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Abstract

This conceptual essay explores the contentious discourse surrounding Coach Prime Deion Sanders' decision to leave Jackson State University (JSU), a historically Black college and university (HBCU), for the University of Colorado (CU), a predominantly white institution (PWI). Using King's principle of Black historical contention and Glaude's concept of nation language, we analyze Black male sports media commentary to examine how Sanders' move is perceived through divergent Black separatist and integrationist lenses. Employing principles of Fairclough's critical discourse analysis (CDA) as an analytic framework, this study interrogates the tensions between personal autonomy and collective responsibility within Black liberation narratives. Our findings reveal how Sanders' decision ignited polarized views, underscoring complex intersections of Black male identity and roles in public discourse. This work contributes to interdisciplinary discussions on Black representation and challenges oversimplified narratives, advocating for a nuanced understanding of Black men's pathways to liberation in mainstream spaces.

Introduction

In 2020, Coach Prime Deion Sanders, a Hall of Fame inductee in football, a World Series baseball champion, and one of the greatest athletes in history, took on the role of head coach at Jackson State University (JSU). This ignited hope that historically Black colleges and universities (HBCUs) could once again attract top football talent and national attention. However, his decision to leave JSU, an HBCU gaining national prominence, for the University of Colorado (CU), a predominantly white institution (PWI) with an underperforming football program and a Black student population of just 2.6%, highlighted deep-rooted tensions over Black leadership and progress, particularly regarding Black men. After a heated football game against Alabama State University (ASU)—a competitor in the Southwestern Athletic Conference (SWAC), a league of HBCUs founded in 1920—ASU's head coach Eddie Robinson Jr. remarked, "I'm living on the shoulders of the SWAC. He ain't SWAC. You know, I'm SWAC." When informed of Robinson's comments, Sanders retorted, "Who is SWAC, if I ain't SWAC?" This exchange underscored a long-standing debate over identity, motives, and commitment to Black liberatory futures—a recurring tension within Black male discourse.

This conceptual essay employs King's (2020) theory of Black historical consciousness, particularly the principle of Black historical contention, and Glaude's (2002) concept of nation language to examine how divergent ideologies—spanning from Black separatist to integrationist—frames Black males' contentious ideas and pursuit of a Canaan land or Promised Land, a metaphor symbolizing a place of ultimate freedom (Glaude, 2000). This essay uses principles of Fairclough's (2013) critical discourse analysis (CDA) to investigate how sociopolitical power shaped sports and popular media discussions surrounding Sanders' move from an HBCU to a PWI. The guiding research question for this study is: "How did Black men in popular sports media address the controversy surrounding Coach Prime Deion Sanders' departure from an HBCU to a PWI?" This essay argues that perspectives on Sanders' decision within sports media largely fell into either a Black separatist or integrationist viewpoint. By critically examining these responses, we challenge the binary framing of Black male sociopolitical actions, proposing instead a broader view that recognizes varied ways of conceptualizing and pursuing liberatory ends—given that Canaan is contentious.

This analysis aims to disrupt entrenched narratives, seeing such disagreements not merely as binary but as a spectrum of options for navigating the complex landscapes towards Black liberation—a movement seeking to ensure racial justice and self-determination. While the historical contributions of Black women to educational justice are significant (Cooper, 1988; James-Gallaway, 2024; Perkins, 2024; Townes, 1993), these concepts are beyond the scope of this paper. Rather, this essay centers specifically on the experiences of Black men, acknowledging Brown's (2018) concern that social sciences rarely ask explicit questions about the humanity of Black males as "the shadows of the past remain[ed] embedded in the subjectivity of the black male" (p. 61).

In examining Sanders' decision as a reflection of race, identity, and justice-oriented motivations, a topic analyzed with regards to Black male teacher-coaches at the interscholastic level (Thomas, 2022, 2023, 2025; Thomas et al., 2024), this work contributes to broader interdisciplinary discussions within education and cultural studies. Following a literature review on Black male contention within discourse and navigating Black male identity, liberation, and public scrutiny in sports media, we outline the conceptual frameworks of Black historical

consciousness (King, 2020) and nation language (Glaude, 2000), before discussing our CDA-based data analysis approach. Our findings reveal a terrain of separatist and integrationist views, which we then aim to make more complex and inspire nuanced discussions towards manifesting Black liberatory futures from a Black male perspective.

Literature Review

Enduring Discourse of Black Male Contention

The longue durée of Black males' (Brown, 2018) intra-factional perspectives on why and by what means to pursue separatists or integrationists' ends has been contentious from colonial enslavement to the twenty-first century. As early as 1829, the Black activist and abolitionist, David Walker, upbraided traitorous Blacks who prioritized white embrace over a commitment to Black liberation. Pausing from his excoriation of white supremacy in *Appeal,* Walker (1892) said, "[a]nd I am sorry that I have it to say, that many of our brethren have joined in with our oppressors . . . many of us know no better than to fight against ourselves, and by that means strengthen the hands of our natural enemies" (p. 62). The American Colonization Society's efforts to relocate enslaved people back to Africa in the early nineteenth century illuminated the contention that Walker noted. For example, Martin Delany, a separatist saw the possibility of a Liberian College as "a grand stride in the march of African Regeneration and Negro Nationality" (Shepperson, 1960, p. 301). Conversely, Richard Allen, a noted African Methodist Episcopal Bishop, rebuked such efforts stating, "This land which we have watered with our *tears* and *our blood is* now our *mother country*, and we are well satisfied to stay . . ." (Walker, 1892, p. 60). By the Jim Crow era, the ranks of Black male intellectuals within both separatist and integrationist factions would swell.

