“A Postgame Interview for the Ages”: Richard Sherman and the Dialectical Rhetoric of Racial Neoliberalism

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Abstract
This essay analyzes articulations of race and power as they surfaced in the media uproar surrounding National Football League (NFL) star Richard Sherman’s notorious 2014 National Football Conference (NFC) Championship post-game “interview for the ages.” It charts two dialectical poles of representation: overtly racist denunciations of Sherman as a classless “thug” and counter-representations of self-enterprising talent. I argue these competing images register “permissible narratives of difference” that underwrite a neoliberal, post-racial project. The article thus explores how Sherman’s newfound celebrity authorizes “official antiracisms” of post-racial rhetoric, which foreclose alternatives to the privatization and depoliticization of racial discourse.

Keywords
Richard Sherman, NFL, celebrity, official antiracism, neoliberalism, post-race

A Star Is Born
Sport culture, writes David Leonard and C. Richard King (2011), is “one of the few places in American society where there is a consistent racial discourse”; especially when it comes to athletes who “threaten the existence of a commodifiable and pleasurable black athletic body” (pp. 10-11), such stars function as a “legible form of cultural shorthand for understanding the broader operations of racial power in a given context” (Giardina & McCarthy, cited in Leonard & King, 2011, p. 3). No doubt this is true for

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National Football League (NFL) celebrities such as Richard Sherman, whose notorious post-game interview after the 2014 National Football Conference (NFC) Championship not only boosted his own star profile but also became a national media sensation in its own right, igniting a social media backlash and surfacing the contours of an emergent racial project.\(^1\)

Following a game-saving pass deflection against rival 49ers wide receiver Michael Crabtree, Sherman passionately declared in an interview with Fox sportscaster Erin Andrews: “I’m the best corner in the game. When you try me with a sorry receiver like Crabtree, that’s the result you’re going to get. Don’t you ever talk about me.” When asked by Andrews who he was talking about, Sherman replied, “Crabtree. Don’t you open your mouth about the best or I’ll shut it for you real quick. L.O.B. [Legion of Boom—the self-proclaimed nickname for the Seahawks secondary].” That moment, seemingly just another bit of sports trash talk for the camera, would inadvertently set off a national discussion on race that initially took the form a Twitter backlash riddled with anti-Black epithets—racist tirades variously deriding Sherman as an overexcited “jungle monkey,” an “ignorant ape,” a “cocky nigger,” a “role model for today’s Taliban youth,” and a violent, gangster “thug” (see Kalaf, 2014). The viral magnitude of this backlash was so scandalous and intense that it prompted news outlets as wide-ranging as *Sports Illustrated* and *NPR* to dub the incident “one of the most memorable postgame interviews ever,” with *Forbes* magazine even proclaiming it (rather perversely) “the best TV moment of 2014” (Eagle, 2014; Hayes, 2014; Memmott, 2014).

And yet, overt racism on Twitter was only half the story. In the days immediately following the interview, a host of media pundits took to the blogosphere in defense of Sherman’s post-game performance.\(^2\) By virtue of an ad hoc retort, these commentators were quick to shame the slurs as offensive acts of a few “stupid” individuals: vestiges of old-line “troglodyte” racism as opposed to, say, indicative statements of a deep-rooted White supremacy still thriving in American culture (Moynihan, 2014). Offering redemptory accounts of Sherman himself, many commentors also met the monkey, terrorist, and thug-themed images with reports of Sherman’s self-enterprising talents, effectively steering attention away from the social media hoopla and toward Sherman’s own “Africanized Horatio Alger” story (Patton, cited in McDonald, 1996, p. 41)—succinctly outlined as “a kid from Compton, surrounded by bad circumstances who made good grades and worked hard to create a new life for himself” in the NFL (Osmeloski, 2014). Indeed, this enterprising “success” story became the basis for Sherman’s newfound celebrity, earning him further accolades in the weeks and months to follow.

Most notably, Sherman was invited to the White House correspondents’ dinner, where Barack Obama himself performed a comedic send-up of Sherman’s post-game remarks, saying,

> Sometimes I feel disrespected by you reporters. But that’s OK. Seattle Seahawks cornerback Richard Sherman is here tonight, and he gave me some great tips on how to handle it. Jake Tapper [CNN], don’t you ever talk about me like that! I’m the best President in the game! (quoted in Mihoces, 2014)
Obama followed his clowning imitation with a more serious rendition of Sherman’s success story, telling the crowd

[Sherman] grew up in Compton with some wonderful people but also with gangs and drugs and guns. His dad had to wake up at 4 a.m. every day to drive a garbage truck. But because of his dad’s hard work and his family and his mom, Richard ended up earning a 4.2 GPA in high school and went to college at Stanford . . . He showed his neighborhood that they could make it. And if he seems a little brash, it’s because you’ve got to have attitude sometimes if you are going to overcome some of this adversity. And the fact that he still goes back to inspire high schoolers for higher goals and making better choices, that’s all-star behavior. (quoted in Mihoces, 2014)

Thus, Sherman’s “all-star” behavior has been consistently reiterated as one in the same with his celebrity image; to wit, his straight-out-of-Compton narrative appears, on the one hand, a progressive antidote to the kind of overt racism found on Twitter; on the other hand, such accounts get recurrently stressed in relation to these images as the “left” neoliberal framework for construing the path of Black male achievement in U.S. society. As such, the post-racial hype surrounding Sherman helps to distinguish him as “one of the many prominent African-American athletes who seem to embody and thus legitimate ideologies of individualism and the desirability of the American Dream” (McDonald, 1996, p. 41). In fact, one might even say his stardom is predicated on this desire, which animates visions of post-race not just in sports, but American culture more broadly.

The following essay aims to intervene in this discussion, by charting the twofold racial rhetoric surrounding Sherman’s post-game interview. On one hand, depictions of Sherman as “the sum of all American fears—monkey, thug, terrorist, nigger” (Coates, 2014)—reiterate ideologies of the Black male threat, which generally pathologize Black men as aggressive, violent, and criminal so as to avoid addressing the structural forces of anti-Black racism. On the other hand, such images yield more “uplifting” stories of a Black man who has “made it” despite inauspicious beginnings. I claim that these discourses not only reveal the dialectical images of blackness in U.S. sport/culture, but they also work to consecrate what critical race scholars dub “post-race,” or the hegemonically assumed “after” moment of racism where (a) race presumably no longer matters, (b) any attempt to “deal” with race only exacerbates “the problem,” and (c) racism is treated as an anachronism, appearing (if at all) in the guise of privatized attitudes that are beneath public concern, with little bearing on broader institutional arrangements, political systems, or the social distribution of resources. As the main modality of racial discourse today, post-race functions much like its opposite—overt racism—to rationalize racial injustice, while playing up tropes of individual responsibility and self-reliance; it is, as Kent Ono (2010) writes, “the perfect elixir to help US society forget about the icky historical abomination known as racism” (p. 227).

