

## **In the Shadows No More: Making a Case for Black College Assistant Football Coaches as Strategic Hybrid Resisters In and Through Sport**

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*Within the discussion of sport activism, athletes often garner the most attention. However, other athletic stakeholders also engage in broader forms of resistance – one group being Black college assistant football coaches. I utilize a hermeneutical phenomenology methodological approach to examine the relationship between the experiences of Black college assistant football coaches and resistance in and through sport. Eight coaches engaged in semi-structured interviews, and their experiences were interpreted through the combined frameworks of critical race theory and African American resistance typology by Cooper (2021). My interpretation uncovered that Black college assistant football coaches are strategic hybrid resisters engaging in varied aspects of resistance, including activism. Ultimately, participants engaged in resistance to ensure their continued success, counter hegemonic norms, and increase opportunities for other Black coaches (or potential coaches). I conclude with a discussion of implications for policy and practice and future research opportunities related to the Black coaching experience and resistance.*

*Keywords: Black coaches, sport activism, critical race theory, college athletics, resistance*

When examining sport activism, Black athletes are often at the forefront of the conversation. Prominent examples include, Muhammad Ali refusing to enlist in the United States (U.S.) military during the Vietnam War, John Carlos and Tommie Smith protesting at the 1968 Olympic games, Black college athletes protesting racial injustice, and Colin Kaepernick kneeling during the national anthem. While there are numerous other examples of activism within the realm of sport, these examples are some that have been widely covered. These examples are exclusively of athletes and lack examples of activism (or activist-influenced behaviors) from coaches, management, or other sport stakeholders. While much-deserved attention has been given to these notable protests, other athletic stakeholders also engage in resistance in and through sport to address racial inequities, which may be less noticeable than activism.

Historically, within college athletics racial inequities exist at all levels, from athletes, coaches, and administrators (Howe & Rockhill, 2020; Rockhill et al., 2021). Fink and Pastore (1999) argued, “perhaps nowhere is discrimination and oppression more evident than in Division IA intercollegiate athletics” (p. 311). Their argument remains valid, although discrimination occurs in less overt manners than in the past. For example, Black college athletes comprise the largest racial group in Division I football (44%), yet Black coaches only occupy 31% of assistant coaching roles and 8% of all head coaching roles at the Division I level (Lapchick et al., 2021). The covertness of racism in this case relates to *what* opportunities Black coaches receive. It could be argued that these coaches are getting opportunities at the assistant level. While true, Black coaches are not often placed in roles that allow for upward mobility. The percentages of Black coordinators (generally next in line for head coaching positions) drops to 10% for offensive coordinators and 18% of defensive coordinators (Binion & Wood, 2022). While Black athletes see increasing opportunities to participate, opportunities for Black coaches to enter and advance in the field remain stagnant. This dearth of representation and opportunity motivates Black coaches within the field to disrupt the status quo.

To achieve this goal, Black coaches engage in varied forms of resistance (including activism) that serve to increase opportunities for other Black coaches. While typically overlooked in activism, I provide a perspective expanding the discussion of activism that conceptualizes these coaches as strategic hybrid resisters with an activist agenda. Within this paper, I discuss relevant literature related to Black college football coaches and then utilize tenets from critical race theory (CRT) and the African American resistance typology (AART) to emphasize how Black assistant college football coaches are engaged in aspects of resistance.

## Literature Review

Black coaches representing 8% and 31% head and assistant football coaching positions at the Division I level brings forth a nuanced discussion. On the one hand, a surface-level view appears to portray *some* opportunity for Black coaches at the assistant level. However, on the other hand, that opportunity is diminished as Black coaches attempt to become head coaches. Thus, it is not only about *an* opportunity; rather, an important discussion related to Black coaches is *what* opportunities they are receiving to advance in the field.

### *Access Discrimination and Exclusion*

An analysis of Black coach representation at the Division I level highlights historical issues of access and exclusion (Finch et al., 2010; Howe, 2018). The concept of access discrimination provides insight as to why this has happened. This concept describes discrimination that is not related to job performance whereby the dominant group prevents members of minoritized groups from obtaining positions within the organization (Cunningham & Sagas, 2005). College athletics is an exclusionary system dominated by white<sup>1</sup> men, who make most of the hiring decisions (Howe & Rockhill, 2020). To that end, the dominant group (white men) are in positions of power that allow them to limit the access of Black coaches (Cunningham & Saga, 2005).

Access discrimination works to maintain a homologous workforce, thus white decision makers are less likely to hire Black coaches (Cunningham & Sagas, 2005). One way to maintain a homologous workforce is through the “old boy network,” which is described as sponsoring and favoring candidates based on friendship and loyalty (Loy & Sage, 1978). White male dominance in college football leadership is perpetuated due to these strong networks working to exclude Black coaches from entering and ascending in the field (Singer et al., 2010). This network creates numerous opportunities for members (i.e., white males); however, for people outside of this network (i.e., Black coaching candidates), those same opportunities are diminished simply because of their social status. Thus, historically, Black coaches have been excluded from opportunities because of this social network.

Counterarguments to the old boy network exist, which are based on the meritocratic fallacy and the notion that there are not enough interested Black candidates. Gearity and Metzger (2017) described the *myth of meritocracy* as the perception that success comes to those who deserve it by working hard. This idea of meritocracy leads to blanket statements such as “coaches who work hard get rewarded” or “the best coaches succeed.” However, that is not always the case, as demonstrated by the lack of racial diversity within the coaching field. Work from Bozeman and Fay (2013) counters the argument that the lack of diversity is the result of an insufficient number of interested candidates. With the primary pool of potential coaches likely being former college athletes, football coaches would generally have a collegiate football background. Black athletes make up a substantial portion of collegiate football players; however, they remain underrepresented within coaching (Kopkin, 2014; Lapchick et al., 2021). In fact, Cunningham and Singer (2010) found that racially minoritized college athletes had greater intentions of pursuing a career in coaching than their white peers. Thus, disproportionate representation is not due to a lack of intention or effort; rather, it is due to access discrimination.