With the rise of federal, state, and privately funded schools for Black students during the Jim Crow era, Black male thought leaders advanced competing agendas while favoring variations of separatism (Du Bois, 1935, 1996; Washington, 1896; Woodson, 1933). For example, while working to secure funding from Julius Rosenwald to build Black schoolhouses post-Reconstruction, Booker T. Washington (Hoffschwelle, 2006) argued that Black folks would realize full citizenship through agricultural and industrial education; conversely, W. E. B. Du Bois (1996) utilized *On the Training of Black Men* to call for classical and higher education. However, Carter G. Woodson (1933) critiqued classically trained Black teachers in *The Mis-Education of the Negro.* According to Woodson (1933), "the 'educated Negroes' have the attitude of contempt toward their own people because in their own as well as in their mixed schools Negroes are taught to admire the Hebrew, the Greek, the Latin and the Teuton and to despise the African" (p. 1). Despite Woodson's critique, scholarship on Rosenwald Schools has noted numerous instances in which Black male teachers (Walker, 2000) and principals (Walker, 2009) rejected or sabotaged industrial curricula while encouraging students to pursue professional careers. In the years leading up to the 1954 *Brown* decision, the Civil Rights movement became dominated by the Black bourgeoisie with a desire for integration which fanned the flames of increased contention (Cruse, 2005; Frazier, 1957).

While many Black families and teachers of the early to mid 1900s supported Black-controlled schools, the Black bourgeoisie and Civil Rights leaders opposed a separatist agenda (Burkholder, 2021). For example, while Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. praised President Eisenhower for restoring law and order in the wake of massive resistance to the integration of Little Rock Central High School, Malcolm X critiqued the effort for "simply organizing black victims to be

brutalized by racial terrorists in the South" (Joseph, 2020, p. 77). Cruse (2005), a harsh critic of Black elite leaders such as King, said, "it is one of the rare bourgeois classes of color that will sell itself out to white power without a principled struggle for its economic rights" (p. 178). Nonetheless, the death of King created a vacuum of power that both Black separatist and integrationists sought to seize. In 1972, eight thousand Black folks gathered for the National Black Political Convention in Gary, Indiana to resolve the divide between Black separatist and integrationist-oriented Civil Rights leaders. Black nationalist like Roy Innis and Amiri Baraka presented a fervent, unequivocal separatist agenda that cut against the grain of mainstream Black Christian integrationist (Cone, 1970). Innis successfully passed an anti-busing resolution stating, "[w]e condemn forced racial integration of schools as a bankrupt, suicidal method of desegregating schools" (Moore, 2018, p. 133). Ultimately, Black male leaders' irreconcilable, intra-factional divisions have led to the inability to create a unified national Black education agenda. Division abounds with Black male advocates of multiculturalism (Banks, 1993), Afrocentrism (Asante, 1991), antiracism (Kendi, 2013), and a faction of separatist engaging in homeschooling (Fields-Smith & Kisura, 2013). Contemporarily, popular culture has become a medium for the insatiable production and consumption of Black male contention.

Contested Figures: Navigating Identity, Liberation, and Public Scrutiny in Sports Media

The intersection of race, sports, media, and politics has long positioned Black male sports figures as symbols of both resilience and social change, offering them a rare public platform to assert strength in a society fraught with racial biases. Yet, this visibility brings inherent tensions, as the political undertones within sports often clash with expectations for athletic figures to remain apolitical. Busey and Walker's (2017) concept of "critical Black patriotism" frames civic engagement for Black sports figures as rooted in personal dignity and a resistance to marginalization within mainstream narratives of civic engagement. Figures like Muhammad Ali, Tommy Smith/ John Carlos, Mahmoud Abdul-Rauf, and Colin Kaepernick exemplified this tension by using their platforms to critique racial injustices, often at significant personal cost. Kaepernick's protest against police violence, for example, spurred discussions around the social responsibility of Black sports figures, leveraging what Towler et al. (2020) termed "celebrity activism" to mobilize political action and solidify shared identity within Black communities.

The rise of sports media has amplified the visibility and influence of Black sports figures. Dyson (1993) encapsulated this dual role of Black athletes as both "substance and symbol," representing the convergence of Black identity, social power, and resistance. However, this empowerment comes with a price. Burrows (2016) refers to this as the "Black tax"—the expectation that Black athletes remain publicly aligned with their communities, often sacrificing personal advancement to promote collective progress. Navigating these dual demands of individual ambition and collective responsibility, Black male sports figures occupy a complex role, embodying a form of "dual citizenship" or membership across racial and political spheres.