Certainly, in cases such as “the Richard Sherman controversy” (Schilken, 2014), post-racial rhetoric informs how the national conversation on race (such as it is) typically unfolds. Here, public fascination with an infamous Black athlete triggers a media
dustup that, in turn, elicits a slew of post-racial retorts tailored to suit national ideologies of meritocracy, self-reliance, and individual entrepreneurialism (cf. Hartmann, 2007). Such articulations embody what Ralina Joseph (2011) calls the “representational paradox” of post-race in which “stereotypes are formed through dichotomies, and the post-racial is always reliant upon the racial, which . . . often defaults to the racist” (p. 393). In this sense, post-race is predicated on its opposite—on old school racist tropes of violent, threatening blackness against which post-racial “all stars” like Sherman arise to signify the antidote: An individualized capacity to divest themselves of stereotyped blackness in favor of “positive” portrayals that remain tethered to the same ideologies that fuel overt racism. In effect, we get images of a brutish “thug” met with counter-images of self-enterprising talent; yet, the latter work inferentially to uphold the same racist presuppositions (blackness coded as thuggish, animalistic, criminal) they ostensibly offset. Accordingly, Sherman’s success story appears remarkable precisely to the extent it infers its opposite—that is, “real” thugs with whom Sherman is misidentified.

It follows that the dialectical rhetoric of post-race constitutes a condition wherein “transcending blackness” (Joseph, 2012)—in the form of individuals overcoming structural ghettoization—stipulates the terms of public acceptance. However, this particular mode of uplift also fits the tenets of neoliberal capitalism, which posits responsible entrepreneurialism and self-investment as the model for ethical behavior. Indeed, to the extent post-race operates in the Sherman case as a highly visible marker of “racial neoliberalism” (Goldberg, 2009), it does so through the interlocking areas of political economy, sports media, and commercial celebrity (see Andrews & Jackson, 2001; Jhally, 2006). The following sections thus seek to tease out the implications of the Sherman case by focusing on the intersections of sport, neoliberalism, and post-identity politics. Drawing on research within sports studies, I foreground problems of racial formation with respect to neoliberalism that emerge in conjunction with what Jodi Melamed (2011) terms “official antiracisms,” which authorize normative modalities of “permissible” difference that effectively depoliticize and absorb historical practices of materialist antiracism in the name of neoliberal racial reform. The resulting emphasis is on marketized modes of “fairness” that assess difference as “rational” rather than racial; that is, in terms of responsible self-investment rather than White-supremacist ideology.

Ultimately, the essay aims to supplement research on identity politics in sport by weaving together a concern for the material conditions of racial neoliberalism, with a particular eye toward the forms of antiracist knowledge that work for (and as) normative modes of power. The point is not simply to critique the “bad” representations (i.e., the overt stereotypes) but the rejoinders, the “good” representations that form the basis of an ostensibly enlightened racial discourse (cf. Jhally & Lewis, 1992). Here, damage is done not strictly on the basis of cultural identity—or “racial frames”—but on account of populations marked as insufficiently equipped to participate in circuits of “value generation.” Accordingly, the article offers a critique of how the racialization of human bodies—that is, racism—“operates differently, among various levels of social formation, in direct relation to the shifting configurations of capitalism” (Mirpuri, 2012, p. 98). I proceed by first outlining the terms of racial neoliberalism;
next, I analyze the racist ideologies directed at Sherman, and their connections to relevant sport culture scholarship; third, I examine how these ideologies yield a post-racial framework that delivers more “positive” messages about racial entrepreneurialism as the key to racial empowerment.

Finally, because such messages are not isolated to the NFL, I extend this analysis in a brief conclusion that examines the conjunctural links between the Richard Sherman case and the racial rhetoric surrounding Michael Brown’s killing in Ferguson, Missouri, in the fall of 2014. Although not outwardly related, these two “racial events” (Feagin, 2013, p. 11) nonetheless signify the brunt of anti-Black racism in the present, but they also reveal how tropes of the Black male threat are often matched by articulations of permissible difference, which, again, reinforce the larger socio-cultural condition of neoliberalism as the dominant framework through which contemporary America “talks to itself” about the enduring problem of race.

**Official Antiracism, or, Racial Neoliberalism**

The most forceful paradigm in the Sherman case is official antiracism: a conventional set of knowledges that serve to disconnect race from broader material conditions and thus limit what might be regarded as effectual antiracist practice. As Melamed (2011) explains, official antiracisms work to supplant “race radicalisms . . . that prioritize the unevenness of global capitalism as primary race matters” (p. 47), substituting more palatable discourses that render capitalism neutral to race, thereby restricting racial conflicts to liberal political terrain (e.g., legal rights, formal equalities, market liberties). Thus, what counts as a race matter in official antiracisms is contained by knowledge of minoritized “differences,” which foreclose public discussion of “all but those antiracist projects that serve the incentives of neoliberal capital” (Mukherjee, 2014, p. 1). In short, by depoliticizing economic arrangements and making the market “nonpolitical” for race matters, official antiracisms conceal the intersection of political economy and race; reifying liberalism’s long-standing rhetorical separations of *class politics*—the critique of economic inequality—and *identity politics*—protests against gender and race-based exclusions from citizenship or civic participation (cf. Duggan, 2003).

Melamed identifies three successive versions of official antiracism in circulation since World War II. In the first, “racial liberalism” (1940s to 1960s), White supremacy was brought into crisis by a series of progressive antiracist movements (anti-colonialism, anti-apartheid, the U.S. civil rights movements), which were eventually contained within hegemonic paradigms of liberal racial reform. Restricting the parameters of antiracism to the American Creed—abstract equality, individual liberties—racial liberalism reinforced ideologies of exceptionalism, while taking for granted U.S.-led global capitalism as a nonpolitical issue. As Melamed (2011) puts it, racial liberalism “made the market economy nonpolitical (for race matters) by making African American entrance into it the basis of antiracism” (p. 25). Likewise, “liberal multiculturalism” (1980s to 1990s) worked to consolidate “a new racial common sense” by yoking antiracist practice to extant political-economic power, absorbing paradigms for racial reform into benign, colorblind iterations of “diversity.” In the latest phase, “neoliberal
multiculturalism” (2000s), these questions of difference are fully absorbed within the reigning neoliberal order, premised on “the belief that the market is better than the state at distributing resources and managing human life” (Melamed, 2011, p. 39). As it were, neoliberal antiracism exerts a monopoly over reigning conceptions of post-racial empowerment.

