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## Notes on the uses of sport in Trump's white nationalist assemblage

In January 2016, on the campus of the University of Iowa, a public university located deep in the proverbial American heartland, Donald Trump held a political rally as part of his campaign to become the Republican nominee for the American presidency. At the time, the idea of a Trump presidency was considered a long shot. Trump began his speech that day with an odd comment: “You know, I have to start, I have to tell ya [sic], I met some real athletes today. We don't see athletes too often, do we? I have to come to Iowa to meet athletes, right?” (FOX 10 Phoenix, 2016). In the next breath, Trump summoned roughly a dozen members of the University of Iowa American football and wrestling teams to join him on stage. And despite the facts that athletes are in actuality hyper-visible all over contemporary American popular culture and approximately one-quarter of the athletes who make up the University of Iowa teams that Trump called on-stage are African-Americans, the only athletes who appeared on stage that day were white men.

The choice to begin a political rally in Iowa by showcasing athletes as a way of currying favour with supporters was not an aberration during the Trump campaign. Numerous times Trump appeared on stage with famous white sportsmen in an effort to sell himself to local audiences of American voters. In New England, Trump humble-bragged about his relationships with New England Patriots quarterback, Tom Brady, and head coach, Bill Belichick. In Pennsylvania, he name-dropped the late, legendary Penn State football coach, Joe Paterno, and current Pittsburgh Steelers, quarterback, Ben Roethlisberger (Kusz, 2016). And during a campaign stop in the deep South, Trump appeared with NASCAR CEO Brian France, driving legend Bill Elliot, and his son and current NASCAR driver, Chase Elliot (Oates, Kusz, 2019).

The Trump campaign also deployed Mike Ditka and Bobby Knight – two former, well-known coaches of American football and basketball (respectively) – at rallies and as surrogates on cable news shows to make the case for Trump to become the U.S.' 45<sup>th</sup> president. Knight and Ditka were undoubtedly chosen because, in Trump's vernacular, these white men represented 'strong', 'tough' and thoroughly American 'winners' known for

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coaching with an unapologetic, authoritarian style that supposedly ‘made men out of boys’. Even further, Ditka and Knight each famously refused to accept and be constrained by norms of cultural diversity and feminism that challenged systemic white male authority and privilege.

One might be tempted not to make much of Trump’s repeated associations with white sportsmen on the campaign trail; to regard it as little more than an old page taken from the average American politician’s campaigning playbook. On one hand, Trump’s repeated association with athletes at his political rallies could be explained as his effort to cast himself as a populist. This should come as no surprise for as Jackson Katz has noted American presidents and politicians have long used sports metaphors, sporting events, associations with sport figures, and even invented personal sporting identities and histories in an attempt to forge connections between themselves and key voting constituencies (Katz, 2013).

But, taking such a view conceals more than it reveals about Trump’s nationalist oeuvre. First, it fails to acknowledge the political value the Right has given to sport in the post-9/11 era as a cultural force that could prove useful as a medium to disseminate its revanchist racial and gender ideologies (Silk, 2012). As Mark Falcous, Matthew Hawzen and Joshua Newman explain, in 2013, far-right news and commentary website, *Breitbart News* launched *Breitbart Sports* (Falcous, Hawzen, Newman, 2018). Of course, *Breitbart News* is the website that Steve Bannon – the man who was both its former chairperson and Trump’s campaign manager and chief strategist – once described as “the platform of the alt-right” (Green, 2017: 212). Bannon created *Breitbart Sports* based on his own reading of the European New Right’s (ENR) appropriation of the Gramscian idea that political change is always ‘downstream from culture’. An editorial published during the launch of *Breitbart Sports* explicitly recognized as much stating: “sports are a key (as much as Hollywood) component driving our [America’s] cultural narrative, which by definition eventually affects our political narrative” (Falcous, Hawzen, Newman, 2018: 6-7).

Second, it risks not taking seriously the concerted manner in which Trump has repeatedly deployed sport politically – via sporting spaces, referencing sport figures, and his language of sports – to convey and advance a project that political theorist, William Connolly describes as an “aspirational fascism” meant to reconstitute American white supremacy following the Obama presidency (Connolly, 2018: xvi). Indeed, two years into his reign, in a manner that Henry Giroux has similarly described as “neo-fascist”, Trump has continued to regularly hold political rallies (often in athletic stadia), lionized white athletes through tweets and White House championship celebrations, and disparaged African-American sports figures – especially those critical of his white nationalist project (Giroux, 2017: 3). In each case, Trump employs sports to stoke racial animosities and model a performance of white male omnipotence central to his brand of white nationalism. Third, Trump’s engagement with, and use of, sportsmen – both on the campaign trail and during his presidency – evince one of the earliest and clear-

est examples of what Jeff Maskovsky calls Trump's cultural politics of "white nationalist post-racialism [...] a paradoxical politics of twenty-first-century white racial resentment [which] seek[s] to do two contradictory things [at once]: to reclaim the nation for white Americans while also denying an ideological investment in white supremacy" (Maskovsky, 2017: 434).