Within sports media, Black athletic figures face unique scrutiny, where their visibility and decisions challenge dominant narratives about Blackness. Hall (2006) encourages society to question, "What, then, is this 'black' in popular culture?" This critical inquiry exposes the limited frameworks through which Black male sports figures are often viewed—whether as "magical negroes" (Pimentel & Busey, 2018) or as characters whose stories are reframed by white savior tropes (De Oca, 2012), leading to what King and Womac (2014) termed "problematic historical

memory." In this landscape, Black sports figures are often stripped of the intellectual, cultural, and political depth that defines their humanity (Guerrero, 2013), reduced instead to stereotypical figures detached from the social realities that shape their experiences.

The proliferation of sport shows on social media platforms can provide new vantage points to witness these complexities, capturing Black men's sociopolitical confrontations in ways that challenge and complicate flat, binary constructions of Black manhood. Yet, too often, "the same old stories" (Brown, 2011) addressing Black male conditions and experiences are circulated. Scholars like King (2017) and Kumah-Abiwu (2020) argue for a critical race media literacy that recognizes the layered narratives within Black male contention in popular media. Hall (2006) describes this as "essentializing moments," where attempts to distill a 'pure' Black experience in media risk removing Black sports figures from the broader sociopolitical fabric of anti-blackness. The concept of Black male contention towards Black liberation highlights how Black men have used sports media to critique intra-community behavior that risks compromising Black representation. This phenomenon surfaced prominently when Coach Prime announced his decision to leave JSU for CU. His move sparked a heated debate in sports media, highlighting a historical tension between separatist and integrationist perspectives within Black male discourse. The public reaction to Sanders' departure offers a contemporary case study of Black historical contention, showcasing the spectrum of thought on what it means to pursue liberation within, and sometimes against, mainstream institutions.

Conceptual Framework

Our data analysis was grounded in a conceptual framework composed of King's (2020) Black historical consciousness principle of *Black historical contentio*n and Glaude's (2000) notion of *nation language*. Black men's varied subjective conceptualizations on the appropriate utility of civic engagement to redress manifestations of antiBlackness has been contentious for centuries. Thus, we intentionally utilized constructs that tended to the specificity of how Black men make sense of and enact a plurality of actions that are, we argue, contentious but united in the pursuit of problem-solving towards liberatory ends. This conceptual framework enabled us to analyze contemporary separatist-integrationist discourse in popular culture germane to Deion Sanders' exodus from JSU to CU.

Efforts to overcompensate for the erasure, or curricular genocide (Au et al., 2016), of Black representation can lead to the presentation of pristine, messianic figures that are both factually incomplete and create unrealistic expectations of civic engagement for Black students (Woodson, 2016). King (2020), a social studies and curriculum scholar, argued for an intentional reframing of Black history beyond a White epistemic logic to "explore Black identity through complex and nuanced narratives that attempt to get at the full humanity of Black people" (p. 337). To achieve this goal, King (2020) developed a framework of Black historical consciousness composed of the following six principles: systemic power, oppression, and racism; agency, resistance, and perseverance; Africa and the African Diaspora; Black joy and love; Black identities; and Black historical contention. The complexity of Black humanity leads to intra-racial points of divergence on an array of political and social issues. According to King (2020), "Black historical contention stresses that we should not merely teach and present positive histories and images" (p. 340). Analyzing our data through the lens of Black historical contention allowed for a humanizing approach to (re)presenting a seemingly irreconcilable discourse of discord amongst Black men in

popular culture. We complement the principle of Black historical consciousness with Glaude's (2000) notion of *nation language*.

In Glaude's (2000) seminal text, *Exodus!: Religion, Race, and Nation in Early Nineteenth-Century Black America*, the African American Studies scholar argued that "[n]o other story in the Bible has quite captured the imagination of African Americans like that of Exodus" (p. 3). With the ability to present a journey from bondage to deliverance, the book of Exodus fostered an intellectual space of analogical reasoning that helped create a sense of peoplehood with a shared history and destiny. Once taken up, Exodus evoked a moral obligation to "the race" in which Black folks engaged in forms of self-actualization to alleviate an oppressive condition. However, Glaude (2000) cautions that this ". . . does not lead to the conclusion that we have identical interest or that we will agree on a course of action" (p. 11). Black folks' competing discourse on Exodus as praxis manifested in what Glaude (2000) calls *nation language*—the manifold ways Exodus gets used to generate a sense of peoplehood and a correlated course of action towards collective liberation. Moreover, the aim of *nation language:*

> is to allow for a plurality of action and to build forms of overlapping consensus with an eye toward problem-solving and not with the view that there is but one conception of the good to be recognized by all black people precisely because they are black. (p. 12)

Collectively, we utilized *Black historical contention* and *nation language* as an analytic to explicate the discursive cacophony of contention around Deion Sanders' exodus from JSU to the CU.