The crucial point here is that post-race constitutes a “third phase” in the racial break—one that, as Roopali Mukherjee (2014) observes, acts in contrast to the paradigm of colorblindness rather than in concert with it. Insofar as post-race implies a new type of “racial commonsense,” which departs from liberal multiculturalism’s submersion of racialized difference into a desire for “diversity,” it operates through an “explicit avowal of some racial differences deployed as evidence of the declining significance of race in the life chances and experiences of whites as well as non-whites” (p. 4). Put another way, post-race necessitates the recognition of race, if only to secure a “specified range of [racial] differences that disavow any vestige of their consequence for anyone—of any race—who can fashion themselves as properly neoliberal subjects” (Mukherjee, 2014). Post-race thus acknowledges the structural conditions of capitalism, if only to incorporate a “neoliberal ethic” of self-reliance and individual enterprise regardless of race, attributing success to entrepreneurial genius and viewing those who do not succeed as “utterly expendable” (Giroux, 2003, p. 195).

Within this state of affairs comes a retooling of antiracist practice. No longer allied with materialist efforts at politicizing institutional and economic arrangements, racial neoliberalism conceives of freedom and opportunity as a nearly exclusive private endeavor. As Henry Giroux (2003) puts it, the neoliberal imagination strips language “of its critical and social possibilities, [making it] . . . difficult to imagine a social order in which all problems are not personal, private dilemmas” (p. 196). By this logic, racial neoliberalism manages the contradictions of post-race—dysfunctional schools, racially skewed unemployment, unequal access to loans, health care, mortgages, police harassment, and mass incarceration of millions of people of color—in support of justificatory fantasies of individualized opportunity. Not only do these fantasies “translate all social problems into individual misfortune or misdeed,” but they also displace structural barriers onto the private sphere as mere “obstacles” to be overcome by individual initiative (Searls Giroux, 2014, p. 4). Meanwhile, the neoliberal state becomes a structure for “securing privatized interests from the perceived contamination and threat of those deemed not to belong, who have little or no standing, the welfare of whom is calculated to cost too much, economically and politically” (Goldberg, 2007, p. 81).

All told, racial neoliberalism depends on what Melamed (2011) calls “processes of differential value-making” (p. 11); to wit, institutions become neoliberal by dividing populations into “worthy” and “unworthy” beneficiaries of a system defined utterly by private interests. As Melamed states,

Neoliberalism has revealed itself to be more than just an economic theory. Rather, it . . . [is] a name for the differentiated experience of citizenship that ensures that governments protect those who are valuable to capital, whether formally citizens or not, and that they
render vulnerable those who are not valuable within the circuits of capital, whether formally citizens or not. Neoliberal multiculturalism has created new privileged subjects, racializing the beneficiaries of neoliberalism as worthy multicultural citizens and racializing the losers as unworthy and excludable on the basis of monoculturalism, deviance, inflexibility, criminality, and other historico-cultural deficiencies. (p. xxi)

As such, neoliberalism secures the conditions of official antiracism by circulating “permissible narratives of difference”—that is, narratives that valorize “marketized modes of racial reform”—designed to, as Mukherjee (2014) explains, “Weed out ‘at risk’ individuals who are inferior in terms of their life capacities and ill-equipped to participate in the commercialization of life, and against whom, as Michel Foucault puts it, ‘society must be defended’”; equally, “good risks are available to be channeled into privatized, and profitable circuits of inclusion” (p. 6). As a result, neoliberalism “confers privilege on some racial subjects (e.g., the white liberal, the multicultural American, the assimilable black, the racial entrepreneur) while stigmatizing others (‘born again’ racists, the overly race conscious, the racial grievant, the terrorist, the illegal, the criminal)” (p. 6). Thus, “privilege” is no longer determined strictly by phenotype (if it ever was), as traditional racial identities—Black, White, Asian—occupy both sides of the privilege/stigma divide (Melamed, 2011, p. 13). Meanwhile, “at risk” subjects are systematically cut off from institutional power and made to bear the omnipresent circumstances of economic precarity and privatized risk.

Representations of a Post-Racial “All Star”

Within this context, “the Richard Sherman controversy” emerges as an archetype of official antiracist/post-racial discourse. Although Sherman is, today, generally regarded “positively,” his celebrity was initially constructed in accordance with long-standing stereotypes and controlling images of Black masculinity—tropes that serve to corroborate the disposable status of all-too-many African Americans under neoliberalism. At the same time, celebrated themes of self-reliance and self-enterprise surfaced in equal time vis-à-vis Sherman’s stardom, indicating how frequently tropes of the Black male threat get matched with permissible narratives of difference articulated through racial neoliberalism. At odds with a liberal “colorblind” perspective, these narratives do not so much ignore structural barriers in support of some “raceless fantasy of meritocracy” (Guerrero, 2011, p. 139) as combine the latter with a celebration of a “raced sport celebrity” (Andrews, 2012, p. 156) so as to avow the latter’s enterprising talents. Unlike his predecessors, then, particularly athletes such as Michael Jordan and Tiger Woods, Sherman’s stardom does not involve minimizing his racial identity8; rather, his stardom is distinctly that of a raced entrepreneur.9 His all-star status appears a “credit to his race” rather than a proverbial “exception.”

To illustrate these points, the following sections interrogate the dialectical rhetoric of Black male threat and its neo-individualizing counterpart within social media responses and news coverage of the Sherman interview. Regarding the latter, I collated more than 100 articles from LexisNexis published in the week immediately following
the event, roughly 40 of which delivered the content critiqued below; most derived from major daily newspapers and popular blogs. This commentary, all told, proves useful to scholars interested in interrogating the “conjunctural” problem of raced sport celebrity (Andrews, 2012, p. 155).