### *The Plight of Black Coaches*

The lack of Black head coaches is, in part, due to the tendency for white athletes and coaches to occupy positions that lead to faster career advancement (i.e., *what opportunity*). This preferential treatment and discriminatory action come in the form of racial stacking (Day, 2012; Latimer & Mathes, 1985; Pitts & Yost, 2013). Stacking refers to the historical relegation of

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<sup>1</sup> In an act of resistance in scholarship, I make the conscious effort to capitalize “Black” but not “white” when referring to racial categorization. This decision was made to counter hegemonic norms that have oppressed those racialized as Black. While this decision contradicts APA guidelines, I follow examples set by scholars such as Hextrum (2020) and Kluch et al. (2022).

Black athletes to positions perceived to demand less intellectually and require less of a leadership role (Pitts & Yost, 2013). Positions perceived to require superior intellectual abilities and leadership characteristics are known as central positions (i.e., quarterback, center, middle linebacker, and safety). In contrast, peripheral positions (i.e., running back, receiver, defensive line, and defensive back) are perceived as requiring more athletic ability and instinct rather than an extraordinary amount of intellect (Bopp & Sagas, 2014). Finch et al. (2010) found approximately 30% of white coaches were assigned quarterback and offensive line positions as opposed to only 3% of Black coaches filling those roles. This becomes problematic when discussing the pool of candidates for head coaching roles due to the centrality phenomenon, which is the tendency to select head coaches from a pool of coaches who are assigned central and coordinator positions (Anderson, 1993; Brooks & Althouse, 2000). Additionally, as Keaton and Cooper (2022) argued, relegating Black coaches to peripheral positions hinders their agency within racialized organizations. Racialized assumptions and subsequent actions related to Black athletes and coaches perpetuate inequity within the field.

Relegation of Black coaches to peripheral positions can, in part, be explained through the access discrimination. Head coaches at the college level have autonomy regarding assistant coaching hires; however, a problem arises when head coaches are more comfortable employing assistant coaches of the same race (Cunningham & Sagas, 2005). Therefore, white coaches (representing the dominant group) are more likely to hire other white coaches, and Black coaches are more motivated to hire Black coaches. This phenomenon becomes problematic when looking at the racial breakdown of head football coaches, who are mostly white males (Lapchick et al., 2021). Within this phenomenon, an overrepresentation of white head coaches further limits the opportunities of Black coaches and other racially minoritized or non-male coaches in general. Mobility within coaching is, unfortunately, more about social capital than merit, as mobility primarily occurs when it aligns with the interests of the old boy network (Day & McDonald, 2010; Loy & Sage, 1978).

### *Disconnect in the Study of Resistance and Black Coaches*

Black coaches experience numerous challenges in receiving opportunities (historically) and, more importantly, opportunities that lead to advancement. Within these experiences, being relegated to peripheral positions limit agency (Keaton & Cooper, 2022), which is likely a reason that Black coaches have not been conceptualized (within scholarship) as resisters or activists. The structure of college athletics makes it difficult for Black coaches to remain in organizations by exerting agentic resistance (described below); thus, they must be strategic about when and how they engage in resistance. In order to remain in their positions, resistance may not always be in the form of symbolic activism. Resistance for this population may, at times, be more subtle than protesting. Former President Barack Obama counseled, “figure out what’s the best way for you to make a difference... My advice is there is not one way about bringing about change. I think there are multiple ways to bring about change” (Obama as cited in Cooper et al., 2019, p. 152). This same connection should be made to Black coaches who are seeking to create change in multiple ways.

## Frameworks

### *Critical Race Theory*

This study was influenced by CRT and African American resistance (Cooper, 2021). CRT is a framework born out of critical legal studies when scholars realized the need to center race to understand the society of the U.S. (Bell, 1995; Ladson-Billings, 1998). The theoretical framework consists of central tenets that guide analyses of society. First, CRT holds that racism is pervasive, ordinary, and vital to understanding U.S. society (Delgado & Stefancic, 2017; Yosso, 2005). Race is a social construction that allows those in power (whites) to justify the mistreatment and oppression of racialized “others” (Allen, 1994). The status quo is maintained due to the lack of acknowledgment of racism from these dominant powers (Delgado & Stefancic, 2017). In addition, Solórzano and Yosso (2002) combine the pervasiveness of racism with other forms of oppression. Building on the work of Crenshaw (1989) with intersectionality, CRT scholars understand various marginalized identities do not exist in separate domains. Instead, these marginalized social identities intersect, making it difficult to identify oppression within a singular identity.

Second, another tenet of CRT is the premise of interest convergence. This states, “The interest of [B]lacks in achieving racial equality will be accommodated only when it converges with the interests of whites” (Bell, 1980, p. 523). From a historical standpoint, elite whites have possessed the most considerable share of power in the U.S, which stems from another tenet of CRT – whiteness as property. Whiteness functions as a form of property, explaining how and why elite whites often hold power (Delgado & Stefancic, 2017). Thus, the distribution of resources or progress for Black people often comes “more from the self-interest of elite whites than from a desire to help [B]lacks” (Delgado & Stefancic, 2017, p. 9). Interest convergence is a form of maintaining a structure that privileges whites, whereby progress towards a more just society is created only when Black and white interests align. This tenet has also been extended to what Cooper and Cooper (2015) conceptualize as strategic responsiveness to interest convergence (SRIC). According to Cooper and Cooper (2015),

In order for SRIC to manifest, three conditions must be met: 1) an individual must recognize an inequitable structural arrangement that is designed to exploit them, 2) an individual must internalize or believe they possess the power to alter their personal outcome within this arrangement, and 3) an individual must actively engage in behaviors to counter the inequitable arrangement in such a way to maximize the holistic benefits for themselves. (p. 147)

Next, CRT challenges the dominant U.S. ideology, which often serves as a camouflage to perpetuate a status quo that unequally benefits dominant social groups (Yosso, 2005). This ideology includes claims of equal opportunity, meritocracy, the use of colorblind perspectives, and race-neutral practices. One way to challenge the dominant ideology is through counter-storytelling, which is “a method of telling the stories of those people whose experiences are not often told” (Solórzano & Yosso, 2002, p. 32). These stories are critical to disrupting hegemonic practices and the dominant ways of knowing upon which they are constructed (Delgado & Stefancic, 2017; Howe, 2021). Finally, CRT scholars are committed to achieving social justice (Solórzano & Yosso, 2002). This commitment includes empowering marginalized social groups

and attempts to effectively enact praxis and thoroughly analyze racism by adopting a deliberately transdisciplinary perspective (Hylton, 2010; Solórzano & Yosso, 2002).