Method

Critical Discourse Analysis

We drew on principles of Fairclough's (2013) CDA not as a formal methodology but as an analytic tool to conceptually engage with the discourse surrounding Coach Prime's decision. Our aim is to analyze the media discourse through the lens of Black male liberatory pursuits, focusing on power relations and sociocultural factors. Fairclough's (2013) approach to CDA emphasizes its role in not only describing but evaluating societal realities, making it suitable for examining the contentious narratives surrounding Sanders' move. Studies have shown the effectiveness of CDA in deciphering overt and covert ideologies while highlighting the immense impact of media (James-Gallaway et al., 2023; Johnson, 2020; Ramanathan & Hoon, 2015; Thomas et al., 2022). As Van Dijk (2015) and Wodak (2014) assert, CDA is not a singular method but a perspective that integrates various means to study discourse, power, and ideology in context. CDA helps uncover how media outlets, as dominant social actors, construct narratives that either challenged or legitimized Sanders' decision. Importantly, CDA is a critical, interdisciplinary approach that seeks to demystify power dynamics and resist social inequality via discourse (Van Dijk, 2015; Wodak, 2014).

This essay, framed as a conceptual analysis rather than an empirical study, loosely follows CDA's interpretive process (Brown & Kraehe, 2013), which includes Fairclough's (2013) three dimensions: description; interpretation; and explanation. In the description phase, we analyzed the textual properties of media sources discussing Sanders' move. The interpretation phase examined the relationship between the discourse and the social structures that shape it, particularly focusing

on the sociocultural and racial dynamics of Black male identity. Finally, the explanation phase evaluated how this discourse influences broader social practices, particularly Black justice-oriented pursuits and the tensions between separatist and integrationist frameworks of Black progress. As Wodak (2014) emphasized, CDA involves a retroductable analysis, ensuring transparency in how we draw connections between media discourse, social structures, and ideologies. Through the lens of nation language (Glaude, 2000) we explored how commentators' statements of Sanders' decision were framed within a limited binary – Black separatism vs. integrationism – and ultimately argue for the need to move beyond these frameworks to understand Black men's sociopolitical attitudes and actions in more nuanced ways. The data selected for this qualitative work was gathered using purposive sampling, selecting platforms (11 sources) that were either featured on ESPN or Fox Sports (premier sports channels), hosted by a former Black professional athlete on a podcast, or led by a Black sports journalist or sociocultural critic.

Below are the steps of interpretation that were flexibly followed (Brown & Kraehe, 2013).

1. Textual analysis: Identify linguistic choices to frame Sanders' decision by media outlets, observing how platforms align with or challenge dominant ideologies.
2. Contextual analysis: Explore the historical and sociopolitical contexts of media narratives – considering the role of race, identity, and representation.
3. Power & ideology: Attend to how race and sports media shape public perception concerning Black male citizenship.
4. Impact on social practices: Analyze social implications of these media depictions and how they may affect views of Black leadership, achievement, and collective progress.

In maintaining CDA's critical tradition, this essay underscores the recognition of rigid binaries when examining Black men's sociopolitical actions but also the necessity to reconsider and reframe those actions.

Findings

While our approach focuses on analyzing sports commentators' discourse surrounding Sanders' decision, we begin this section by incorporating his own words to provide needed context grounding our analysis. Sanders' statements reveal his personal motivations and values, which serve as a foundation for understanding the external interpretations and critiques by sports commentators. By juxtaposing Sanders' own declarations with media commentary, we deepen our exploration of discourse, highlighting not only the public narratives but also Sanders' self-positioning within these debates, offering a fuller and deeper perspective regarding his decision.

Prime The Prophet or For-Profit

Between 2020 and 2023, Sanders used God to justify both the genesis of his arrival to and exodus from JSU. As a prominent Black figure who framed coaching as his calling to carry out the mission of God's work via helping young men, Sanders' use of Christian rhetoric evoked a Black theology— "the synthesis of Christian belief and Black Power ideology" (Frederickson, 1996, p. 153). In 2020, the *Atlanta Black Star* captured Sanders' early synthesis of Christianity and Black power when he said, "God called me to Jackson State and me to these men" (Nelson,

2020). Deion continued to verbally fuse prophecy with his occupational purpose at an HBCU. During a 2022 interview on *60 Minutes* with Jon Wertheim (2022), Deion rationalized his presence at JSU by declaring, "I truly believe with all my heart and soul that God called me collect (laugh), and I had to accept the charges . . ." According to Glaude (2000), Black folks political use of Exodus towards a Canaan land allowed for the imagining of a new nation "through the precepts of Black Christianity" (p. 6). Through a Black theological lens, Canaan served as a language for the civic practice of building a liberatory nation—a 'promised land' for a people living in a civic shadowland as second-class citizens (Tillet, 2012). Martin Luther King Jr. captured the essence of this prophetic, liberatory fantasy (Dumas and Ross, 2016) in his, *I've Been to the Mountaintop* speech, stating, "I've seen the Promised Land. I may not get there with you. But I want you to know tonight, that we, as a people, will get to the Promised Land." However, Deion's ability to stir the souls of Black folk came to an impasse when he announced that God had called him to depart an HBCU for the "prosperity of a PWI."