Perhaps the best-known example of how Trump uses sport to advance his nationalist project is his criticism of former NFL quarterback's, Colin Kaepernick's, protest of police brutality and continued racial oppression in the United States by taking a knee during the national anthem. While Trump's denunciation of Kaepernick is an oft-cited example of how he has used sports to advance his retrogressive politics (and one that has been thoroughly and rightfully examined critically by many academics [Forst, 2017; Marston, 2017; Martin, McHendry, 2016; Rorke, Copeland, 2017; Spencer et al., 2016]), it represents only one case of Trump's consistent use of sports to convey his nationalist project. What I argue here is that more scholarly attention should be given to how the language, spaces, and logics of sport are key constitutive parts of Trump's white nationalism and how white sportsmen are employed to re-center a particular performance of white manhood in the cultural life of the American nation. Doing so would not only concretize the cultural practices through which Trump is renewing what historian Stephen Kantrowitz calls "white man's prerogatives", as a means of reconstituting white supremacy in the 21st century (Kantrowitz, 2000: 94), but it provides empirical support for the quotidian ways in which Trump advances "white nationalist postracialism" (Maskovsky, 2017: 434) in and through his nationalist project.

So, in the space provided, I offer some developing interpretations on what I see as two inter-related questions. First, how sport been used to cultivate and popularize the proto-fascist white nationalist project(s) currently gripping the United States. And second, how does sport facilitates the production and popularization of the unapologetic and omnipotent performance of white masculinity central to the contemporary American white nationalist assemblage?

To address these questions, I critically examine not only Trump's uses of sport, but also two other cultural sites that also form a part of today's white nationalist assemblage – alt-right figure, Richard Spencer's essays and tweets to promote his identitarian brand of white nationalism and recent media representations of National Football League superstar, Tom Brady, a man who Trump loves to call a 'good friend' – to show how they also promote (in Spencer's case) or normalize (in Brady's case) racial and gender ideas and affects that inform and advance his nationalist project to "Make America Great Again". To understand how sports play a role in Trump's white nationalist project and the broader assemblage of Trumpism, it is vital to explain how both are complex products of the post-9/11 era and a concerted conservative effort to mobilize sport as a national space where the desires, values, and interests of successful white men come first.

### **On context: excavating some cultural roots of Trump's white nationalism**

Trump's white nationalist project, of course, grows out of the current wave of xenophobia, nativism, right-wing, anti-refugee, anti-Muslim strongman nationalisms taking hold across the globe. Additionally, Trump's nationalism draws on a longer genealogy of American nativist and populist rhetoric, ideologies, and movements tracing back at least to the 1930s. Through his actions and rhetoric, Trump also makes clear a persistent theme of recent scholarship on American white supremacist and right-wing populist movements over the past two decades – the ideologies and rhetoric used by mainstream conservatives and avowed white supremacists have converged (Ansell, 1997; Berlet, Lyons, 2000; Ferber, 1998; Holling, 2011; Ferber, Kimmel, 2000; Swain, 2003). More than any other post-civil rights era U.S. President, Trump links the American State with avowed white supremacists thereby amplifying their ideologies and interests. He does this not only through his rhetoric, tweets, and policies, but by persistently and theatrically performing white male omnipotence, a manly way of acting largely only publicly available to white men acting unashamed about being socially privileged, refusing to be contained by norms and values of cultural diversity and feminism, and pride fully restoring a strong white man to the foremost seat of American power and rekindling the idea that deference from all others is white men's natural right (Kimmel, 2013; Kusz, 2018; Pascoe, 2017).

But, it is important to note that Trump's bellicose nationalism shares much in common with the George W. Bush administration's post-9/11 rhetoric, performances, and policies (even if Trump has expressed these sentiments in more crude and vulgar ways than Bush II ever did). The nativist, Islamophobic, and androcentric impulses Trump has cultivated and extended through his nationalist project grew out of three main vectors. First, what Michael Silk describes as "a 'preferred,' phallic [...] patriarchal body politic [that emerged in the aftermath of the 9/11 terrorist attacks that was] explicitly entwined with [...] a myopic expression of American jingoism, militarism, and geopolitical domination" (Silk, 2012: 211). And second, what Joshua Inwood has called a "white counter-revolutionary politics" (Inwood, 2018: 1) that was re-ignited in response to the Obama presidency. Indeed, Matthew Hughey and Gregory Parks meticulously document the disturbing nativist, Islamophobic, anti-black, and anti-immigrant sentiments directed at President Obama by white conservatives during the Obama years. But, even more prescient Hughey and Parks foresaw and foretold the production of "*a dangerous...white supremacist ideology and practice ...[that] together reveal[ed] the existence of a Herrenvolk (white master race) democracy in the midst of the supposed 'post-racial' era of Barack Obama*" (Hughey, Parks, 2014: 7; italics added). While Hughey and Parks do not explicitly articulate Trump with this Herrenvolk ideology and practice, we must not forget the key role he played in stoking racial hysteria as the most prominent voice

in the Birtherism movement that questioned Obama's citizenship. Additionally, during the heart of the Obama years, Trump's celebrity was rejuvenated in the American imaginary through his role as a white 'master-businessman' on NBC's *The Apprentice*. Third, "a fragmented, deregulated, interactive and increasingly factionalized mediascape" across traditional, digital, and/or social media (Ouellette, Banet-Weiser, 2018: 4) has created an affective networking of tropes and narratives centered on white male victimization, aggrieved entitlement, conspiracy theories, and compensatory fantasies of white male omnipotence (Johnson, 2019; Kusz, 2018), including sport media (Kusz, 2001; 2007; Leonard, 2012; 2017; Newman, 2007; Newman, Giardina, 2010; Falcous, Hawzen, Newman, 2018). Today's white nationalist assemblage functions domestically in the United States to unapologetically advance viewpoints and public policies that prioritize straight, Christian white men's interests and rights above all others in American civil society (Giroux, 2017).