“The Sum of All American Fears”: Richard Sherman as Black Threat

The most flagrant of these articulations are the inflammatory remarks and anti-Black epithets directed at Sherman following the interview. These remarks coincide with a traditional line of racist thinking that reduces Black athleticism to essentializing stereotypes of “natural” physicality and bodily prowess, which often inversely correlates to White mental and moral superiority (Hoberman, 1997). Tweets decrying Sherman as “fricken jungle monkey” and “ignorant ape” recall logics of racial naturalism, which generally paint a regressive portrait of non-White/European populations. As Linda Tucker (2003) argues, such representations are rampant in sport culture and saturated with meaning and history, particularly mythologies of White-supremacist “cultural lore” that serve to construct black bodies around tropes of animality, criminality, and hyper-sexuality.10 No doubt, this racial “containment” is at work in the Sherman case, where tweets such as “Someone put Richard Sherman in an animal hospital because he is a fucking gorilla” and “Richard Sherman is the reason stereotypes about black people exist” (Kalaf, 2014) replay a situation in which Black men are made to bear responsibility for the racist violence directed against them. Yet, the breadth of these attacks also includes posts such as “Richard Sherman deserves to get shot in the fucking head. Disrespectful nigger” and “Sherman should get lynched” (Kalaf, 2014), which illustrate the tenacity of anti-Black hostility in the present and also reveal just how easily essentializing narratives of Black male corporeality can give way to racial frames that construct blackness as Other, “a perpetual threat that requires control, if not annihilation” (Leonard, 2012, p. 9).

Furthermore, the “white lore of the Black man as a criminal and a figure of bestial sexual excess” (Tucker, 2003, p. 311) informs representations of Sherman’s telecast interaction with female sportscaster Erin Andrews. In a manner consistent with racial containment, these reactions follow a clearly racist and gendered script of an “out of control” Black man (Sherman) forcefully intimidating a vulnerable White woman (Andrews). Despite the fact that Sherman spoke to a number of reporters that night, his interview with Andrews has been set apart, due in no small part to headlines such as “Richard Sherman Breaks Up Pass, Wins Game, and Goes Nuts on Erin Andrews” (McIntyre, 2014) and “Richard Sherman Screams at Erin Andrews About Crabtree” (Burke, 2014), which reflect a welter of tweets depicting a confrontation between a “very angry” Black man and a “helpless” White female reporter. Together, these images recall age-old melodramatic fantasies of White “female bondage and rescue,” which helped to forge a national identity around sexual threats that “black villains” supposedly pose to White women (see Williams, 2001). Where this tradition feeds on the myth of the Black bestial rapist, it also sustains hegemonic gender ideologies of White women as perpetual victims in need of White male protection.
This was made clear when the live video feed showcasing Andrew’s TV interview with Sherman was deliberately cut short by Fox TV producer Richie Zyontz because, according to Zyontz, the interview “started crossing a line that I did not want to see it go . . . it started getting dangerous for us” (quoted in Deitsch, 2014). The fact that Andrews’ experience is not accounted for here—despite her own insistence elsewhere that “obviously, he [Sherman] didn’t threaten me or make me feel uncomfortable” (quoted in “Erin Andrews on beauty and female sportscasters,” 2014) or, as she put it to USA Today, “I want to make sure that people know it wasn’t a situation where I’m a victim and he acted like an idiot” (Litman, 2014)—only goes to show that Zyontz’s “us” does not include Andrews herself. Rather, the fantasy entails a White male producer stepping in to protect a White female reporter from the “dangerous” presence of an animated Black man. That Sherman’s gaze was actually fixed on the camera—that is, a (White) gazing public—and not Andrews herself, further indicates the extent to which such irrational fears of the Black male threat must, nonetheless, be “contained” for the voyeuristic consumption of White onlookers (see Andrews, Mower, & Silk, 2011, p. 87).

Similarly, tweets casting Sherman as a menacing “thug” recycle one of the most common racist tropes in American culture today. As Ralina Joseph (2011) describes it, the problem of the “thug” not only invokes traditional discourses of Black male deviance but also a “culture of poverty thesis” (p. 397) that allocates responsibility for African American inequality to a faulty culture rather than racist institutions. Such framing occurs in conjunction with narratives of criminalization that have historically been used to blame Blacks for everything from the slave trade to the Black Codes to the New Jim Crow (Alexander, 2012). However, the thug label finds amplification within a sports-media complex that promotes the commodification of Black bodies in conjunction with a discourse of Black urban authenticity, or “ghettocentrism.” As David Andrews et al. (2011) suggest, this line of thinking not only essentializes Black masculinity in terms of the conventional themes of “ghetto life”—crime, violence, drugs—but also affords an opportunity for (White) consumers to indulge racial fantasies of the dark Other. Given this promotional context, the mediated consumption of Black bodies in sport links to a broader, more inferentially racist “sense of both ‘blackophilia’ (white investments in racial otherness) and ‘blackophobia’ (white fear and dread of racial otherness)” (Andrews et al., 2011, p. 89). Hence, these appeals inspire a contradictory fascination with “thug” athletes as signifiers of violent Black masculinity; at the same time, they reinforce racial stereotypes that associate blackness with social deviance, as well as a commercially engineered discourse of ghettocentrism, which “commodifies African American athletes while it criminalizes the general African American population” (Andrews, 2012, p. 157).

It follows that if Sherman is to be read as an emblematic subject of Black male “success,” it is in no small part due to his post-racial ability to defy the stigmatic markings of a “thuggish” criminal in favor of more valued images of self-conduct befitting neoliberal norms. Surely, tropes of the Black male threat make sense when set against the inferentially racist idea that Sherman should be admired for overcoming—or evolving beyond—his thug image. But where his detractors would degrade him by this
stigma, his supporters prop him up for his ability to “rise above” such publicly contemptible forms of blackness (Silverstein, 2014). Although Sherman’s stardom is thus borne out of an insidious logic of overt racism and ghettocentrism, an inferentially racist framework of ghetto “transcendence” also overdetermines his path to symbolic redemption.

Redemption Story: Richard Sherman as Racialized “Man of Enterprise”

A number of critical sports scholars have pointed out that a basic contradiction shapes the narratives of legitimation surrounding Black male athletes. As David Leonard and C. Richard King (2011) argue with respect to Kobe Bryant,

Typically, when Black athletes do something wrong in public, they find themselves ensnared in what Joe Feagin has dubbed the White racial frame . . . which actually consists of “stereotyped racial knowledge, racial images and emotions and racial interpretations” along with “several ‘big picture’ narratives that connect elements into historically oriented stories with morals.” Ideas about hard work (meritocracy), the American Dream (rags-to-riches), equal-justice-under-the-law, and, of course, colorblindness all operate within this context. (p. 211)

Similarly, Daniel Grano (2014) has suggested that mediated rituals of Black male athletes seeking public “redemption” afford insight into the broader cultural formation of racist ideologies, especially “racialized standards for expressing an ‘authentic’ self.” Grano argues that such standards advance “the fantasy that problems of racial and other inequities must be transcended in order to realize true identity.” In the case of Michael Vick, Grano points out he “had to prove he was forgivable by demonstrating the emotional burden of his crimes had finally motivated him to dissociate from the influences of normalized black criminality” (p. 91). Hence, the problem of racial redemption is actually a problem of transcending the “otherness” of Black culture.