Two months after Sanders' *60 Minute* interview in which he utilized prophecy to justify his calling to JSU, he pivoted during a meeting with the media prior to the 2022 Celebration Bowl by using the moment to announce his divinely ordered exodus from JSU to CU. During the media frenzy, Sanders (The 3 Point Conversion, 2022) said:

> I reached the point where I had a real conversation with the Lord. Now it's funny how you believed the Lord when he said to come here, but you don't believe me when I tell you the Lord may tell me to do otherwise. It's like my God is talking to you about me. I don't think he works like that. (2:33)

Sander's announcement was met with contempt and adulation by Black Americans. The former wondered whether 'Coach Prime' was ever a prophet for Black liberation or a for-profit charlatan masquerading as one. During the Fall of Sanders' first season at CU, he blurred the lines of a divine exodus with capitalistic opportunism when he said:

> God wouldn't relocate me to something that was successful. That don't make sense. He had to find the most disappointing and the most difficult task, and this is what it was." Later in the interview, when asked what he told the JSU students about his exodus, Sanders said, "Opportunity called. Sooner or later in life, there will be opportunity that knocks at your door … (Wertheim, 2023, para. 24 & 37)

The utility of Exodus as a language of nation building towards liberatory ends requires a moral obligation to racial solidarity–a sense of 'we-intentions'. We argue that the discourse of Black male contention in popular culture around Sanders' exodus is grounded in the spectrum of divergent perspectives on what a moral obligation to the race entails. According to Glaude (2000), the moral obligation to the race via 'we-intentions' is "a sense of being one of us, the force of which is essentially contrastive in that it contrasts with a 'they' that is made up of violent white human beings" (p. 15). In the following section, we explicate the typologies of contention in sports media as Black males utilized competing notions of nation language to advance a plurality of actions following Deion's exodus from JSU to CU.

Exodus, Treason, and Moral Abdication

As we examined popular media outlets, we found that Black male contention around Deion's exodus from JSU to CU took the form of Black nationalist, conservative, and separatist

typologies. While this collective expressed a shared condemnation of Sanders' exodus from an HBCU to a PWI, their contention was grounded in the divergent ways they critiqued his rationale for exiting. These perspectives ranged from viewing the coach as a manipulative charlatan to an assimilationist, a sellout, and an eternal outsider. One of Coach Prime's harshest critiques came from the Pan-Africanist, Dr. Umar Johnson, who upbraided Sanders' for morally abdicating a nation-building agenda and exploiting HBCUs for integrationist ends. In an interview on *The Breakfast Club*, Dr. Johnson (2022) said:

> When Deion Sanders stood against Colin Kaepernick's protest in 2016, I branded him a "Negropean" … When I heard Deion Sanders was taking the Jackson State job, I said, ok, I'm going to give him his Black pass back because … you go to Jackson State, an HBCU, that's impressive. Now, I hear all of a sudden you might be leaving. He's wrong … that means that Deion Sanders used, abused, and exploited the HBCU, Jackson State, just to be given an opportunity to show predominantly white institutions that he could coach. If he only used [Jackson State] as a steppingstone to getting a job at a white college he was dead wrong … The reason I'm so personally disappointed in Deion is I thought he was there for a movement not for money… I foresaw a situation where Deion would hire other retired Black NFL players to coach at HBCUs …That one man could have been the catalyst for a movement that would have revolutionized the survival of HBCUs! . . .For him to pull out of Jackson State the way that he did it before making sure the HBCU system survived, to me, was selfish … and y'all want to condone that because you Black celebrities are not committed to the best interest of Black people… 50,000 lashes for Deion! (49:15)

"Negropean," in Johnson's view, describes Black individuals who adopt or prioritize European (white) cultural values over those of the Black community. The remark, "I thought he was there for a movement not for money" perpetuates the idea of white Western values of individualism versus Black collective progress. Johnson's criticism of Sanders' abdication, perhaps even his treason, gets at a core tenet of nation language (Glaude, 2000)—the moral obligation to racial solidarity in opposition to white-controlled structures. Through his Pan-Africanist lens, Dr. Johnson further articulated the targeted extraction of Sanders from an HBCU as effort to financially cripple nation-building ends during his interview with *The Art of Dialogue* (2023):

> I really believe Deion Sanders could have led a major financial revolution for HBCUs by way of the athletic programs. . . I really think the white power structure stood back and they looked at the threat Deion posed to the success and the financial wherewithal of the PWI had he been able to continue to take top athletes . . . They sent him to a white college that has only 2% Black students and in a town that only has 1% Black people . . . I believe they were making a statement by doing that . . . The pan-Africanists in me, the revolutionary in me, I am still disappointed that we have a Black man bringing all this attention and all this money to a predominantly white university that has almost no Black students on the campus. (0:44)

Johnson's mentioning of "2% Black students and in a town that only has 1% Black people" accentuates pan-Africanist principles of Black unity beyond the playing field, to the university campus, and the greater community. Johnson believed that Sanders would galvanize the masses of wealthy Black folk to finance Black institutional independence, and further contended that white individuals and institutions intentionally extracted Coach Prime to stymie the growth in HBCU

power. Yet as Glaude (2000) argues, despite having common issues "that fact does not lead to the conclusion that we have identical interests or that we will agree on a course of action" (p. 11). Thus, while Dr. Johnson, expressed disappointment in Sanders' moral abdication of his responsibility to the race for failing to preserve HBCUs in perpetuity, the journalist, Bomani Babatunde Jones, scolded Sanders' for being a predatory opportunist who exploited an HBCU for personal gain while never being committed to nation-building ends.