Much scholarship in sport studies has illuminated how sporting discourses, spaces, and consumption became key (even if often overlooked) cultural, social, and political sites produced by, and expressive of, these narrow forms of patriotism, masculinism, racial citizenship, and nationalism in post-9/11 America (Butterworth, 2008; Fischer, 2014; Schimmel, 2012; Silk, Falcous, 2005; Stempel, 2006; Weedon, 2012). But, Silk provides perhaps the most comprehensive accounting of how "the sporting popular [...] transmit[ed] particular understandings about 'us', 'we', [and] 'them' and so on in the aftermath of 9/11" (Silk, 2012: 11) that created the discursive ground for Trump's more extreme white nationalism. As Silk explains:

This was a moment in which [...] ruling elites appropriated sport as a space in which to forward [its preferred] political rhetoric, in which the collective affinity between Pentagon, Hollywood, and the networks reached new heights, in which corporate entities operated to contour national narratives, and in which a rhetoric of fear, terror, religiosity, and moral authority and absolutism was sutured into sporting narratives [...] this was a moment, then, in which the banal, the sporting popular, was harnessed, politicized, and as an affective public pedagogy, deployed as soft-core weaponry [...] on both a domestic and national stage [...] to define nation and its citizenry, and to demonize and pathologize [those defined as] others (Silk, 2012: 3).

And perhaps the clearest example of the sporting nationalisms that emerged post-9/11 was the branding of NASCAR as 'NASCAR Nation' (Kusz, 2007; Leonard, 2017; Newman, Giardina, 2010; Silk, 2012). Silk forwards NASCAR as "cultural conservatives' clearest and most intentional, attempt to politicize sport and mobilize it as an affective means of generating support for the Bush administration" (Silk, 2012: 216). But not to go overlooked, during this same period a casual, quotidian discourse of nationalism constructing various sporting fan bases as 'nations' also emerged in media and marketing discourses as a novel way of branding sport at all levels (the Boston 'Red Sox Nation', U.S. Soccer's 'One Nation, One Team', and the University of Rhode Island's 'Rhody Nation' are examples). While this emergent sporting nationalist idiom is not in any sim-

ple way uniformly linked to any particular ideological, political, or racial meanings, at the very least it primed American publics for the use of nationalist languages by a politician like Trump. In his analysis of the links between sport and what some have called ‘Trumpism,’ David Andrews argues that today’s American ‘uber-sport’ formation – of which the language of sporting ‘nations’ is a key part – tends to reinforce more socially conservative ideas about nation through consumer-friendly norms, values, and practices (Andrews, 2019).

So while it is tempting to cast Trump and his campaign as the origin of a decisive shift in white hegemony in 2016, today’s American white nationalist assemblage was enabled by social and discursive conditions already in place in the post-9/11 era just waiting for a strongman political candidate to emerge who was more than willing to exploit growing sentiments of white anger and wounded masculinity just as Trump did.

### **On white male prerogative and Trump**

Through his omnipotent, authoritarian performance of white masculinity Trump is leading the drive to renew white male prerogative as the governing logic of American institutional and cultural life. Thus, it is vital that we take seriously the meanings, affect, and effects of Trump’s performance of white masculinity. Benjamin Moffitt argues that in today’s hypermediated age, efforts to understand politics must “stress the performative dimension of contemporary politics” (Moffitt, 2016: 7). In particular, he argues that especially in this age of populist politics, political analysis must focus more on “the political style of politicians” to make sense of their appeal. Moffitt defines political style as “the repertoires of embodied, symbolically mediated performance made to audiences that are used to create and navigate the fields of power that comprise the political, stretching from the domain of government through to everyday life” (Moffitt, 2016: 7). What this means here is that understanding Trump’s white nationalism means focusing not only on the policies of his administration, but also on how he constitutes and conveys his white nationalist project through an “embodied [and] symbolically mediated performance” of white male prerogative whether on the campaign trail, in interviews, as a Twitter troll, as White House host, and/or at his political rallies (amongst innumerable other spaces, places, and presidential roles) (Moffitt, 2016: 7).

Informed by Stephen Kantrowitz’s use of the term white male prerogative might best be explained by contrasting it with the concept of white privilege. White privilege can be described as a set of social, psychic, cultural, economic, and political benefits and preferences those defined as ‘white’ *passively* enjoy because they are built into and supported by the norms, values, customs, laws, and dominant ideologies that constitute a white-dominant/normative system. In contrast, white male prerogative refers to an *active, assertive* way of being (almost always accompanied by a threat to violence or to violate) that works before, within, and even beyond laws and norms to force powerful

white men's interests to precede and outweigh all others. White male prerogative proceeds from the conviction that white men's interests should come before all others and that they deserve rights, opportunities, and privileges *that should not be available to others*. This conviction may rest (although it does not depend upon) a tacit belief that white men have a natural or innate superiority relative to other social groups (Kantrowitz, 2000; italics added). As Trump has shown, white male prerogative can be difficult to contain or challenge by opposition in real time as it is being enacted in formal, institutional spaces. White men who wield it very often mobilize cultural norms and expectations of civility and legal standards to their advantage if they believe they will support their interests. Or, they may ignore such expectations or standards completely and confidently with a conviction that what is considered norm, law, value, custom, and ideology are all ultimately dependent on, and defined by their will as powerful, assertive white men. This conviction and the corresponding practices central to white male prerogative are enabled and buffered by institutionalized white and male social privileges that enjoy a measure of cultural inertia, protection, and investment by those who imagine themselves as 'white,' groups of whites, and white-dominant institutions.

