s protest. In their analysis of reactions to Kaepernick’s protest, Martin and McHendry view these defense strategies as “efforts to control the means of protest [which] ultimately end up silencing marginalized populations from voicing any discontent at all” (98). Criticisms of Kaepernick’s protest even drew a response from President Donald J. Trump who suggested NFL owners should fire anyone who does not stand for the anthem. The tone of the president’s comments and comments by NFL owners brightened the
spotlight on the protests—if not on the issue of racial inequality in America—and led the NFL owners to develop a plan that would include donations to nonprofit organizations as a demonstration of their commitment to addressing some of the challenges Kaepernick wanted to draw attention to (Belson). However, some players did not support the NFL owner’s proposal which smelled of philanthrocapitalism or socially responsible capitalism where elite whites give money to causes in order to address challenges from which they benefit or helped create (Kish and Leroy). NFL owners benefit from the structures that spatially isolate people of color and low income people. NFL owners also benefit from the limited opportunity structures to which people of color and low income people have access based upon various forms of discrimination. Consequently, far too many people of color and lower income people view sports, such as professional football, as one of very few legitimate opportunities for social mobility. NFL owners are often tied to the corporations, elected officials, and most importantly, ideologies that perpetuate the structural racial inequalities that persist in American society. Some people, including Kaepernick supporters, thought the standout quarterback could do more than kneel. They expected Kaepernick to use his status and resources to address some of the challenges facing communities of color. Kaepernick responded not by throwing money at the problem and donating to organizations with recognizable names, such as the United Negro College Fund, but he gave to grassroots organizations working to transform individuals, families, and communities (Bishop and Baskia). GQ Magazine named Colin Kaepernick, Citizen of the Year 2017. The magazine elected Kaepernick believing he risked everything to change society and put him in the rare company of people like Muhammad Ali, John Carlos, and Tommie Smith. GQ Magazine noted that of ninety quarterbacks in the NFL, Kaepernick was easily better than at least 70 of them, yet he still had not, and has not to this day, been signed to a team. He is not playing because he dared draw attention to racial injustices in America in uniform. He challenged the football establishment from one of the most powerful positions on the field—one that was off limits for people that looked like him for much of the league’s history. Kaepernick resisted in a number of ways, from kneeling to wearing his hair in such a way as to make his racial and political identity hypervisible.

Adaptive Leadership and New Social Movements

Colin Kaepernick’s personal protest mobilized others to tackle the tough challenge that is persistent racial inequality in America. Kaepernick represents a new generation of leadership whereby leaders are not people who occupy positions of authority, but by personifying a practice open to anyone at any moment in time. Ronald Heifetz, Alexander Graslow, and Marty Linsky define adaptive leadership as “the practice of mobilizing people to tackle tough challenges and thrive” (2). The goal of adaptive leadership is to have a positive social impact. Adaptive leadership builds on the past and involves experimentation. It relies on diversity and seeks to significantly displace, reregulate, and rearrange, argue Heifetz and his coauthors. Those engaged in the practice of leadership understand that adaptive change takes time and that systems are not broken but operate in the way that people benefiting from the systems want them to function. There is no crisis. Systems are structured in such a way as to yield the outcomes they get (cf. Heifetz, Graslow, and Linsky). Adaptive leaders are not popular and should not anticipate support because “no one who tries to name or address the dysfunction in an organization (or in a
country) will be popular” (Heifetz, Graslow, and Linsky 5). People in positions of power prefer “the current situation to trying something new where the consequences are unpredictable and likely to involve losses to key parties” (5). Those key parties must be willing to change their loyalties, priorities, beliefs and habits (5). Clearly, changing laws did not erase racial disparities in America in part because changing laws to achieve racial equality and/or to see racial progress represents a technical solution to an adaptive challenge. Adaptive leadership requires an understanding of the difference between technical and adaptive challenges. Kaepernick understood the difference between technical and adaptive problems and the type of responses that each required. Ronald Heifetz and Marty Linsky describe technical problems as problems that “can be solved applying existing know-how and the organization’s current problem solving processes” (2). An elite athlete, Kaepernick surely knew how to make changes to improve his performance. Adaptive problems, on the other hand, “require individuals […] to alter their ways […] as the people themselves are the problem, the solution lies with them” (2).

Kaepernick’s desire to address the problem of racial inequality in America could not be solved with a technical fix in part because some people did not see racial inequality as a problem. Kaepernick’s adaptive response was to raise awareness about racial inequality and provoke people in positions of power to work towards the creation of a more equitable society. Kaepernick is a change maker in the tradition of adaptive leadership. Heifetz and Linsky warn that change makers “may be attacked directly in an attempt to shift the debate to your character and style to avoid discussion of the issue” (3). There are many examples of attacks on Kaepernick’s character and style from people like Michael Vick to the retired army colonel to the President of the United States. There is a reason that NFL owners would assault the character of change makers like Kaepernick. “By attempting to under cut you, people strive to restore order, maintain what is familiar to them, and protect themselves from the pains of adaptive change. They want to be comfortable again and you’re in the way” (4). Heifetz and Linsky add, “when the status quo is upset, people feel a sense of profound loss and dashed expectations. They may go through a period of feeling incompetent or disloyal. It’s no wonder they resist the change or try to eliminate its visible agent” (5).

Conclusion

Kaepernick’s protest is emblematic of current modern-day movements whereby black people, from athletes to non-athletes alike, feel empowered to highlight contradictions in what and who America claims really matter. Colin Kaepernick demonstrates the same courage and bravery that people committed to social justice
issues involving race have demonstrated over many generations. Debates about whether racial progress is linear, incremental, and inevitable, as opposed to unobtainable are ongoing with no resolution in sight. What is clear is that many contemporary black athletes, and many black non-athletes, are following Kaepernick’s lead, and proclaiming their willingness to use their favored—albeit tenuous—status to draw attention to issues that far too many Americans wish to ignore. Kaepernick embodies a commitment to mobilizing others to effectuate change in their own corners of the world in ways that work best for them. The takeaway from Kaepernick’s actions is that everyone is empowered to engage in the practice of leadership and has a responsibility to use their resources—whether modest or vast—to bequeath to the next generation a nation more just than the one we inherited.

Works Cited


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