

## A rant good for business: Communicative capitalism and the capture of anti-racist resistance

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### ABSTRACT

Following Richard Sherman's infamous postgame interview after the 2013 NFC championship game, the popular media mobilized in rebuttal to what appeared to be the rampant expression of racism on Twitter and other social media. Articles on the websites for Grantland, Deadspin, The Nation, Esquire, Ebony, and many others shamed Sherman's racist detractors enthusiastically. This essay argues that the Sherman incident charted an elaborate anti-racist political argument calibrated to reflect the demands and objectives of neoliberal capitalism. I advance this argument in two main sections. First, I explain how the relationship between anti-racism and neoliberalism is complicated by what Jodi Dean calls communicative capitalism, a situation that neutralizes the purported effects of anti-racist speech in support of Richard Sherman. Second, I show how Sherman's challenge to the notion of Black respectability renders his blackness imaginary, a move that depoliticizes capitalist relations in the name of anti-racism.

To many followers of the National Football League, the moments following the conclusion of the 2013 NFC championship game overshadowed the contest's results. Minutes after tipping the San Francisco 49ers final pass safely into the hands of an intercepting teammate, Seattle Seahawks cornerback Richard Sherman was interviewed by Fox sideline reporter Erin Andrews, who asked Sherman to recount his game saving play. "I'm the best corner in the game!" Sherman shouted, "When you try me with a sorry receiver like Crabtree, that's the result you're gonna get!" Sherman focused a stare directly into the camera and reiterated his point with thundering emotion, "Don't you talk about me!" (Chase, 2014a). At immediate issue was Sherman's rivalry with 49er wide receiver Michael Crabtree, who had rejected Sherman's ostensible gesture of postgame sportsmanship with a dismissive jab to the facemask. By any measure, Sherman's reaction was startling. Interrupting an otherwise celebratory moment for his team with strident self-reference, Sherman spoke loudly and conveyed miscalculated intensity. Throughout the evening and into the morning, social media conversation proliferated; Richard Sherman was "trending."

Just a few hours after the end of the game, *Deadspin's* Samer Kalef (2014) posted an article titled "Dumb People Say Stupid, Racist Shit about Richard Sherman," presenting 17 tweets by otherwise unknown users, some of which equated Sherman with an ape, and others which issued ugly, tired slurs (i.e. "Fuck you richard sherman u high payed nigger [sic]"). Those 17 tweets aside, it is difficult to quantify the racist reaction. Two days later, *Deadspin* cited numbers from an organization called iQ Media claiming that the word "thug" was uttered on television 625 times on the intervening Monday (that's "a lot," they said) (Wagner, 2014). Dave Zirin (2014a) urged readers of *The Nation* to "get ready for even more tweets from so-called fans that sound like press releases from the White

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Citizens Council,” and promised “more stomach-churning racial coding than an episode of Fox & Friends featuring Ann Coulter.” Those narratives never emerged with the force Zirin expected, but Kalef’s article became key evidence in the case for the sinister ubiquity of racist responses to Sherman’s post-game interview. Fox News (2014) even encouraged Sherman to “embrace his villainous side,” “while building his own brand on football’s biggest stage.”

By the next day, the entire sports media complex had mobilized around the postgame incident. Racists were named, racist codes were decoded, and Sherman’s background, playing style, and postgame remarks found spirited public defenses. Articles on the websites for *Grantland*, *Deadspin*, *The Nation*, *Esquire*, and *Ebony* (2014; among many others) enthusiastically shamed Sherman’s racist detractors. Jamilah King (2014) wrote in *ColorLines* that “the ensuing drama has put racism in American sports on center stage just in time for this year’s Super Bowl.” This essay argues that the Sherman incident charted an elaborate anti-racist political argument calibrated to reflect the demands and objectives of neoliberal capitalism. I advance this argument in two main sections. First, I explain how the relationship between anti-racism and neoliberalism is complicated by communicative capitalism, a situation that neutralizes the purported effects of anti-racist speech in support of Richard Sherman. Second, I show how Sherman’s challenge to the notion of black respectability renders his blackness imaginary, a move that depoliticizes capitalist relations in the name of anti-racism.

### Anti-racism and communicative capitalism

Perhaps part of the reason that Zirin’s racist storm never quite gathered is that Sherman himself intervened in [MMQB.com](#), an NFL opinion page curated by *Sports Illustrated*. After offering an insider’s view of his rivalry with Crabtree, Sherman admitted, “It was loud, it was in the moment, and it was just a small part of the person I am. I don’t want to be a villain, because I’m not a villainous person” (Sherman, 2014). Unlike the rote apologia that commonly comes from sports figures, Sherman was direct and insightful during a nationally televised press conference. In what would become a widely referenced nugget of social criticism regarding the term “thug,” Sherman said, “The reason it bothers me is because it seems like it’s an accepted way of calling somebody the N-word now. It’s like everybody else said the N-word and then they say ‘thug’ and that’s fine” (News Today, 2014). ESPN, *Sports Illustrated*, national news outlets like CNN, local sportswriters from Seattle to New York, and master aggregator Huffington Post offered similar claims in support. Even on the right, Breitbart published a sympathetic piece and Rush Limbaugh spent a portion of his radio show defending Richard Sherman’s right to egocentrism (Limbaugh, 2014; Scholla, 2014). The Sherman case seemed to generate a disproportionate response; no serious commentator had actually called him a thug, but the racialized meaning of “thug” was widely interrogated. Given the tempest of anti-racist indignation Sherman triggered, I propose that a misunderstanding regarding the function of anti-racism in neoliberalism fits into the gap between racism as it was diagnosed and racism as it was actually practiced.