### *African American Resistance Typology*

To understand AART, resistance must first be defined. Cooper (2021) referred to resistance as “intentional and/or unintentional actions by individuals, groups, organizations, and/or institutions that challenge oppressive systems and ideology” (p. 76). Within the AART, there are eight forms of resistance (*agency, pioneering, advocacy, hybrid, social movements, revolutions/social transformations, and sustained cultural empowerment*). I highlight the types of resistance pertinent to the current study and refer readers to Cooper (2021) for further detail other forms of resistance.

*Agency* refers to an individual or group choice to express individuality or disposition to sociocultural norms within a context (Cooper, 2021). Since Black people are often dehumanized in the U.S. many actions within white spaces represent agentic resistance, such as presenting oneself authentically and not conforming to hegemonic, Eurocentric norms. *Pioneering* describes individuals who represent the first of their social identities to break barriers or accomplish a feat in a specific field (Cooper, 2021). Thus, being the first Black head football coach and win a championship at an HWI could count as pioneering. *Advocacy* “refers to intentional actions taken by an individual or group to generate awareness of and galvanize support for address specific social issues and conditions” (Cooper, 2021, p. 86). Another form of resistance within the AART is *hybrid*, which is describes when individuals or groups use multiple forms of resistance or actions related to advancing social justice (Cooper, 2021). For example, if an individual leverages agency and advocacy, they would fit within hybrid resistance.

The next form of resistance is *activism*, which is discussed in detail within a separate typology by Cooper (2021) known as the African American Sport Activism Typology (AASAT). AASAT was initially introduced by Cooper et al. (2019) and revised to its current form (see Cooper, 2021; Cooper et al., 2020). Although this typology primarily highlights the activism of athletes, I engage with this work and apply it to Black coaches. Cooper and colleagues (2019) define activism as “engagement in intentional actions that disrupt oppressive hegemonic systems by challenging a clearly defined opposition while simultaneously empowering individuals and groups disadvantaged by inequitable arrangements” (pp. 154-155). Within this definition of activism, AASAT was created, which included nine types of activism (*symbolic, scholarly, grassroots, mass mobilization, economic, legal, media, music and art, and military*). For conciseness, only the forms of activism relevant to the current study are described. I direct the audience to Cooper (2021) for more detail about the AASAT. *Symbolic* activism is deliberate actions that bring attention to social injustices with a desire to inspire positive social, political, economic, and educational change (Cooper et al., 2019). *Grassroots* activism is actions performed within and beyond sport at the meso (organization) or micro (individual) level, which include community engagement, individual relationships, and statewide and association-wide efforts (Cooper et al., 2019).

CRT and AART ultimately informed my interpretation of the racialized experiences of Black college assistant football coaches. In the spirit of engaging in theoretical pluralism, particularly as it pertains to resistance (Cooper, 2021), I engage in the “messiness” of incorporating multiple frames of thought. I use CRT and conceptualizations of resistance and activism to advance understandings of Black coaches’ experiences engaging in these actions.

## Methodological Approach: Hermeneutical Phenomenology

Within this study, I engaged in a hermeneutical phenomenological approach. Phenomenology, as van Manen (2016) described, “is the study of lived or existential meanings; it attempts to describe and interpret these meanings to a certain degree of depth and richness” (p. 11). Ultimately, my goal in choosing phenomenology was to construct interpretations of the human experience (van Manen, 2016). A hermeneutical approach differs from other forms of phenomenology that seek to discover the “essence” (Finlay, 2012; van Manen, 2014). Instead, hermeneutical phenomenology involves interpretation “to bring out the ways in which meanings occur in a *context*” (Finlay, 2012, p. 22). Thus, as opposed to “bracketing” one’s experiences as a researcher, scholars engaging in hermeneutical phenomenology embrace researcher subjectivity and interpretation (Finlay, 2012). Through phenomenological reflection practices, I was able to “make explicit the structure of meaning of the lived experienced” (van Manen, 2016, p. 77).

With *some* existing understandings of the experiences of Black college coaches and my experiences as a Black male (highlighted further in my positionality statement), a need is realized to expand awareness of the nature of the experience surrounding Black college football coaches. Employing hermeneutical phenomenology allowed me to reflect on this knowledge while further investigating and interpreting the lived experiences of Black assistant football coaches. Overall, this study was guided by the question: what are the lived experiences of Black assistant football coaches at the Division I level at HWIs as it relates to resistance?

### Sample

To remain within the scope of a phenomenological study, I recruited a sample of eight coaches. Adequate sample sizes for phenomenological studies with rich data range from six to ten participants (Morse, 2000). Head coaches were excluded from recruitment in this study; however, assistant coaches identifying as Black were considered, including coordinators, position coaches, graduate assistants (GA), quality control coaches (QC), and special assistants/analysts. Additionally, both active coaches and recently retired coaches (less than five years removed) were recruited for this study. More information about participants can be found in Table 1.

I engaged in two sampling strategies. The first strategy used was purposive sampling to ensure particular unique cases were represented in the study (Robinson, 2014). To fulfill this strategy, I conducted Internet searches on athletic websites and online coaching directories for Division I FBS institutions. Additionally, each respective institution’s media guide was utilized to verify race and identity when pictures were not present in the directory. The last step in this process was to obtain contact information for each coach. The second sampling strategy employed was snowball sampling. According to Noy (2008) “a sampling procedure may be defined as snowball sampling when the researcher accesses informants through contact information that is provided by other informants” (p. 330). This technique is particularly useful when potential participants are interconnected and when trying to access “hidden populations” or networks that are hard to contact (A. Edwards & Skinner, 2009; Noy, 2008). Knowing that college coaches are busy and, especially during the football season, do not often respond to personnel outside their networks, snowball sampling provided access to participants.