Unlike these cases, however, the Sherman controversy did not arise from any actual criminal accusations or charges; furthermore, Sherman’s relationship to the attacks levied against him on social media can hardly be said to arrive in response to having done something “wrong.” To the contrary, Sherman’s only “violation” was having offended those who are invested in a White normative framework of proper “sportsmanship” (see Cunningham, 2009). Nonetheless, the public debate around Sherman’s “unruly” behavior (Cohen, 2014) suggests a need to defend himself, justifiable or not, alongside those who similarly violate the tacit codes of “respectability politics,” that is, a belief that “if blacks are going to be accepted by whites, they must conduct themselves in a way that elicits respect and sympathy rather than fear and anger” (Alexander, 2012, p. 212; cf. Cunningham, 2009; Ferber, 2007; Leonard, 2012). Public calls for Sherman to “show respect” and “stay classy” (Cohen, 2014), therefore, share a basic premise with the sentiments of racial naturalists who paint him as an uncivilized ape: Both assume that Blacks have to prove to Whites they are not inferior, and thus worthy of dignity and respect.
Yet the “proof” offered in Sherman’s case is not strictly that of a “white racial frame.” More precisely, Sherman’s story gets articulated in terms of a racialized (and gendered) Man of Enterprise (Foucault, 2008), according to which various commentators look to glorify a young Black man who travels “from Compton to the NFL” on the basis of self-reliance and individual “hard work” (Martinez & Gast, 2014). In a word, Sherman comes to embody the “sporting entrepreneur” (Andrews et al., 2011, p. 74), a prominent figure who might “prove” that subjects hailing from poor ghetto communities are best judged on the basis of “success’ narratives that take racism off the hook by demonstrating hard work in the realm of sports or entertainment is all that one needs to escape the ghetto” (Kelley, cited in Andrews et al., 2011, p. 74). In America’s current racial moment, such narratives are more likely to sustain systems of racial dis/advantage under the cloak of individual success.

Indeed, across popular media discourse, this narrative plays out in three ways. First, through Sherman’s own “strategic rhetoric of blackness” (Gallagher, 2001, p. 144). Days after the interview, for instance, Sherman held a press conference to address the racist attacks being levied against him. He spoke of craven people who “take shots on Twitter,” and more pointedly about the mainstream media’s penchant for calling him a thug:11

The only reason it bothers me is because it seems like it’s the accepted way of calling somebody the N-word nowadays. It’s like everyone else [on Twitter] said the N-word and they [the mainstream press] said “Thug,” and they’re like, “Ah, that’s fine.” What’s the definition of a thug, really? Maybe I’m talking loudly and doing something I’m not supposed to. (quoted in Scott, 2014)12

Perhaps because Sherman’s comments marked an all-too-rare (and refreshing) breach of the “sport-as-somehow-special” dogma (Hartmann, 2007, p. 53), which posits professional sports as a “sacrosanct” realm averse to controversy and political issues, especially race politics (cf. Khan, 2012), the media largely responded to Sherman’s remarks with affirmative reactions. No sooner, however, had the latter compelled “the media” to recognize the racist problem of the thug than a host of pundits representing both niche and general interest outlets were clamoring to rhetorically solve this problem by way of the “black role model,” the glorified African American athlete who overcomes racist stereotypes through sheer self-determination. Within this frame, commentators were characterizing Sherman as a “credit to the community” (Farmer, 2015) and a paradigm of “black male achievement” (Tune, 2014). Moreover, it was reported that Sherman’s ability to “rise above” the thug stereotype (Silverstein, 2014)—to “transcend” his stigma, as it were—motivated his response. As Sherman put it in a widely-cited quote to the press,

I’ve fought that my whole life, just coming from where I’m coming from. Just because you hear Compton, you hear Watts, you hear cities like that, you just think “thug, he’s a gangster, he’s this, that, and the other;” and then you hear Stanford, and they’re like, “oh man, that doesn’t even make sense, that’s an oxymoron.” You fight it for so long, and to
have it come back up and people start to use it again, it’s frustrating. (quoted in Scott, 2014)

In official antiracist fashion, pundits followed suit by condemning the “thug” label (though not its structural roots in institutional forces) and celebrating Sherman as its symbolic corrective. *Time* magazine even dubbed Sherman among the “100 most influential people” in the summer of 2014, with a blurb naming him the “Compton, California-raised Stanford graduate” and “NFL cornerback who smack-talks athlete stereotypes” (Gregory, 2014). Prior to that, a host of mainstream outlets were rejoicing Sherman for “defying stereotypes on where you come from, what you look like, and succeeding no matter what other people think about you” (Tune, 2014). No doubt, this formula taps into a White racial frame that compels Black athletes to undertake testimonial rhetorics of legitimation (Grano, 2014). But it also articulates a “racially coded coming-of-age narrative” that accrues ideological purchase among middle-class readers, who might then attentively consume such narratives as proof of their own ethical subjectivity toward less fortunate subjects (Cole & King, 1998, p. 52).

As Cheryl L. Cole and Samantha King (1998) write of these “celebratory entrepreneurial tales,” raced sports stars (such as Sherman) provide “incontrovertible evidence of self-improvement, self-reliance, self-determination, and ‘choice’ as it simultaneously produce[s] an endless supply of morality and cautionary tales” (p. 52). Crucially, such narratives operate through implied reference to “the often invisible, but nonetheless affective, rhetorical figure of the gang member [thug]” (Cole & King, 1998, p. 52). Through this dialectical articulation, Black masculinity gets coded via “a fundamental distinction between the athlete” (figured here as the privileged icon of racial entrepreneurialism) “and the criminal” (figured through the gang member; Cole & King, 1998, p. 52).