While Jones has not identified as a Pan-Africanist like Dr. Johnson, he is a third generation HBCU graduate who earned his bachelor's degree from Clark Atlanta University. Thus, Jones emerged as a quintessential nationalist who frequently uses his platform to advocate for Black pride, rights, and justice. On *CNN This Morning*, Jones (CNN, 2022) critiqued Sanders' behavior, stating:

> When you come into the first job and sold the idea that you are going to be the savior of HBCUs, and you are going to raise the playing field, not just for Jackson State, but for everybody else, and you're going to do it because God told you to do it. He explicitly said that God told him to do this …he sold it and got people to believe it and then he chucked the deuce and left… He came in and sold a long-term vision for what was going on at Jackson State, but his goals and ambitions were always to be a power 5 head coach. My take has always been he went to Jackson State primarily because he wanted to be a head coach but didn't want to ever be anybody's assistant coach, so he had to find somebody that would give him a job and make him a head coach, all the bigger grandiose notions of what he was doing for somebody else, naw, it was what it always is-he did it for Deion. (1:54)

For Jones, JSU is "the savior" in this story—an HBCU that granted Sanders his only head coaching opportunity because no power 5 (the five major athletic conferences in NCAA Division I) school would do so. Later in the same interview, *CNN* host, Don Lemon, asked Jones what he believed Deion should have done instead, he said:

> I wouldn't have come in the first place and said that God sent me here to fix HBCUs, and God decided that in the middle of it you were supposed to leave. I mean the thing I've said is maybe God wants 10% of $5 million and not 10% of $375,000. If God can do math, then I can understand why that is. He sold a dream and then walked out on the dream. People have the right to be critical of that. (7:03)

The statement, "People have the right to be critical…" voices Black nationalist' views of obligations towards collective uplift. Jones perceived Sanders as a charlatan who predatorily targeted and exploited Black problems by selling a vision of creating a promised land that was revealed to be the propagation of false prophecy for profit.

While Johnson and Jones grounded their critiques in Sanders' moral abdication and capital accumulation, respectively, the Black conservative, Jason Whitlock, pathologized Sanders' for being a self-hating African American with an insatiable thirst for white individual and institutional affirmation and acceptance. Whitlock (2022) took to his podcast platform, *Fearless*, to launch his diatribe in which he said:

> My number one take away, as Black people, we would rather beg than build our own. That's what this whole Deion Sanders situation truly illustrates. Rather than build our own great program, dynasty, legacy, [or] our own platform, we'd rather

> go beg white people to give us access to their platform. That's what this is. Deion Sanders had an awesome opportunity, and not just Deion Sanders, a lot of the Black celebrities that you hear running their mouths about Black Lives Matter, Diversity Equity and Inclusion, and 'Black coaches just don't get a chance' … we think the white man's ice is colder … and we don't believe in building anything of our own. Period, end of story… and it's because anything that's all Black, we don't think is any good, so we don't build it, we don't invest in it, and we certainly don't support it over the long haul. (2:22)

Whitlock expressing "we think the white man's ice is colder" is not the first Black male figure to use such pathological tropes of self-hatred to condemn Black folks whose decisions to work for or with white institutions garnered public ridicule. Edward Frazier, a Black sociologist, dedicated an entire book to the matter in Black Bourgeoisie. In his text, Frazier (1957) argued that "[t]he self-hatred of middle-class Negroes is often revealed in the keen competition which exists among them for status and recognition. . . They prefer to submit to the authority of whites than to be subordinate to other Negroes" (Frazier, 1957, p. 227). Across each example, competing points of view revolved around a plurality Black male's political typology—pan-Africanists, nationalist, conservative—were in contention with Deion's conceptualization of exodus from an HBCU to a PWI. Reverend Allan Boesak, a Black male leader against South African Apartheid, said, "there was a big difference between a minority's battle for equality in a predominantly white society and a black majority's effort to overthrow the rule of a white majority" (Fredrickson, 1996, p. 149). In this theme, the findings illuminate how Deion's integrationist quest for equality as a Black male coach at a PWI served as a point of ideological contention with Black men who sought to forge a unified nation language toward overthrowing the rule of a white majority.

He's Goin' Up Yonder…What About You?