The main appeal of Trump with his supporters is the affect he generates via his performance – and their consumption – of white male prerogative. But, this affective relation between Trump and his white supporters can not be separated from Trump's white male body; that is, they find affective pleasure in the specific ways he moves, speaks, occupies space, and relates to others (particularly to immigrants, racial and religious minorities, women, liberals, and political opponents). His appeal (and perhaps the disdain experienced by critics) lies in the self-assured attitude he displays as a white man and in the ways he comports his body to expect deference from others and to attempt to 'own the room'. The appeal of Trump's performance of white male omnipotence is constituted through his will to speak his mind and act without apology; his unabashed taste for unbridled masculine authority; his shamelessness; his steadfast refusal to take responsibility for his actions; and his resolve to live within his own version of reality. In today's slang, Trump's drawing card is his swagger. Trump's guttural appeal to anxious whites is the unspoken sum of these parts.

This understanding of Trump's appeal is further corroborated by the comments of self-professed white nationalist and alt-right poster boy (circa 2016), Richard Spencer, the leader of the National Policy Institute which according to its website is "dedicated to the heritage, identity, and future of people of European descent in the United States, and around the world" (National Policy Institute, 2019). According to Spencer, Trump's appeal lies more in his performative style than policy substance:

I don't think our support of Trumpism really about policy at the end of the day [...] I think it's really about Trump's style, the fact that he doesn't back down, the fact that he's willing to confront his enemies, mostly on the left. There's something about him [...] that is infectious [...] you look at that and you think: this is what a leader looks like, this is what we want. Even in all

his vulgarity and I would never deny him, this is what we want in a leader. This is someone who can make the future. So I think that is the way I would define our love of Trump (Spencer, cited from: Media Matters Staff, 2016).

Trump's performance of white male prerogative also tacitly affirms many white working folks' 'common sense' distrust of cultural elites and professional class experts (Williams, 2017). His anti-elitist attitude toward liberals belies the faux-aristocratic sense of superiority he conjures about himself. In combining a blunt style of 'telling it how it is' with his wealth and celebrity, Trump enacts white male prerogative to bend the world to his will (Sullivan, 2016). Such a performance of white masculinity – guilt-free, successful, non-deferential, unconstrained, and unapologetic – feels liberating to anxious whites in an era where, according to Arlie Hochschild's ethnographic work and Lauren Berlant's cultural reading, they feel they have lost ground to 'minorities', professional women, and the hegemony of cultural diversity logics that have left them feeling silenced, stressed, and ashamed (Hochschild, 2017; Berlant, 2016).

And perhaps the most alarming aspect of Trump's performance of white masculinity is how time and time again he has been able to defy and rewrite the conventional logics of how to be a presidential candidate and president. It demonstrates the efficacy of white male prerogative as a cultural and political force. At stake for Trump, like his supporters who feel aggrieved and anxious about their perception of the declining social and psychological value of whiteness in American civic life, is a struggle to re-secure ways of seeing and sense making about American social life that not only put white Americans in the center of American culture and a first priority for the allocation of State resources and opportunities, but to make such an articulation beyond debate.

### **On some uses of sport in the Trump assemblage**

Let us now turn to illuminating the ways that sport is used by Trump and others within the Trump assemblage to advance white male prerogative through his project of white nationalism. I want to briefly return to the 2016 Iowa campaign rally mentioned previously to make visible its cultural politics. Trump begins this political rally by surrounding himself with young white male athletes to tacitly convey the central aim of his nationalist project – renewing cultural reverence for white men who signify an omnipotent masculine ideal and forwarding these white men as ideal national citizen to his audiences. The scene's seductive affect draws from a familiar part of American folk culture – the spectacle and fantasy of the homecoming pep rally and football game (the rally even takes place in a gymnasium!). The codes and rituals of the pep rally and game that Trump rallies draw upon are so pervasive and mythologized they need not be explicitly spoken. Whether intentionally or not, Trump's use of this nostalgic sporting referent and folk cultural idiom connects with the almost exclusively white audiences that attend Trump rallies. It functions to interpellate white Trump supporters in what



seems to them to be a race neutral way and enables them to become a 'we' that can, at once, be both local and national, centered around the interests, bodies, and prerogatives of white (sports)men serving as symbols of national renewal.

Sport is central to this articulation of a white, androcentric fantasy of nostalgically reviving the 'good ole days' for anxious white Americans. Given Trump's longer history of connecting himself to sports and games like football, gambling, professional wrestling, and golf to build the Trump brand (Oates, 2017; Oates, Kusz, 2019), it should not be underestimated that he would use sport to build his political brand. His political rallies contain elements of contemporary (post)modern sporting events with their attendant pre-game theme songs, theatrical introductions, orchestrated crowd chants, and an 'us vs. them' rivalry dynamic. Despite his many incompetencies, Trump clearly recognizes that drawing on the logics and rituals of sporting events can help him affectively connect with white American audiences. Implicit in the pleasures of the Trump rally is the idea that this white-dominant imagined community could relive the 'good ole days' and 'best of times' conjured in the spectacle of the homecoming pep rally and football game if only manly white men – who he frequently describes as a rarefied class of 'total winners' – would be given the cultural and institutional reverence they deserve.