Table 1

*Participant Characteristics*

Name	Title	Current/Most Recent Institution Conference	Coaching Experience (Years)	Previous Titles	Positions Coached	Head Coaching Aspirations
Coach Bridges	Retired	Big 12	20+	Position Coach, Defensive Coordinator	Cornerbacks, Safeties	Yes
Coach Donaldson	Graduate Assistant (LB)	SEC	9-12	Graduate Assistant, Quality Control, Position Coach	Defensive Line & Linebackers	Yes
Coach Graham	Position Coach (WR)	American	1-4	Graduate Assistant, Quality Control	Quarterbacks & Receivers/Slots	Yes
Coach McFarland	Defensive Coordinator/Position Coach (CB)	American	13-16	Position Coach	Running Backs, Receivers/Slots, Safeties	Yes
Coach Randolph	Position Coach (CB)	American	9-12	Position Coach, Defensive Coordinator	Cornerbacks, Safeties	Yes
Coach Richardson	Retired	Big 12	20+	Position Coach, Associate Head Coach	Running Backs, Defensive Line, Linebackers, Specialists	Yes
Coach Vincent	Retired	Big 12	17-20	Graduate Assistant, Position Coach	Linebackers, Cornerbacks, Safeties	Yes
Coach Woods	Position Coach (WR)	American	20+	Graduate Assistant, Position Coach	Running Backs, Receivers/Slots, Cornerbacks, Safeties	Yes

*Note.* Since this study, some participants have transitioned to different institutions and Coach Woods now serves in an off-field capacity. Data collected represents their perspectives while holding positions listed in the table.



### *Data Collection and Analysis*

Phenomenologically based interviews utilize open-ended questions and seek to explore and build upon responses the participants share. Therefore, semi-structured interviews were used, as they provided a set of open-ended questions and flexibility to probe while conducting the interview (Skinner & Edwards, 2009). Examples of questions asked to participants included: *How have opportunities for Black people in coaching increased over time? Describe the extent you work to bring other Black coaches into the field. What pressure do you feel to succeed from a cultural perspective?* Each participant engaged in one semi-structured interview that averaged one hour in length, which is appropriate as guidance from Smith et al. (2009) that conducting 4-10 interviews can illicit rich data. Of note, rapport was built with participants in numerous ways (i.e., based on existing relationships and extensive communication prior to data collection). By already building these relationships, we were able to take maximize our time during the interviews by not spending too long on the rapport-building process. Interviews were conducted both in person and via phone. The interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed for data analysis. I read through the transcripts for accuracy before commencing data analysis. In addition to interview transcripts, I also took detailed notes during the interview process and kept a researcher journal throughout the study that were also used to assist with interpretation.

The analysis phase followed what is known as the hermeneutic circle, which represents an iterative, dialectical process of examining pieces of data to better understand the whole for a deeper analysis (Cohen et al., 2000). In describing the hermeneutic circle, Cohen and colleagues noted,

The hermeneutic circle is a metaphor that guides the process of inquiry on several levels. Analysis begins as parts of the text are understood in relation to the whole text and vice versa. Then, the individual texts are understood in relation to all the texts and vice versa. The researcher begins with a vague and tentative notion of the meaning of the whole of the data and with the reflexive awareness that this notion is an anticipation of meaning. (p. 72)

Throughout the dialectical process, I read, reread, reflected, and wrote about the data for better understanding (Cohen et al., 2000; van Manen, 2014). This process, undoubtedly, brought forth tension between the data and my interpretation.

The researcher journal was vital in grappling with these tensions. For example, my positionality (discussed below) informed some of my understanding of the Black coaching experience. Seeing Black coaches engage in resistance during my time working in college athletics was, at times, different than what participants described. However, in working through these tensions, it became evident that there is no monolithic way to think about resistance. How one coach thinks about their actions may differ from another. Additionally, how a coach may act or show up on the practice field (where most of my experience engaging with Black coaches was) may not be indicative of how they feel about resistance. In other words, after grappling with this tension, I understood that Black coaches were strategic in deciding when and how to engage in resistance.

Within the hermeneutical circle, multi-stage coding was used as the primary method of data analysis as guided by Saldaña (2015). In the first coding cycle, I used “In Vivo” coding, in which I coded data using the participant’s words (Saldaña, 2015). This method keeps the data as

close to the participant as possible. It also helps to eliminate some of the researcher's biases by taking codes directly from the data as opposed to formulating them. After the first cycle of In Vivo coding was complete, I reviewed data a second time to group the first-cycle codes into relative emerging concepts and categories, known as pattern coding (Saldaña, 2015). After pattern coding was complete, I analyzed the data to find the major themes. The last step in data analysis was to interpret the themes through the lens of the theoretical frameworks (CRT and AART).

### *Positionality*

An essential aspect of hermeneutical phenomenology and good qualitative research is the ability to reflect, situate oneself within the research, and acknowledge how the experiences of the researcher influence their work. As a Black man who worked in college athletics for several years (often hands-on with Black coaches), this work is personal to me. Seeing firsthand what many Black college football coaches went through at the Division I level sparked my interest in engaging with this study. Although I am not a coach, I saw many of their experiences resemble mine and other Black professionals' time within college sport. Instances of (c)overt racism and institutional roadblocks were apparent as I worked within college athletics and had conversations with Black coaches in the industry. My lived experiences and observations as a Black man working within and researching college athletics helped guide my interpretation of the experiences of the participants in this study. I was able to reflect on these experiences within my researcher journal and ultimately help situate my analysis within an appropriate context.

## **Findings**

### *Existing in a System Shaped by Whiteness*

One difference in resistance and activism relates to intent of the individual or group (Cooper, 2021). To begin evaluating intent, it is important to assess how Black coaches view the field of coaching pertaining to race. This theme highlights participants' understandings of the coaching field, and acknowledgment that the field's anti-Black foundation. Existing as a Black coach in historically white spaces meant their lived experiences were shaped, in part, by whiteness. There was consensus among the coaches that race and power shaped their experiences on the job. Coach Randolph illustrated an understanding of the history that racism has played within the game of football as he posited:

This was a game that was built on racism... when this sport got integrated as players, it took very long to become integrated as coaches because if they [whites] don't think we can play the game and now we dominate the game, imagine how long it takes for them to think that we can actually coach them.