While Coach Prime's decision was met with a bevy of criticism, it also garnered understanding, agreement, and vehement defense along media airwaves. These perspectives were cached in motifs of functionalism, opportunism, and realism—because despite the prominence of Coach Prime, it was recognized that this was still a Black man navigating the waters of a hegemonic society. As sport media platforms began to take on more politically driven content, we witnessed Shannon Sharpe, NFL Hall of Famer, sports commentator, and Black social media's proverbial "Unc" weigh in on the subject on Fox Sports show, *Undisputed* (2022), saying:

> We say we want our Black coaches to get opportunities. He (Coach Prime) gets an opportunity. He takes the opportunity. And now you mad. My (Black) community has to stop feeling like he owes you something. (1:25)

Shannon Sharpe, a friend of Coach Prime, points to a layer of historical contention within the Black community relating to representation and opportunity. Using the lens of CDA, Sharpe's statement moves beyond personal sentiment to reflect on a broader discourse of communal expectations. This discourse aligns with ideas of Black solidarity, determination, and representation in hierarchical structures such as college sports coaching. "Want(ing) our Black coaches to get opportunities" emphasizes the Black community's desire and aspiration for equitable opportunities, especially considering the historical and present-day impediments regarding Black head coaches as only 15 of 133 NCAA Football Bowl Subdivision (highest level

of college football) head coaches are Black. When Sharpe states, "And now you mad," his assertion speaks to a resulting discrepancy based on the decision of Coach Prime.

Sharpe positions himself as an insider with a shared identity using the pronoun "we" to illustrate commonality with the Black community– perhaps to give his perspective more credence. His repeated use of "opportunity" highlights a theme of access to power, influence, and attention too often deferred and denied to Black Americans. This "opportunity" also orients itself with Glaude's (2000) nation language specifically, "Exodus politics," as leaving JSU for the mountains of CU was a way of not merely achieving a higher salary but in essence a gateway to personhood.

Charlemagne, popular American radio host and social critic, presented an understanding centered on Coach Prime, HBCUs, and representation in sports. He (*Breakfast Club Power 105.1*, 2022) stated:

> I don't understand this slander. Deion Sanders has done everything that he said he was going to do. He did his job. He told us from the beginning everything he was going to do. He was going to change the perspective of HBCU football. He did that. He laid the blueprint and showed what was possible. If one man can stop the momentum of HBCUs, then HBCUs really don't have momentum. (0:30)

Having given "Donkey of the Day" (a radio segment that highlights acts of absurdity) to everyone criticizing Coach Prime, Charlemagne saying, "I don't understand this slander" exercises a defensive and bewildering tone against what he views as unjust reprimand. "He did that" communicates for Charlemagne an adherence to Coach Prime's primary responsibility of coaching for a certain amount of time but more importantly elevating HBCUs to another level of acclaim. More so, Charlemagne stating, "He did his job" delineates Coach Prime's self-proclaimed goals from that of others' expectations of him.

Within the larger scope of social networks, this outlook engages questions as to the transformative power of individuals working among institutional structures. Narratives of success, impact, visibility, and value surface pertaining to both Coach Prime and HBCUs. Charlemagne's comment about "momentum" problematizes the resilience and capability of HBCUs to weather transitions of leadership. Indeed, some of the most fevered heights reached of Black historical contention has concerned changes of power. Charlemagne's expression implies that Coach Prime's success at JSU should be viewed as a potential example of what can be achieved, rather than a unique, short-lived accomplishment that could quickly and easily be reversed.

Another popular personality, sports media host and journalist, Steven A. Smith addressed the criticism levied at Coach Prime, asserting the decision to join CU should be looked at as favorable considering his contributions to JSU and HBCUs. In direct and confrontational style on his podcast, *K[no]w Mercy*, Smith (2023) exclaimed:

> We got people hating on him all the time. Oh he should have stayed at the HBCU longer. He shouldn't have used them to catapult his career and all this other stuff they chirping about. Shut the hell up! When he was at Jackson State, he did his job, he won football games, brought attention to his program and never hesitated to bring attention to HBCUs and the needs that they had in order to elevate the profiles of Historically Black Colleges and Universities across this country. Imagine what opportunities that potentially will open up for African American coaches coaching at HBCUs now. Because if Prime Time goes and all of a sudden he puts Colorado

> in the national championship picture. What about the next great HBCU coach? He's opening up the doors of opportunities for future African Americans who want to coach on the highest levels. Think about the big picture. There is not a Black person alive that should not be rooting for Prime Time Deion Sanders to succeed. (0:02)

Further illustrating Black historical contention (King, 2020), Smith is unapologetic in denouncing disapproval of Coach Prime's decision. He insists taking an expanded view of the college sports landscape improves perspective on "opportunities that potentially will open up for African American coaches at HBCUs now." For Smith, Coach Prime's move to CU was seen as part of Black collective advancement—initially benefitting him personally, but ultimately bringing long-term benefits to the Black community. As Glaude (2000) attests, usage of the Exodus story by African Americans stresses a "journey forward—the promise that where we are going is radically different from where we are" (p. 6). Accordingly, for Smith, Coach Prime is simply one of the first or a progenitor of that "we" of Black coaches. This singular assent to the "highest level" is representative of a larger racial project of successive coaches entering new realms of opportunity.