Now I do not mean to overlook or minimize the way in which Trump rallies repeatedly perform the cultural work of othering particular groups, defining them as enemies and/or aliens within Trump's vision of the nation. But, some disgusted by Trump's xenophobia, nativism, racism, and Islamophobia have dismissed these rallies as little more than festivals of hate and have not given sufficient analytic attention to the pleasures these rallies also offer anxious whites; in particular, how they offer an affirmative vision of the nation manned by a strong, tough white man who speaks their language and seems willing to fight for them. Through his rallies, in a clearly proto-fascist manner, Trump orchestrates a virtual experience of the nation where he plays the role of the legendary coach or star quarterback leading his (white) team to a victory of taking back what they perceive as 'their' country. As Berlant highlights, part of the pleasure of a Trump rally for his supporters is that they get to see a performance of unbridled, unapologetic white masculinity on stage "not seeming to care about the consequences of what he says" and they enjoy "the feel of his freedom" (Berlant, 2016). So then, part of the process of renewing white supremacy in Trump's America takes the form of a sporting-like event where white Americans are urged to make a choice as to what 'team' they belong to and support. The logic of sporting rivalry and loyalty reduces complex and difficult conversations about citizenship rights to facile tests of loyalty to nation or Trump. That Trump gives much political weight to these sporting logics and the symbolic value of white sportsmen to his nationalist project is further evinced in his reported desire to stage a 'winner's evening' at the 2016 Republican convention because "our country needs to see winners [...] We don't see winners anymore" (Corasaniti, 2016).

Many of these dynamics can also be seen in Trump's use of former college basketball coach, Bobby Knight, as an advocate on the campaign trail. Knight professed that his preference for Trump was based in his being a "tough son-of-a-bitch and there isn't going to be anybody that pushes an administration around that Donald Trump is in charge of" (ABC News, 2016). Through his praise of Knight, Trump's predilection for authoritarian performances of white masculinity was consistently revealed. Indeed, Knight featured as a Trump surrogate because of, not despite, his refusal to adopt and be contained by the norms of political correctness, feminism, and multiculturalism. Lest we forget, like a white slaveholder, Knight once brazenly staged a photo-op where he 'jokingly' wielded a bullwhip on an African-American player. He also infamously answered a question about handling pressure as a coach by stating: "if rape is inevitable, relax and enjoy it" (Moran, 1988). So in Knight, Trump aligned himself with a white sportsman who was not simply a winner, but one who had a long track-record of authoritarian actions (often wielded against women and African-Americans) tacitly signifying his investment in Trump's brand of white nationalism qua the renewal of white male prerogative. Yet, while stumping for Trump, Knight's controversial past was largely elided. Instead he was affirmatively cast as a 'humble patriot' who willingly enlisted in Trump's project to "Make America Great Again" in response to, the putative horror of the Obama presidency.

When campaigning for Trump, Knight also drew on a language of white nationalist post-racialism when commenting on Colin Kaepernick's protest of police brutality and continued racial oppression:

If I were the man in charge he'd be looking for another job. I wouldn't want that on my team... It has taken away from our objective and that's winning. To really discredit [the United States], as a citizen [...] is beyond anything what I could understand. I mean I don't know where in the world you could go whether you're black, white, green, Indian, whatever the heck you are and have a better opportunity to live than in the USA, that just boggles my mind (Fox Business, 2017).

Through his comments, Knight not only dismisses the centrality of race in the United States' history of defining citizenship, but he conveys a white supremacist expectation that people of colour subordinate their interests, voices, and will to freedom to an implicitly white team/nation, even if it shows little respect for their rights and humanity. These comments parallel Trump's response to a new NFL policy mandating players stand during the national anthem or remain in the locker room: "You have to stand proudly for the national anthem or you shouldn't be playing, you shouldn't be there. *Maybe you shouldn't be in the country*" (Lockhart, 2018, italics added).

On another occasion during the 2016 campaign, while addressing a virtually all-white crowd at a Trump rally, Knight said:

We need a Donald Trump. You need him. Your children need him. We need someone who is smart, tough, and loves the USA [...] we've spent eight years with, probably, the worst prepared president [President Obama] for the job that we've ever had, it wasn't his fault, it was our fault for not finding someone who is better than he was (ABC News, 2016).

While the racial meaning of the 'we' and the positioning of Trump as a savior needed for 'your children' is unspoken, its implication is clear. Through his description of the US' first black president as historically deficient and 'our fault' for not finding someone better, Knight's comments concretize Hughey and Parks' (2014) insight about the formation of a Herrenvolk white supremacist ideology in the Obama era.