Thus, for coaches within this study, there was a consciousness that the environment they worked in was situated within a dominant ideology of racial inferiority whereby Black coaches were seen as "less than."

This dominant ideology influenced the experiences of Black coaches once they were in their roles. For instance, Coach Donaldson argued,

You might be one of the best coaches, X's and O's, smart, this or that, but if you can recruit, then you're tagged as a recruiter. If you're a Black coach, you are expected to be a recruiter. That is without a doubt.

Black coaches were ultimately relegated to being recruiters within this dominant ideology. Thus, if a Black coach is on staff, they must be there to recruit Black players; however, if a white coach is on staff, there is no assumption about their role or credibility. Coach Woods noted in the coaching field, "it comes down to Black coaches having to prove that they are capable of coaching. They have to go above and beyond to prove that they are capable of so that these white coaches are willing to bring them on board." It is a dynamic that Coach Randolph described as being "inclusive, but not equal." Inclusive comes from the fact that, while representation was not to their satisfaction, Black coaches do have jobs in the field. However, not equal refers to the disadvantaged position in which the Black coach is placed, such as having to prove himself capable of occupying certain positions. By examining these quotes, it became clear that an overall foundation in whiteness and racism influenced the experiences of Black coaches.

This theme also speaks to an overall systemic issue that influences Black college assistant coaches. A foundation of whiteness influences who is positioned to make decisions within college athletics, which has a ripple effect on the experiences of Black coaches. Coach Vincent, when discussing hiring and the lack of Black coaches, argued:

It just comes down to decision making. The decision-makers in those situations, the majority of them are not African American... let me just say when a coach goes out to hire an assistant or a head coach or a coordinator, what they do is call their buddies. You know who you know, who's out there, who's a great coordinator? Well, you know, it's all about who that guy calls, you know? And then what that guy says. So when you look at some of the people making decisions, you know, for head coaches, you look at the ADs [athletic directors], well you know who do those guys call? Other ADs. Well, the demographics of the majority of the ADs at the FBS level are Caucasian or non-African American. So, what's their take on who the next guy is? Who do they call? Who do they rely on? Another head coach or another you know... So I think the biggest, the biggest situation is that the people that make the decisions, who they're talking to are not predominantly African American. So, you know, people talk to who they're comfortable with. And then go with who they're comfortable with because their job rides on it. Who you trust. When you start talking to the people you trust, what's their demographic?

The answer to the demographic question is "white." Ultimately, there is an overall sentiment that white decision-makers do not trust Black coaches to the same extent as white coaches and that white decision-makers do not have Black individuals within their social networks, which benefits whiteness.

The understanding and acknowledgment from participants that racism influences the paths and experiences of Black coaches is critical insight related to intent. Without a consciousness that they are existing in a space that seeks to exclude and oppress, Black coaches could simply be holding a position without a connection to Black liberation. Instead, this consciousness portrayed by participants influenced the resistance detailed in subsequent themes.

### *Creating Their Own Network*

While Black college coaches exist within a system of whiteness, this population is active in charting their own paths within this oppressive system. As a result, participants were clearly engaging in multiple aspects of activism including, intentionality, oppositional force, and disrupting of hegemonic systems (Cooper, et al. 2019). Essentially, Black college coaches have created and are building on their own social and professional networks. Mentorship plays a vital role in the experiences of Black assistant football coaches. Coach Bridges, now retired, spent a good portion of his career in a defensive coordinator position. Thus, he had some power whenever it came to mentoring and advocating for other Black coaches. Reflecting on this aspect, Coach Bridges, noted, “I did what I could by mentoring and building relationships with young Black coaches who were trying to enter the field.” From the perspective of a younger-tenured coach (Donaldson), it was important for him to reflect on the role that other Black coaches serve in his career, which influenced his mentorship and advocacy today. Coach Donaldson noted:

Basically, my mentor, anytime I have a question about a job.... He’s actually helped me get two jobs now. My very first job he helped me get that. And then a few years later he helped me get my next job. So he’s always there sticking his neck out for me and help me out. And then as far as advice, he’s always available. And I know I can trust him to give me the best advice when it comes to making decisions in this business.

There was a mutual trust between the mentee and mentor, partially due to race. The experience Coach Donaldson had as a mentee influenced his continued mentorship and advocacy now. He continued by explaining,

I’m just willing to help out one of my Black brothers if he calls me or just give him advice... My biggest way of helping them is letting them know that I will do anything, answer any questions, go over whatever type of information with them. I just made a call for a guy the other day and kind of endorsed him. If I know him and I know he will do a good job, then I’ll endorse him. I don’t know if there’s anything in particular, but I definitely kind of relate and would empathize with a Black coach over a white coach because I know how hard it is for us. I’m going to give more help or be more available.

As evident within this quote, relationships with other Black coaches were about more than mentorship. Instead, these relationships increased the social capital of Black coaches within the field.

Within extant literature, scholars note that the old boy network influences, often negatively, opportunities for Black coaches to enter and advance within the field. Coaches who are outside of this network, are left behind or must work harder than those in privileged positions to receive the same benefit. Such an idea was noted as Coach McFarland posited, “Being a Black man and coach, [you] are going to have to work that much harder to get in those positions. You are going to have to do more than the white coaches.” This acknowledgment influenced his role in fighting for Black coaches. When asked why he continues to mentor and advocate for Black coaches, McFarland responded, “there is always going to be a fight for opportunities for Black

coaches.” His fight, at this stage of his career, was through mentorship within their networks and advocating outside of the network.

Black coaches ultimately work to counter these hegemonic practices by establishing their own networks to mitigate the injustices resulting from these long-standing, racially exclusive networks. While these networks of Black coaches may be informal, they provide the opportunity for other Black coaches who have broken through barriers and have thriving careers to spread knowledge and offer guidance to younger coaches entering the field. Such was the case with the retired or longer-tenured coaches. Coach McFarland, who was in the 13-16 year range of experience, focused more on receiving mentorship as opposed to giving it while he is navigating the field. In addition to mentorship, the networks of Black coaches operate on a principle of reciprocity. As evident in the quote by Coach Donaldson, he discussed his willingness to always be of assistance to other Black coaches. The consistent building of this network increases potential job opportunities. While not explicitly stated, networks of Black coaches work to counter those advantages given to white coaches through the old boy network.