In Sherman’s case, this narrative naturalizes the neoliberal model by recasting the social conditions of systemic inequality and economic oppression as mere “obstacles” to be overcome by a sporting entrepreneur. Hence, *The Huffington Post* formulated Sherman’s press conference remarks in more sanguine biographical details, noting his industrious work ethic and exceptional intelligence as the key to overcoming racism (again, construed narrowly in terms of racial slurs): “A 25-year-old graduate of Stanford . . . Sherman has had to continually deal with preconceived notions about growing up in hardscrabble Compton, California” (Greenberg, 2014). In this way, the report calls attention to Sherman’s “hardscrabble” account in order to reinforce the idea that battling stereotypes, not structural constraints, is tantamount to battling racism. Similarly, a celebratory profile in *The New York Times* displayed the tagline: “Before the rant that cast him as villainous to some and refreshing to others, Sherman survived gang-infested neighborhoods to compile a 4.2 GPA and receive a football scholarship to Stanford, where he also ran track and earned a degree” (Shpigel, 2014). Besides reiterating a ghettocentric belief in rough-and-tumble “gang-infested neighborhoods” as the backdrop for authentic Black masculinity, such reports also stress, in neoliberal fashion, the importance of education (as opposed to living wage jobs or trade unions) as the key to racial and class “uplift.”
Indeed, a handful of liberal publications take this tactic: valorizing “the real” Richard Sherman in terms of his GPA (e.g., Coates, 2014; Liu, 2014; Zirin, 2014). This suggests a second narrative strand in the Sherman case:

A young man from Compton who graduated from one of the worst school districts in the United States . . . [and] went from a world of gang violence and drugs to everything that Palo Alto and Stanford University represents. (Saul, 2014)

Here, a focus on defying stereotypes gives way to a neoliberal vision of enterprise and affirmative self-reliance via hard work and education. Yet, unlike the “popular ideology” that typically shapes this redemption narrative—that is, that “sport is a positive and progressive racial force . . . a way out of the ghetto” (Hartmann, 2000, p. 233)—Sherman’s success story has less to do with a belief in sport per se than belief in “a singular kid from Compton” (Campbell, 2014) who represents the ideal of self-enterprising, responsible entrepreneurialism; an ideal that is contingent upon the expectation that Black men from “the ghetto” have a norm of violence and criminal behavior. If anything, sports serves here as a site for “redeeming” blackness in relation to the glorified image of affirmative neoliberal self-reliance. These features, in turn, combine to promote a sense of “differential value-making” that works to confer privilege on some racial subjects while stigmatizing others.

Again, such narratives appear frequently in ostensibly “enlightened” liberal publications. For example, Eric Liu (2014) writing for The Atlantic sums up Sherman’s star image as an “all-American” entrepreneur this way:

[A] rugged individualist who pulls himself up by his own bootstraps, fanatically prepared and self-reliant . . . Hard-nosed capitalist who works at the intersection of big dreams and big money. Budding celebrity who manipulates his public image to mask his actual smarts and savvy.

To the extent material inequities are addressed here, it is through a rhetoric of personal attitudes and individual behavior. In effect, the structural bases for Sherman’s “all-star” trajectory—poverty, segregated schools, substandard housing, second-rate or non-existent employment—are transformed into sources of personal motivation and, accordingly, depoliticized. Likewise, in The Huffington Post, Isaac Saul singles out Sherman among his peers as the “Stanford graduate from Compton who has never been arrested, never cursed in a post-game interview, never been accused of being a dirty player,” notably unlike “31 NFL players [who] were arrested [during the 2014 NFL season] for everything from gun charges and driving under the influence to murder” (Saul, 2014). Again, such narratives of difference keenly illustrate how post-racial sleights of hand are reliant on racist premises—Sherman could have been one of those players arrested for actual criminal activity, but he had “the work ethic to put up those grades [in high school] and make it to Stanford” (Saul, 2014).

Paradoxically, then, Sherman’s value to official antiracist/neoliberal discourse lies in the promotional power of his ghettocentric narrative. As the gurus of self-enterprise
would have it, Sherman is “keenly aware of his social media celebrity-dom,” and how to create a personal brand around the racialized rhetorics of overcoming adversity (Osmeloski, 2014). Indeed, as Sherman himself put it to a crowd of 7,000 marketing executives at the Adobe Digital Marketing Summit in spring of 2014, “You want to provoke a response and a discussion. You want to be unique in your field. Honesty and being genuine is what sells in my field” (quoted in Osmeloski, 2014). Such racialized articulations of an “authentic” self must align with “the fantasy that problems of racial and other inequities must be transcended in order to realize true identity” (Grano, 2014, p. 91); yet, Sherman’s performance of “being genuine” also adheres to a language of “participatory individualism,” that is, a neoliberal mind-set that, as David Theo Goldberg (2014) says, “inscribes race as a personally chosen project” (p. 76), while “emphasizing commercial enterprise, personal entrepreneurship, and the genius of individual innovation as the economic driving force” (p. 190).

A third strand of racial entrepreneurialism thus emerges from Sherman’s “straight out of Compton” narrative (Armstrong, 2014): The ability to invoke (in the act of disproving) the Black-threat-of-the-thug as part of a commercialized marketing plan. Among the many endorsements capitalizing on this schematic is Sherman’s partnership with Beats electronics.13 In one commercial (airing only days after the infamous interview), Sherman is seen hounded by reporters in an NFL locker room. The subtext is clear; reporters ask “Do you think you’re the best corner in the league?” “Is your trash talk is a distraction to your teammates?” “What’s your responsibility to the kids on the streets in Compton?” Sherman responds in kind with generic answers: “I do think I’m the best”; “talk is a motivator”; “you try to set an example.” Next, the camera cuts to a White reporter sneering under his breadth: “He thinks he’s so untouchable,” whereas another asks, “Did you fight a lot as a kid?” Sherman responds, “Not everybody in Compton is a gang member.” Finally, the question: “So what do you think about your reputation as a thug?” Silence. Sherman, visibly irritated, stares down the reporter, shrugs his head, and offers a tight-lipped dismissal: “I don’t have that reputation.” The ensuing din gives way to a hip-hop mix on the soundtrack, as Sherman turns cheek, straps on his headphones, and effectively “silences” his critics with noise canceling “beats.” The commercial ends with the promotional tagline: “Hear What You Want.”