Similar racial logics are also at work in Trump and his administration's swift criticisms of African-American athletes and sport personalities like former ESPN newscaster, Jemele Hill, and NBA star, Steph Curry. In the latter case, Curry drew Trump's ire when he declared he would not accept a White House invitation to celebrate the Warriors' 2017 NBA championship because he does not "stand for what our President has said and the things that he hasn't said in the right times" (Amick, 2017a). In response Trump tweeted: "Going to the White House is considered a great honour for a championship team. Stephen Curry is hesitating, therefore invitation is withdrawn!" (Amick, 2017b). While many trivialized Trump's response as the sort of immature power-play typical of an adolescent or insecure man, I contend that Trump's response reveals the import he gives to symbolic performances of white male prerogative as a part of his nationalist project. In this case, Trump engages in a very public performance of white male prerogative in an attempt to ensure that American cultural and institutional authority and agency lay in the hands of a white man rather than a person of colour.

In the case of Jemele Hill, then anchor of ESPN's flagship evening broadcast of *Sports center*, Trump and his administration took the offensive against her after discovering that she tweeted: "Donald Trump is a white supremacist who has largely surrounded himself w/ other white supremacists" (Gardner, 2018). Over the next three days, White House Press Secretary, Sarah Huckabee Sanders, railed against Hill, first calling her comments a "fireable offense," before walking those comments back, calling them "highly inappropriate" and recommending "ESPN should take actions" (ESPN subsequently suspended Hill for two weeks) (Draper, 2017). This performance of white male prerogative – carried out not only by Trump, but his surrogates, including a white woman via a war of words and the use of the White House's bully pulpit – not only challenges the idea of a free press, but it exemplifies the contradictory and asymmetrical, yet self-serving, way in which white male prerogative operates for Trump. On one hand, it allows him to relentlessly and maliciously disparage women, immigrants, people of colour, and Muslim Americans almost daily with impunity. But in the face of any criticism, he marshals the forces of norms of civility, the Twitter mob, and the authority of the State against his critics, like Hill, to undermine her statement and right to speak (even despite how her comment is supported by credible historical evidence).

Finally, Trump's use of sport to perform white male prerogative is also evident in his decision to serve fast food to various championship college sport teams who were invited to the White House. This strange practice began when Clemson University's football team was being honoured in the midst of a federal government shutdown manufactured by Trump in January 2019. Trump's stunt was not only aimed at distracting the masses

from the shutdown while reaffirming his supposed populist ties, but it also showed his willingness to defy the food norms of cultural elites (who he associates with the Left) and White House decorum if he so chooses. Additionally, the White House made sure that the American public knew Trump paid for the food out of his own pocket. Through it all, Trump used this ceremonial event associated with sport to play the role of paternal provider to those he defines as key members of the national family – America’s winning sportsmen. And, mirroring his rhetoric from the aforementioned University of Iowa rally, according to one report, Trump saved his highest praise for Clemson’s (white) quarterback, Trevor Lawrence that “tall, handsome quarterback they say [is a] great athlete. That’s nice” (*White House serves fast food on silver platters for Clemson celebration*, 2019).

Indeed, when one decodes Trump’s uses of sport – especially during the 2016 campaign, his tweets, and his rallies – the white, androcentric contours and contents of his nationalist project get revealed not just in broad, vague brushstrokes, but in specific detail as a militant renewal of white supremacy through the restoration of white male prerogative as incontrovertible national norm.

Next, I would like to round out my discussion of the ways that sport is used within Trump’s white nationalist assemblage by analyzing some recent cultural representations and appropriations of New England Patriots’ quarterback, Tom Brady. Brady’s performance of white masculinity is a key symbol in Trump’s white nationalist sporting assemblage not only because of his friendship with the President and his reluctance to publicly criticize Trump (Kalaf, 2015; Kusz, 2017; Stern, 2016), but because of the way promotional and media representations of Brady offer a vision of white male omnipotence consistent with that figured not only in Trump’s rhetoric and actions, but in the ways in which avowed white nationalists also use Brady as a symbol to spread their ideologies and affects (Kusz, 2020).

We can begin by noting how media discourses constituting Brady construct him as an omnipotent ideal of American (white) manliness. Advertising campaigns with highbrow companies such as Aston Martin, Beautyrest, Uggs, and Tag Heuer conspicuously figure Brady as an elitist embodiment of white masculinity located far from the sorts of working class codes and aesthetics often associated with professional American football. This idea of Brady is reinforced by the G.O.A.T (Greatest Of All Time) moniker recently given to him by American sports media and via the social media of his supporters. As a five-time Super Bowl champion, four-time Super Bowl Most Valuable Player, and three-time league MVP, Brady is frequently portrayed and imagined as an athletic master who is deserving of universal and unquestioned praise and deference from Americans but should also be beyond criticism because of his athletic accomplishments. Through these discourses Brady is repeatedly cast as a James Bond-like omnipotent ideal of American manliness (via his statuses as NFL quarterback, wealthy man, and sex symbol) who has the world at his fingertips. This master status ‘sticks’ to Brady’s white male body (Ahmed, 2004) through a discourse that constitutes him as having an exceptional will and discipline as demon-

strated through his meticulous diet and training habits (Abouarrage, 2018; Evans, 2015; Harrington, 2016; Hrustic, 2017; Lee, 2017; Leibovich 2015; Sargent, 2016). Brady himself even reifies this idea of himself through the careful way he curates his public image via interviews, social media, and promotion of his lifestyle brand, as noted in his book, *The TB12 Method: How to Achieve A Lifetime of Sustained Peak Performance* (Brady, 2017).