### *Opportunity Must Align with Strategy*

While Black assistant college football coaches experienced racism and systemic oppression, they proved to exert agency and make the most out of their situation. This became apparent as participants were strategic about the opportunities they decided to take in the coaching field. Such actions embody agentic resistance and, at times, pioneering for those who were the first or only Black coach at their institution (Cooper, 2021). Coach Randolph described,

I think you got to be strategic. That’s up to you all the time. Become less of an opportunist and more of a strategist. If you want to be successful in the coaching profession, just because this opportunity does not mean that opportunity is the right opportunity. You got to have a game plan. You got to kind of know where you want to go and you got to really – to the best of your ability, analyze the opportunity and how does it stack up. Based on your plan and your game plan of the steps you need to take to get to where you want to go and don’t make these steps that stagger or therefore hinder you from getting to the next step and in your plan.

Based on this quote from Coach Randolph, it is vital to have a strategy. A calculated plan from a coach may include goals directed at self-gain; however, for those concerned with the representation of Black coaches, their strategy may be less about themselves and more about the intentional moves that will create more opportunities for their underrepresented group.

Following a strategy rather than committing to the next available opportunity is important as Black coaches are perceived as dispensable. Coach Woods stated, “they’re (whites) ready to replace you with one of their own as soon as you fail.” Similarly, Coach Graham explained, “it’s like little can go wrong and that guy is out of there, so you cheer [for Black coaches].” Failure is simply not an option for Black coaches; thus, it is imperative they are taking the right opportunities that align with their overall strategy.

Ultimately, the success of the Black coach is about more than individual success. Coach Randolph positioned, “I’m also paving the way and trailblazing for some guys coming behind me to have these opportunities, and maybe somebody else’s opportunity is going to be directly based on someone’s experience with me.” Taking advantage of an opportunity simply because it

arises or seems appealing could put Black coaches in an environment intently designed with roadblocks that can hinder their success. Narratives from participants highlighted intentionality in taking specific job opportunities that focused on moving Black coaches forward collectively with their success.

### *Empowering Black Male College Athletes*

Part of the Black male coaching experience was serving as mentors and positive role models for the Black male athletes within their programs. While embracing this role may seem like participants in this study were aligning with stereotypes, the coaches appear to have (re)claimed this moniker in a positive manner. Empowering Black male college athletes was necessary in countering hegemonic norms seeking to exclude or relegate the population to peripheral roles. Mentorship and empowerment were ways Black coaches could collectively uplift Black males within college football – strengthening them to be resisters regardless of their career paths. Coach Graham raised the point that when you look on the football field, “you see mostly minorities out there playing.” These coaches recognized the racialized element of the sport beyond a coaching perspective. Not only did these coaches understand they were underrepresented within the profession, but they also understood that most of the players they interacted with looked like them. Therefore, it was important to empower Black players, whose position the participants were in before becoming coaches. Coach Vincent discussed what he enjoyed about being in his position by stating,

Just the opportunity to influence younger people like my coaches did with me. I think my relationship with my high school and college coaches really made a difference with my time with them. And that was all based off relationships. I learned a lot from those guys about being a man, about accountability, about responsibility and being reliable. And I wanted to build the same. I wanted my players to have the same relationship with me as I had with my coaches. And that was kind of my deal was to give back to them and to try to make them better men and influence their lives.

While the father-figure role has been used to pigeonhole Black coaches or place unjust burdens upon this population, some participants embraced that role, especially when it came to serving those roles for Black athletes. Coach Bridges explained,

I had a dad in my life which was, very good for me. I was very fortunate because a lot of the guys that I grew up with didn't. And my dad was that father-figure... for a lot of guys as being that coach and coming through for guys when they needed. I want to be that guy. I want to be that guy for a lot of people and help guys out. I want to help young guys out as much as I can to help them get to the level they want to be at.

Working within an oppressive, white-dominated system, Black coaches were often tasked with countering injustices; however, they also took it upon themselves to empower others within their community. The empowerment extends beyond other coaches and reaches Black college athletes. While universities ultimately need Black coaches to recruit these college athletes (an example of interest convergence; Delgado & Stefancic, 2017), it is also empowering for these athletes to be surrounded by Black coaches once they are on campus. Of note, this theme cannot

occur without the success of the Black coach, as discussed in previous themes. The continued success of Black coaches proves to be an additional challenge to dominant narratives around and perceptions of the Black coach. These coaches cannot be sources of empowerment to Black college athletes if there remains minimal representation.

## Discussion

Throughout my interpretation, I characterize Black assistant college football coaches as strategic hybrid resisters – understanding *when* and *how* to engage in the varied forms of resistance. The risk of being too disruptive can lead to Black coaches being blackballed and further discriminated against. Therefore, knowing *when* and *how* to engage in resistance is a practical tool of self-preservation. Resistance could not effectively occur if these coaches were not occupying their respective positions (or former positions for those who were retired). Thus, it was important they remained within the system to influence the most positive change.

The distinction of Black coaches as resisters is important as these coaches are more than activists, and sometimes, their actions may not always be considered activism. Resistance, however, is a broader concept, inclusive of activism. In comparing resistance to the definition of activism, Cooper (2021) posited, “resistance is *not inherently intentional, centered on collective progress or well-being, grounded in concrete demands, or clearly connected to broader social movements*” (p. 8, emphasis in original). Thus, while the actions of Black college assistant football coaches may not always fall within the definition of activism, their resistance is framed within an activist agenda. In other words, goals and resistance behaviors for participants were aligned with the goals of activism regardless if they met all five requirements. Throughout this section, I expand on this thought conceptualizing participants as hybrid resisters and provide my extended interpretation of the racialized experiences of Black college assistant football coaches.