This more comprehensive and holistic outlook regarding individual actions vis-a-vis collective responsibility can be explicated given the statement by American journalist, Roland Martin. Moving from a focus of Coach Prime's singular decision to one predicated on the importance of sustaining Black institutions, Martin (2022) declared:

> The issue is not an institution dies when a person leaves. An institution dies when a new person comes in and does not handle their business. …It's a whole bunch of Black people right now commenting about Deion Sanders leaving the HBCU and not nan' one of them work for Black-owned company. It's a lot of people who are commenting about Deion Sanders leaving who don't live in Black neighborhoods. It's a lot of people right now who are commenting about Deion Sanders being a sellout of when it comes to leaving Jackson State, and they made no affirmative decision to actually buy Black. Now see, see it's real easy to focus on Deion, but not look at yourself and what you were doing. …What is required right now is for Black folks to walk the walk about supporting Black institutions. (1:31)

Martin questions the personal and shared commitment towards Black progress of those critiquing Coach Prime's decision. For him not working for a Black-owned company, not living in a Black neighborhood, nor supporting Black business allows for criticism of Coach Prime to fall flat of any substantive reasoning. He calls for an introspective approach whereby individual accountability precedes and is more essential to Black collective progress than casting unrealistic hopes upon its perceived leadership. "Walking the walk" in terms of exemplifying Black progress has been a long-standing point of contention within Black political discourse (King, 2020). Martin's emphatic call to action speaks to debates about the consequences of lived principles over perfunctory disapproval.

Collectively, the statements analyzed within this theme exhibit an appreciation for what Coach Prime contributed during his time at JSU, justifiable reasoning for his exit, but more so a brazen prompting to those who admonished his decision to examine their own actions towards Black progress.

Discussion and Conclusion

Our exploration of the research question, "How did Black men in popular sports media address the controversy surrounding Coach Prime Deion Sanders' departure from an HBCU to a PWI?" revealed a binary of interpretations of Black liberation. Sanders' provocative statement, "Who is SWAC, if I ain't SWAC?" served as a cultural marker, igniting debates over Black representation and progress. Dubbed the "Prime Effect," Sanders' influence revitalized interest in HBCUs as vehicles for Black economic growth and athletic prowess, to then go on to spark record levels of attendance, merchandise sales, Black student applicants, and social media followers for CU. Yet this "effect" also exposed a growing skepticism toward Black elites. Public discourse around Sanders' decision exposed the intersection of Black nationalist and assimilationist ideologies, challenging traditional messianic tropes (Moses, 2010) and raising questions about the role of Black male sport figures within and outside of higher education institutions.

Undoubtedly, Coach Prime's decision evoked strong feelings and reactions. While previous research has addressed such divisions historically (Burkholder, 2021; Cruse, 2005), this study highlights how modern media amplifies these sociopolitical tensions, creating polarized yet nuanced perspectives on individual and communal progress. Discourse across these platforms often simplify complex actions and narratives. Applied more broadly, insights from this study demonstrates the significance of media literacy for consuming and engaging with the representations of Black leadership in sports and beyond. Doing so could situate more Black narratives as deserving of examination and provide the grounds for revised theorizations of dominant discourses.

A limitation of this essay may be its lack of analysis on how Sanders' decision may have been influenced by his desire to provide his sons, Shedeur and Shilo, who play under him, the best chance to be drafted into the NFL. In prioritizing his sons' futures, Coach Prime also counters metanarratives of Black men as absent fathers (Smith et al., 2022; Thomas et al., 2022; Thomas et al., 2024), highlighting his commitment to their personal and professional growth. Also, although limited by the scope of selected media passages, this framework underscores the value of centering Black male voices on Black male experiences, especially within media where politics and public perception converge (Henry & Oates, 2020). Through authentic perspectives, we gain a richer, multidimensional understanding of Black male experiences.

We urge future research to explore Black historical contention not as solely divisive but as a space to investigate the spectrum of choices that Black folk navigate in pursuit of dignity and humanity. Johnson (2019, 2022) has examined how young Black boys develop an awareness of their unique sociopolitical positions and how that consciousness shapes the civic choices they make. With regards to Black male teacher-coaches at the interscholastic level (i.e., middle/high school), Thomas's work explores how this demographic draws on familial and communal youth knowledge (Thomas, 2025) to de-essentialize fixed notions of civic thought (Thomas, 2022) and to enrich the application of Black intellectual thought in social studies and literature courses (Johnson, 2021; Thomas, 2023). Moreover, Blackness is a distinct tapestry of identities and lived experiences, and its portrayals should reflect the full depth and breadth of this diversity. As Black men balance their own aspirations with the responsibilities perceived by or placed upon them by the broader community—this orientation reflects an enduring struggle to honor both personal dignity and communal loyalty which can be understood beyond strict binaries. Acknowledging

these intricacies allows for a more nuanced portrayal of Black identities, fostering richer discourse on race, identity, and representation within and beyond Black communities.

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