These representations of Brady rely on, as they reproduce, a long-standing myth used to (re)produce white supremacy especially in its civilizing iterations – the idea that whites possess a natural, innate quality, or spirit, irreducible to the body, that produces their exceptionality (Bederman, 1996; Dyer, 1997). This articulation of a natural superiority innate to white masculinity dovetails with Trump's habitual labeling of white sportsmen like Brady as 'winners' and his predilection for biological determinist explanations of social actions and outcomes (Oates, Kusz, 2019). The ideas that constitute this taken for granted understanding of Brady as a quarterbacking-master not only resonate with the Herrenvolk master race ideology Hughey and Parks argue has taken form in American culture since the Obama years (Hughey, Parks, 2014), but it parallels the rendering of Trump as Businessman-master on *The Apprentice*. Thus, Brady and Trump have been rendered visible in this era of white nationalism as two omnipotent white masculinities deserving of public respect and reverence because they are masters of their own respective universes.

Finally, the inclusion of Brady as a potent symbol in Trump's white nationalist assemblage is reinforced through his appearance in an Under Armour television spot titled "Rule Yourself". The ad debuted just five days after a red "Make America Great Again" hat was first found in Brady locker. The discovery of the Trump MAGA hat in Brady's locker sparked media speculation about whether Brady shared the nativist, misogynist, and xenophobic ideas Trump espoused while campaigning. In retrospect, this Under Armour commercial – with its digitally-manufactured images of thousands of Brady moving in strict unison and outfitted in red and black Nazi colors and visual aesthetics – constitutes an early cultural site within the Trump assemblage through which the ideologies and affects of white nationalist post-racialism were most explicitly on display. Particularly noteworthy about "Rule Yourself" is how it offers a vision of the American nation where cultural difference is eradicated. In its place is a proto-fascist, militarized vision of white male homogeneity and omnipotence and neoliberal American citizenship as embodied in/by Tom Brady. Dressed in red and black clothing subtly adorned with American stars and stripes and military camouflage, Brady, the so-called G.O.A.T. magically multiplies into an army of identical Tom Bradys. Tacitly, Under Armour's advert forwards a vision of an idealized America where only omnipotent white male winners matter. It is a vision of race and nation that could have been taken from Leni Reifenthal's Nazi propaganda film *Triumph des Willens*. And lest we forget, Trump's love of 'winners' is the vernacular through which he expresses his brand of white supremacy. In "Rule Yourself", we see how Brady's refined and seemingly apolitical 'all-American' white

masculinity could be easily sutured to a peculiar expression of muscular racialized nationalism rooted in Nazi aesthetics. When read retrospectively, Brady's "Rule Yourself" ad represents one of the first public examples of Maskovsky's (2017) "white nationalist post-racialism" (434) that constituted the then emerging Trump white (proto-fascist) nationalist assemblage. This advert, like that strain of criticism of Kaepernick's protest that asserts his kneeling during the national anthem disrespected the sacrifices of American soldiers to ensure our freedoms, reveals how contemporary displays of militaristic nationalism, especially in the Trump era, too often become a conduit for re-centering white men as the most valued citizens in the American national imaginary. And if we read Brady's "Rule Yourself" image intertextually with his living, breathing self that is frequently imagined as the embodiment of white male perfection, that is, as the American who has it all – riches, athletic prowess, fame, supermodel wife, and healthy family – then part of Brady's appeal is how he symbolizes the antithesis of, and antidote to, the embattled, anxious, racially paranoid white American male who fears he has lost it all in the post-9/11, globalized, Obama-era America.

This critical reading of various representations of Brady's white masculinity is corroborated by the repeated ways in which avowed alt-right figures like Richard Spencer and others have seized on Brady's image and accomplishments as a means of disseminating their ideas of white identity politics and white nationalism to broader American publics. In 2017, Spencer, who was only recently gaining wider attention as one of the leaders of the Alt-Right, attempted to use Brady's historic comeback in the United States' showcase sporting event, Super Bowl LI, to spread his ideas about identitarianism, white nationalism, and white identity politics. As Richard King and David Leonard have demonstrated, the White Right, not to mention social/racial conservatives (Carrington, 1998, 2010; Kusz, 2001, 2007; Leonard, 2012) have long used sport to advance their white supremacist beliefs whether through the website, *Caste Football*, or through various threads on *Stormfront* (King, Leonard, 2014; see also Leonard, King, Kusz, 2007). The value of sport to his white nationalist project was first made apparent to Spencer during the national media maelstrom that resulted from an alleged rape of an African-American female stripper by three members of the Duke Lacrosse team during a 2007 team party and was reportedly a key event in his radicalization (Wiedeman, 2017). At the time, Spencer was attending Duke University as a graduate student. Within a year, Spencer quit school and began honing his white identitarian beliefs through writings, in part, about what he saw as the racial politics of Duke Men's Basketball. For example, he praised coach Mike Krzyzewski for creating a successful basketball programme with a white-dominant roster (Spencer, 2015a). In another essay, he conspired that the Duke team's all-black starting fives from 2013-15 were part of an effort to present a diversity-friendly picture of the university to the public in the aftermath of the Duke Lacrosse scandal (Spencer, 2015b).

And as Brady was leading the Patriots to an extraordinary comeback victory in Super Bowl LI over the Atlanta Falcons, Spencer began repeatedly tweeting about Brady and the Patriots' win:

Brady and Belichick are about to win bigly for Trump, the #AltRight, and White America!  
Tom Brady: Aryan Avatar #superbowl”  
For the White race, it's never over  
[Accompanied by pictures of Brady and Trump in similar poses] #Superbowl  
#NewEnglandPatriots#MakeAmericaGreatAgain (Chabba, 2017).