One type of resistance that participants engaged in was agency. As Cooper (2021) argued, agentic resistance occurs when there is a sociocultural disposition or when individuality is expressed. Black coaches existing within in these white-dominated spaces that perpetuate racial inequity constitutes agentic resistance. While not generalizable to all Black coaches, participants in this study had an understanding that the coaching system was not built for them to enter and succeed and expressed how being in their positions was tied to a collective goal of uplifting Black coaches in the field. This point is made because every Black coach in college football is not exerting agentic resistance to the same degree or are even aware that they are disrupting hegemonic norms. In other words, just because a Black coach exists in the coaching field does not mean their existence is tied to a collective aim, opposition, disruption, goals, or broader connection to social movements. Coaches in this study understood that access discrimination existed and wanted to use success within their positions to challenge these practices, which marked their role in a broader Black resistance effort.

Black coaches existing and succeeding in college athletics disrupt societal norms and dominant ideologies and ultimately continue to push the needle for other Black coaches to progress in the field. At times, this resistance constitutes grassroots activism (Cooper et al., 2019). Aside from progress within the field, grassroots activism for Black coaches has influence beyond sport by broadly changing dominant ideologies about Black men. Their existence, experiences, and success within the white-dominated field operate as counter-stories that continue to challenge dominant racialized ideologies. These counter-stories of Black coaches contradict the thoughts that relegate these coaches to the periphery and deem them unfit for

similar opportunities as white coaches (Day, 2012, 2018; Howe, 2018; Keaton & Cooper, 2022). As Black coaches continue to progress, they are subsequently dismantling larger power structures that have historically restricted access for Black people in this domain.

The theme of ensuring that opportunities aligned with strategy was also a form of agentic resistance as the coaches did not rush to accept every position offered to them. Instead, they made intentional and strategic decisions, on their own terms, to choose opportunities that could lead to the collective success of Black coaches. Additionally, while the desire of all participants was to become head coaches, they recognized the impact they could have in their current positions. Thus, career advancement was important, but it did not compromise the goal for collectively uplifting Black coaches and athletes within the field. While Black coaches are too often relegated to peripheral positions or even denied access to the field based on longstanding racist practices (Bopp & Sagas, 2014; Cunningham & Sagas, 2005), it would appear as if the agency of these coaches is diminished. However, participants proved to exert agency and take control of their careers for the shared good. These coaches met all the conditions to engage in Cooper and Cooper's (2015) conception of SRIC by recognizing the exploitative system that consigns Black coaches to recruiters for the benefit of the institution, believing that they can reclaim the pejorative title and turn it into a positive, and by actively breaking the stereotypical mold of the role of Black coaches.

Of note, the second condition of SRIC is a belief that an individual has the power to alter the outcome (Cooper & Cooper, 2015). Participants exerted agency to alter the outcome (both individual and collective) by taking opportunities aligned with their goals. Put another way, the coach who acts within this strategy (i.e., engaging in activist-influenced resistance) does so in a manner that ultimately benefits their community. In contrast, a coach who is an opportunist may act solely in the interest of themselves by taking any available opportunity. With the lack of collective opportunities, Black coaches are often faced with this dilemma (Hill & Purdy, 2012). Thus, a coach simply focused on opportunity may lack care being the designated token hire to fulfill a quota on a coaching staff or relegated to a peripheral coaching position if the position satisfies their personal goals. Interest convergence is in full effect as coaching staffs need some representation of Black coaches to recruit Black athletes (Delgado & Stefancic, 2017; Hill & Purdy, 2012). Without aligning with strategy or the belief that they can influence the collective outcome, the opportunistic Black coach may exhibit contentment with their position without the desire to help other Black coaches. Coach Randolph noted being a strategist is based on the right opportunity. While the dominant ideology is that Black coaches must stay on the periphery, the strategist finds ways to challenge that notion. Participants placed themselves in positions to improve opportunities for other Black coaches and ensure their success within their positions, which helps combat these negative associations.

Pioneering is another aspect of resistance that Black coaches engage. Important to acknowledge is that pioneering may not always be aligned with activism (Cooper, 2021). A Black coach could be the first in their position and to accomplish a feat without a desire to advance the interests of Black coaches. As Cooper (2021) argued, people can become pioneers simply due to interest convergence. Some participants were pioneers as they were the first Black coach to occupy their positions. For example, Coach Bridges was the first Black defensive coordinator who was also hired under the first Black head coach at an HWI. Coach Richardson was the first Black coach in his position at multiple HWIs. Similarly, Coach McFarland was the first Black defensive coordinator at his HWI. Each of these coaches broke social, personal, and professional barriers (Cooper, 2021). There was an understanding from these coaches about the



significance of being in their respective positions whereby if they were not successful, it would ultimately negatively impact future opportunities for Black coaches at their institutions. Their existence and success “not only breaks literal and proverbial barriers as a precedent, but it also reshapes the context for what is possible and empowers those who come after them” (Cooper, 2021, p. 85). Ultimately, breaking these barriers provides an outlook for a more equitable coaching profession.

Advocacy was another form of resistance utilized to collectively advance opportunities for Black coaches. The old boy network has historically functioned as a proverbial space for professional networking, opportunities, and advancement for white male coaches (Loy & Sage, 1978; Singer et al., 2010). Thus, Black coaches advocating for one another is a clear opposition with an attempt to disrupt the status quo. Black coaches are strategically navigating the field as well as building strong social and professional networks amongst one another. Within advocacy, mentorship plays a role and can be viewed as activism under certain conditions, which would also align with grassroots activism (Cooper, 2021; Cooper et al., 2019). The findings revealed that Black coaches desired to be positive mentors and empower Black male college athletes.

One point of departure within the experiences of participants from grassroots activism, as conceptualized by Cooper et al. (2019), is the formation of formal organizations for mentorship. However, there was a concerted effort on the part of the coaches at their respective institutions to actively engage in this work. Mentoring Black male college athletes is part of the collective goal of increasing representation in the field while countering hegemonic norms. As Cunningham and Singer (2010) found, Black athletes intended to enter the coaching profession at higher rates than their white counterparts. Thus, an important step in their resistance was to mentor athletes to be prepared to enter, but not conform to, the system. Ultimately, through the experiences of Black coaches, it is apparent that participants engaged in micro-level actions within meso-level structures while building on association-wide efforts of other Black coaches. Resistance through mentorship and advocacy for Black coaches and athletes ultimately increases their social capital, which furthers their efforts to disrupt dominant norms.