In case there was any doubt, this defiant trope of self-sufficient individualism is made clear in the substance of Sherman’s commercial appeal: not unlike the other “Hear What You Want” ads featuring NFL stars, the rise-above-adversity trope is particularly salient here, given Sherman’s status as the “singular kid from Compton” who, through sheer hard work and self-determination, has “earned the right not to be called a ‘thug’” (Campbell, 2014). Thus, whereas the second trope of Sherman as a well-educated Black man deftly blends neoliberal fantasies of post-racial success, the inferential backdrop in all three narrative strands remains “the ongoing battles over representations of the black urban experience” (Kelley, 1997, p. 8), which render Sherman’s raced stardom a highly visible, yet contradictory and highly marketable, signifier of Black male achievement. As one popular meme sums it up via pictorial reference to Sherman’s press conference, the text emblazoned at the top: “Thug:
Graduated 2nd in his class with 4.2 GPA. SAT score: 1400. Member of the Phi Beta Sigma fraternity. Graduated Stanford with 3.7 GPA and Masters degree.” At the bottom is the punchline: “I wish more kids were a ‘thug’ like Richard Sherman.” The message is clear: Sherman’s intellect and fraternal sociability serve to distance him from threatening Black masculinity, while his status as neoliberal role model becomes operative through reference to the degrading “thug” stereotype.

Ultimately, this kind of representational rescue mission sets up a highly segregated framework for reading Sherman’s blackness as one that, with popular culture generally, reiterates a “bifurcated view of black life,” a schema where “the bulk of ordinary working-class African Americans have few images of themselves outside those connected with crime, violence, and drugs” (Jhally & Lewis, 2006, pp. 211-212). Yet, accounts such as Sherman’s, which extrapolate his achievements within and outside the NFL, also convey a similarly “schizophrenic image of black America,” one that is “split between super-successful and largely admirable (not-all-that) black superstars . . . and dangerous (all too black) perpetrators” (Street, 2005, para. 14). No doubt, this dialectical image structures the symbolic production of race in professional sport; but it also frames, more generally, the politics of racial formation under neoliberalism. This includes the social realities of all-too frequent killings of unarmed Black men and women by police in places such as Ferguson, Cleveland, Baltimore, New York, and elsewhere.

**Outside the Lines: Post-Racial Rhetorics in Ferguson and Elsewhere**

Although I have focused on permissible narratives of difference in the context of Sherman’s NFL celebrity, I want to conclude by considering the conjunction of these narratives with the recent, high-profile cases of police killings of unarmed Black men. Rather than restate the obvious—that such killings are a symptom of structural racism, including institutionalized practices that disproportionately target, punish, and lock away poor people of color—I want to address the construction of race that accompanies this arrangement, and moreover, which contributes to a neoliberal-antiracist “common sense.” What seems most urgent here is the parallel between the Richard Sherman controversy and the rhetorical frames used to justify the so-called “use of lethal force” against young Black men living in poor ghetto communities. The most telling example, perhaps, is Michael Brown.

Where Brown’s killing has ignited mainstream debates over racism in U.S. law enforcement, competing images of Brown as a thug or a model of achievement have become central to these debates. In particular, Brown’s “legacy” is said to rest in the symbolic value of his racial difference, especially insofar as this difference epitomizes polarized views on who bears the blame for the killings. For defenders of the status quo, the stigma of criminality—or “thug life”—is crucial. As conservatives like Ted Nugent summarize this view, “the lessons from Ferguson are ‘Don’t let your kids grow up to be thugs who think they can steal, assault and attack cops as a way of life and
badge of black (dis)honor” (quoted in “Michael Brown’s Legacy,” 2014). Such sce-
narios, which ultimately justify the killings of unarmed Black men by invoking the
menacing Black male threat are, in turn, juxtaposed to permissible narratives of differ-
ence that depict Brown as a “good kid” or “gentle giant,” whose potential success only
amplifies the tragedy of his murder, a tension that discursively parallels Sherman’s
“straight-outta-Compton” story (e.g., Crouch, 2014; Hennessy-Fiske, 2014).

Such narratives are at work, for instance, in headlines such as “Police Kill College-
Bound Teen” (“Community Outraged,” 2014) and “Unarmed Teen Shot by Police
Days Before He Was Scheduled to Leave for College” (Sharee, 2014), which repeat
the neoliberal refrain that “good” kids can be (post)racially differentiated from the
“bad”; that individuals such as Brown are, in fact, “valuable,” insofar as they can be
channeled into appropriate circuits of success. Here, suitable objects of sympathy are
constructed in dialectical correspondence with those devalued Others who assault and
attack cops.

In turn, commemorative photos of Brown in high school regalia match these
reports, alongside quotes from family members lamenting how he worked hard “to
stay in school and graduate” (Bosman & Fitzsimmons, 2014). However, the racialized
nature of this imagery—including the act of pinning “tragedy” to Brown’s educational
status—only becomes evident when contrasted by widely circulated photos of Brown
standing on a concrete stoop, wearing a basketball jersey, and holding his hand in a
sideways peace sign (which some interpreted as “gang signs”). Mirroring the Sherman
controversy, this image prompted a string of social media responses, including, on one
hand, panic-stricken tweets calling Brown a “thug” (or worse), and, on the other, an
official antiracist viral crusade against media “bias,” where frustrated users took to
posting contrasting images of themselves—dressed in cap and gown and mugging for
the camera as a “thug”—under the tag #IfTheyGunnedMeDown (Jones, 2014). No
doubt this thread successfully drew attention to the media’s reliance on Black stereo-
types; yet it nonetheless failed to unseat “the good kid” narrative. Instead, the message
appeared to be one of more permissible narratives of difference; that is, “Here’s how I
really am: Clean, professional, nonthreatening. Here’s the photo the media would dig
up to make me look like a ‘thug.’ Isn’t that terrible?” (Banks, 2014). As a result, the
Twitter response did nothing to deconstruct the bifurcated representation of Black life
into positive and negative images; to wit, it actually helped affirm the “thugs deserve
to die” narrative by suggesting Brown’s “goodness,” his respectability, lay in the fact
that “he was an honor roll student” and that “he wanted to go to college.”

To be sure, this neoliberal framework stands in lieu of the more universal notion
that nobody deserves to be shot—that “this kid didn’t deserve to die because his good-
ness was the exception to the rule . . . [Rather] this kid didn’t deserve to die because he
was a human being and black lives matter” (Woods, 2014). Such articulations work to
counteract the neoliberal mantra of certain Black lives “at risk,” which ensure the
subordinate status of poor ghetto communities as either unworthy or socially exclud-
able on the basis of pathology, criminality, or “bad choices.” What is lacking in these
accounts, however, is a critical evaluation of the changing institutional circumstances
of post-racial identity formation. Indeed, as the Michael Brown case shows, the lock
down of ghettoized “thugs” goes hand in hand with a neoliberal penchant for accumulation by dispossession: it is not simply about revising the terms by which we might think about Black life, but the political-economic arrangements that essentially transform municipal police forces like Ferguson into revenue-collectors preying on poor communities of color.