Spencer's tweets reveal how he transformed Brady's athletic accomplishment into a fantasy of white male omnipotence that attempted draw folks to his and Trump's interrelated white nationalist projects. And uncoincidentally Spencer attempted to spread his ideology in the context of the Super Bowl, America's quintessential national sporting/cultural event. The importance the alt-right gives to the fantasy of white male omnipotence drawing white men into their movement is also exhibited in a post written by Andrew Anglin, creator of the *Daily Stormer* white supremacist website, days before Charlottesville in 2017:

We are now at a magical point in history [...] the Alt-Right is ready to move off of the internet, into the real world [...] The plan was always to build a real political movement. Our target audience is white males between the ages of 10 and 30. I include children as young as ten, because an element of this is that *we want to look like superheroes. We want to be something that boys fantasize about being a part of.* That is a core element to this [...]. This means *we have to look good, we have to look dangerous, we have to have humor, we have to look powerful and we have to look like we are in control. People who see us have to want to be us. That means you have to go to the gym* (Anglin, 2017, italics added).

Anglin's post makes clear the value that white supremacists give to a fantasy of white male omnipotence to the reconstruction of white supremacy in the post-Obama era.

And not six months into the Trump presidency, Spencer once again used sport to disseminate his white nationalist ideas to broader American audiences. In a 4-part series titled, *American Race*, produced by American cable network, TNT, Spencer sat down to talk about race with outspoken African-American former NBA star, Charles Barkley. Through this dialogue, Spencer offered a broader American audience his own performance of white male prerogative, explaining in a plain, deliberate, unapologetic, and self-assured manner his beliefs about racial separatism, white superiority, and the legitimacy of white rule and sovereignty over all others to Barkley, including his desire to “expand and deepen white privilege” (TNT, 2017).

## Conclusions

As each of the above examples show, Trump and those in the Trump white nationalist assemblage have repeatedly circulated their ideologies and affects in and through refer-

ences to sport, sporting language, or in sporting spaces whether on the campaign trail, at Trump rallies, via Twitter, on cable television, or in the on-line spaces of the alt-right. Despite this consistent representational pattern, the role of sport in the production and dissemination of these white supremacist qua white nationalist ideas has been largely overlooked, dismissed, or minimized by many academics and pundits, with only a few exceptions (Andrews, 2019; Falcoux, Hawzen, Newman, 2018). In this essay, I have provided ample empirical evidence of the varied ways Trump used sport to model and venerate a performance of white male omnipotence, vital to popularizing their projects of white nationalism. The uses of sport to lionize a performance of white male omnipotence makes sense when one considers political theorist, William Connolly's claim that:

[A]nxious white males in the working and middle classes seek models of masculinity with whom to identify in a world of uncertainty. *Corporate elites, sports heroes, financial wizards, and military leaders project images of independence, mastery, and virility that can make them attractive models of identification*, whereas state welfare programs, market regulations, retirement schemes, and health care, while essential to life, may remind too many of the very fragilities, vulnerabilities, susceptibilities, and dependencies they strive to deny or forget (Connolly, 2013: 23-24; italics added).

Given Connolly's reading of anxious white masculinity in post-9/11 America, I have argued that not enough attention is being given to the way in which Trump's appeal is driven by a desire to renew white male prerogative, an institutional force in American civic life, and the concomitant appetite for performances of white male omnipotence as a retrogressive reaction against social and cultural changes to American traditions and norms that previously centered performances of white, straight, Christian, patriarchal manliness in a taken for granted manner.

Finally, part of the resistance to Trump's white nationalist assemblage must include making sense of the gender and racial aspects of the appeal of performances of white male omnipotence, whether performed by Trump, Brady, Spencer, or others. In order to challenge Trump's appeal – and those who will surely attempt to plagiarize his demagoguery in the near future – progressives must recognize that in the absence of real reforms, or alternatives to neoliberal global capitalism and its ideology of market fundamentalism, anxious white men, in particular, will invest their energies in omnipotent fantasies of white manhood as a salve to their feelings of anxiety, impotency, or resentment.

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**Abstract:** Using conjunctural analysis and informed by insights drawn from critical whiteness studies, sport studies, and masculinity studies, I offer some developing interpretations on two inter-related questions. First, how sport has been used to cultivate and popularize the proto-fascist white nationalist project(s) currently gripping the United States. And second, how sport facilitates the production and popularization of the unapologetic and omnipotent performance of white masculinity that seems central to the popular appeal of this contemporary American white nationalist assemblage. To address these questions, I critically examine the patterned ways Donald Trump, first as candidate and then as President, has used sport to promote his white nationalist project. Additionally, I critically unpack the writings and performances of two white male cultural figures who are key figures within Trump nationalist assemblage. The first, Richard Spencer, coined the label 'alternative right'. The second, National Football League superstar, Tom Brady, is a man who Trump loves to call a 'good friend'. I contend that, like Trump, they venerate (in Spencer's case) and normalize (in Brady's case) an idealized performance of white masculinity I call white male omnipotence, that is central to explaining the appeal of Trump's nationalist project to "Make America Great Again" for many anxious white Americans.

**Keywords:** white nationalism, sport, masculinity, Trump, whiteness

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