Black coaches utilize multiple forms of resistance, including activism. Thus, Black coaches fit within the concept of hybrid resistors as they engage in a range of actions focused on improving social justice in and through sport (Cooper, 2021). Access discrimination and a history of racist, oppressive practices within college football can influence when and how Black coaches engage in resistance. Knowing how to engage in disruptive behaviors influenced Black coaches being characterized as strategic hybrid resistors.

## Conclusion

Centering Black coaches within this study and framing them as strategic hybrid resistors adds a dimension to the discussion of sport activism. Black athletes have typically gained the most attention regarding activism within sport; however, coaches engage in various types of resistance in and through sport. This resistance, at times, meets the requirements of activism; however, many of the behaviors of Black coaches could be considered borderline activist actions. It is imperative not to discount these resistance efforts in the broader discussion of activism as borderline activist actions sometimes contribute to more tangible change than more concrete, radical forms of activism (Cooper, 2021). Black coaches must navigate numerous roadblocks during their careers that stem from a history of racial discrimination and exclusion in sports. Despite facing this oppressive system, Black coaches continue pushing the boundaries of

college athletics. Activism is widely perceived as symbolic activism, such as protests, not actions typically associated with Black college football coaches. However, examining the experiences of Black coaches through CRT and AART perspectives creates an understanding of how the existence and actions of Black coaches within college football constitutes forms resistance in and through sport. Existence, experiences, and success within the field serve as counter-stories to challenge the dominant ideologies surrounding Black coaches. While the documented experiences of Black assistant football coaches are important, more work must be done to improve opportunities for Black coaches within college athletics. Therefore, as I conclude, the following implications highlight areas for continued mobilization and collective action to increase opportunities for Black coaches.

### *Implications for Policy and Practice*

While these various forms of resistance are ongoing, individuals in positions of power must begin to act in the best interests of Black coaches. Both informal and formal structures must be mobilized when it comes to creating large-scale change (Dill & Aminzade, 2010). Therefore, a need exists for formal structures, beyond what participants of this study engaged in, to focus on these issues. Formal coaching and college athletics structures include the NCAA, conferences within the NCAA (e.g., Atlantic Coast Conference, Big Ten, Big Twelve, Southeastern Conference), American Football Coaches Association (AFCA), and individual athletic departments and their respective institutions of higher education.

While these formal structures must focus on issues related to the Black coaching experience, there are current organizations that already center the needs of minoritized coaches. The Minority Opportunities Athletic Association (MOAA) and the National Association for Coaching Equity and Development (NAFCED) are such organizations. Another organization founded in 2020 by University of Maryland head coach Mike Locksley called the National Coalition of Minority Football Coaches (NCMFC), aims to establish more opportunities for minoritized football coaches. Their site states:

The NCFMC will remove the roadblocks and level the playing field for minorities with respect to coaching opportunities. We will use our platform to give a voice to minority coaches and advocate for issues that distinctly affect our members at every level of the game. (NCMFC, 2020)

The NCMFC is a formal structure providing minoritized coaches with training and educational programs, networking opportunities, and seeks to identify quality coaching candidates of minoritized identities. In order to maximize the opportunity to create change, structures that have typically not centered the Black experience should collaborate and act in accordance with these existing organizations pushing social change that address issues of discrimination within the field. Future collaborations must maintain a commitment to increasing opportunities for and improving the environment surrounding Black coaches.

While these formal structures should collaborate, informal structures such as the Black coaching networks mentioned in this study are integral to continued advancement and must persist in supporting, uplifting, and empowering Black coaches who are often overlooked. To maximize change, Black coaches should continue their professional networks; however, allies with power should also advocate for this population. People with power, in other words, means

those with privileged identities within the exclusive old boy network need to become allies and advocates for Black coaches. Members of the old boy network have historically been reluctant to work with Black coaches; however, advocacy and allyship must occur to completely rid the coaching field of these discriminatory practices and racialized bias. Although the current paper focuses on coaching, advocacy and allyship also extends to higher education administrators, boards of trustees, donors, and other powerful stakeholders regardless of their involvement or connection with the old boy network. Professional development and advancement (e.g., mentoring and networking opportunities, communicating job openings, recommending coaches for jobs, and advocating for extended tenure) of Black coaches must be supported. Opportunities for Black coaches will increase with the collaboration, overlapping, and minimizing of disparity within these power structures.

Black coaches, however, cannot center their hopes or solely rely on dominant parties to act in their best interests. White individuals may advocate for Black coaches; nevertheless, many white privileged individuals perpetuate this system of inequality. Allies are helpful and often needed to disrupt the status quo; however, Black coaches would be remiss expecting dominant parties to act without self-interest consistently. Thus, the continued strengthening of Black coaching networks creates the potential to increase opportunities for Black coaches and offers channels of support and mentorship for these coaches. Networks for Black coaches should also extend beyond the field of coaching and include Black collegiate athletic administrators and other Black power players within the college sport industry.

Respective athletic departments do not solely determine progress for Black coaches; instead, the emphasis an institution of higher education has on racial diversity and the makeup of athletic and institutional leadership can impact the opportunities of Black coaches. However, as Rockhill et al. (2021) found, without racial diversity within the leadership of the university and athletic department, action rarely follows as these entities solely create a façade of diversity to gain legitimacy within the field. Therefore, it is imperative that there is Black representation throughout every aspect of collegiate athletic administration, higher education administration, and coaching.

### *Future Research*

The current study is one of the first examining the Black coaching experience in relation to sport activism and resistance; however, it should not be the last. I focused on Division I Black assistant football coaches, which opens the door to investigate other Black coaching populations, such as head coaches; coaches at Division II and III institutions; and coaches at historically Black colleges and universities. Further, comparative studies could offer valuable insights that could lead to implications or recommendations specific to institution type. While athletes are the typical population of choice when studying sport activism, coaches deserve to be in the conversation as well. Continued research with Black coaches is encouraged.

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