Although these practices are not overtly guided by anti-Black ideology, they nonetheless reveal how official antiracism works to discipline, regulate, and authorize certain conceptions of Black success, which must renounce a contemptible, unworthy stigma to succeed. As Michelle Alexander (2012) writes in The New Jim Crow, in our current system of racial control, “It is no longer permissible to hate blacks, but we can hate criminals” (p. 199), and so we get police killings of unarmed Black men justified in terms of “thug” crimes—stealing cigars, selling fraudulent cigarettes, resisting arrest. Meanwhile, police are exposed to the same rhetoric and media imagery that glorifies Black men who travel from Compton to the NFL on the basis of individual enterprise. Such sporting entrepreneurs seem to offer proof that subjects hailing from poor communities, whether “all-star” athletes or “gentle giants” on their way to college, are best judged on the basis of their value as human capital within the neoliberal society. Although this rhetoric may appear race-neutral (which is not to say raceless), it maintains an inferentially racist focus on the Black underclass and hallows out a discursive space in which to demonize those who fail to conduct themselves according to the dominant codes of racial neoliberalism.

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Notes
1. Michael Omi and Howard Winant (1994) define “racial project” in terms of the linkage between culture and structure or meaning and social stratification. As they put it, racial projects “connect what race means in a particular discursive practice and the ways in which both social structures and everyday experiences are racially organized, based upon that meaning” (p. 56). In other words, racial project theory allows us to understand that “race has no fixed meaning, but is constructed and transformed sociohistorically through competing political projects, through the necessary and ineluctable link between the structural and cultural dimensions of race in the U.S.” which are always “multiply determined, politically contested, and deeply shaped by their historical context” (pp. 71, 57).
3. Walter Benn Michaels (2006) describes “left neoliberalism” as the pursuit of equality of opportunity within the terms given by unequal class relations, which is to say, through
the rubric of “antiracism” shorn of any concern for the structures of economic inequality intrinsic to capitalism.


5. For the purposes of clarity, neoliberalism is here defined as a political-economic project that elevates corporate interests, profit-maximization, and the “free market” over public interest and the demands of social justice. Neoliberalism is, at once, a set of economic policies, governance structures, and political rationalities, all asserting that democracy functions best according to principles of self-enterprise, privatization, and minimized state (public) intervention in business practices. For an extended critique of neoliberalism as a distinct class project, see Harvey (2007); as a political project, see Brown (2015).

6. To be clear, I am not suggesting critical sports scholarship has ignored the racial politics of neoliberalism; only that it remains a marginal area of study within the field. For examples, see Darnell (2010), Giardina and Cole (2013), Hartmann (2012), Kusz (2011), Mirpuri (2011), Montez de Oca (2012), and Sze (2009).

7. Although poor racialized communities of color are particularly marginalized, stigmatization is not exactly determined by racial lines (e.g., poor “white trash” communities are equally devalued under the terms of neoliberalism).

8. As others have demonstrated (e.g., Andrews, 2000; Houck, 2006), both of these enormously successful athletes have frequently enhanced their success by “transcending” their racial identities. Although space does not permit a comparison of Sherman and Woods and/or Jordan, such an analysis would undoubtedly highlight the shifting contours of racial neoliberalism on display here. Compare Leonard’s (2012) analysis of Ron Artest and the “Palace Brawl” for a similar case study of foregrounding blackness (rather than skirting it) vis-à-vis public controversy.

9. The idea of a “raced entrepreneur” builds on prior discussions of racial neoliberalism. Whereas neoliberalism imposes market logics into every facet of daily life, and thus generates normative criteria for a “productive” self that can, at a strictly private level, manage risk and effectively self-govern as an autonomous, rational individual, this logic also serves to normalize systemic problems of poverty, exploitation, joblessness, and discrimination into given, taken-for-granted social arrangements. It also overlooks the degree to which such ideals of an enterprising self operate differently for different populations. Normative citizens are, regardless of race, encouraged to self-regulate and exercise “personal responsibility,” whereas explicitly racialized populations are subjected to extraordinary state surveillance, economic marginalization, and punitive modes of social control—for example, the expansion of prisons, systems of mass incarceration, and hyper-policing. The raced entrepreneur, then, is the “productive” self who is able to individually transcend, by dint of sheer self-enterprise, these institutionalized conditions.

10. Several sport studies scholars have extended this line of inquiry; for broad overviews, see Cunningham (2009, pp. 1-23), Hartmann (2000), and McDonald (2005).

11. In a widely circulated report, iQ media, a cloud-based analytics platform, detailed how the word “thug” was in fact uttered more times (625) on U.S. television the Monday following Sherman’s interview than it had been on any other day in 3 years (see Wagner, 2014).
12. Sherman went on to reference a recent National Hockey League (NHL) game between the Vancouver Canucks and the Calgary Flames in which a line brawl occurred just seconds into the game: “There was a hockey game where they didn’t even play hockey. They just threw the puck aside and started fighting. I saw that and I’m like, ‘Wait, I’m the thug? What’s going on here?’ So, I’m really disappointed in being called a thug.”

13. Sherman’s other high-profile endorsements include Nike, Campbell Soup, Microsoft, Oberto, and BODYARMOR.

14. At the time of this writing, the most recent of these high-profile cases is the murder of Freddie Gray by Baltimore police in April 2015, which has led to an ongoing series of protests and civil uprisings. Gray’s murder comes on the heels of a string of police killings of unarmed Black men in 2014-2015, including, most prominently, Michael Brown in Ferguson, Eric Garner in New York City, Tamir Rice in Cleveland, and Walter Scott in North Charleston, South Carolina.

15. The clearest example of this in cases such as Ferguson are reports that police are not only disproportionately targeting Black Americans, but also that they are incentivized to do so; that there are a host of financial benefits to arresting poor people of color—often for relatively minor infractions. Consequently, municipalities such as Ferguson, struggling with a shrinking tax base, severe cutbacks in state money, and ongoing White flight, have increasingly relied on policing to solve its fiscal problems. As the 2015 Department of Justice report observes, Ferguson’s Municipal Court had roughly 100,000 court cases pending in 2014. The bulk of these involved African Americans; more than half were for traffic offenses, but also included fines for loud music, zoning violations, “weeds/tall grass,” trespassing, jaywalking (the reason Darren Wilson stopped Michael Brown), and “disturbing the peace.” The resulting fines and fees totaled US$2.63 million that year, making Ferguson’s Municipal Court the city’s second-biggest source of revenue—with police essentially acting as revenue-collectors (see “Department of Justice,” 2015).

References


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