As a term of critical art, neoliberalism generally refers to a “world-historic organization of economy, governance, and social biological life” (Melamed, 2006, p. 15) defined by the total consolidation of capital and “the notion that the market serves as a model for structuring all social relations.” (Giroux, 2014). With respect to race, it links to the liberalism of 20th century social movements by positing the market as a zone of universal liberty. Instead of indexing sources of conflict and grievance, racial difference has become the site of celebratory expression. Shielding capitalism’s exclusionary effects from critiques of essentialism by embracing the language of multiculturalism, racism appears as a contingent social remainder for privatization and markets to address. But as Angela Davis (2012) points out, this “fails to apprehend the material and ideological work that race continues to do” (p. 169).

Some critics argue that neoliberalism amplifies racism’s effects through concealment, soliciting our enduring critical vigilance in diagnostic procedures, revelations and disclosures. Says Davis

(2012), “racism clandestinely structures prevailing institutions, practices, and ideologies in this era of neoliberalism” (p. 168). Colorblindness obscures race’s material effects in criminal justice, education, employment, housing, etc. Moreover, this form of anti-racism conceives of race in radically specific terms. Consider the variety of standpoints made visible by advocates of intersectionality: race is gendered, sexualized, and classed. To be anti-racist, we not only have to look harder for racism, but we also must remain alert to race’s infinite correlates. Other critics contend that there has been a mystifying conflation of racism with other axes of oppression. As Walter Benn Michaels (2006) puts it, “people who can’t afford to ride first class, people who shop at Wal-Mart instead of the rich people’s mall, are the victims of poverty, not of prejudice” (p. 293). Instead of revealing neoliberalism’s covert deployment of racism’s history, anti-racism functions to legitimize capitalist exchange. “Liberalism may have needed racism,” Michaels asserts, but “neoliberalism doesn’t—it needs anti-racism” (p. 298).

The problem with neoliberalism is not that it asks us to be anti-racist as such, but that it demonizes collective action, occludes class consciousness, and forestalls the formation of plausible solidarities. The critical move that connects anti-racism to anti-capitalism is to account for the mechanisms that help anti-racism depoliticize the marketplace. Opposing neoliberalism requires attention to what Jodi Dean calls communicative capitalism, an enticement to play politics without doing it, to delight in political speech without the work involved in organizing and forming coalitions. As Dean (2009) puts it, communicative capitalism is defined by “the materialization of ideals of inclusion and participation in information, entertainment, and communication technologies in ways that capture resistance and intensify global capitalism” (p. 2). Marxist critics like Adolph Reed (2013) worry that the hunt for institutional racism works to “graft more complex social dynamics onto a simplistic and frequently psychologically inflected racism/anti-racism political ontology” (p. 12). Reed’s concern is that anti-racism centers oppositional politics around the wrong antagonism by promoting the racial diversification of capital. At the same time, anti-racist critics of neoliberalism notice the ways in which those very same complex social dynamics are deeply racialized. The idea of communicative capitalism resolves this impasse in oppositional politics by recognizing that legitimation and obfuscation are opposite sides of the same coin. By promising universal access and unfettered mobility, communication technologies deliver participation to previously excluded social groups and then register the fact of participation as politics itself. Anti-racist grievances are easily heard, but also quickly evaporate. Participation validates market wisdom *and* effaces the market’s racial effects.

This point addresses the gap between racism as it was diagnosed and racism as it was practiced in the aftermath of Sherman’s postgame rant. A handful of hateful tweets offered the sports media the opportunity to exhibit their anti-racist credentials in torrents of self-referential speech. The sheer amount of media attention paid to Sherman after his postgame interview was itself the subject of media attention, a kind of meta-attention expressed in the suggestion that Sherman had “broke the internet.”<sup>1</sup> Dean (2009) observes that on the internet, “media circulate and extend information about an issue or event, amplifying its affect and seemingly its significance. This amplification draws in more media, more commentary, and more opinion, more parody and comic relief, more attachment to communicative capitalism’s information and entertainment networks such that the knot of feedback and enjoyment itself operates as (and in place of) the political issue or event” (p. 32). Sports media illustrated this dynamic relative to the way audiences were invited to interpret Sherman’s rant. As Tommy Tomlinson (2014) admitted in *Forbes*, “raw emotion—whatever form it takes—is exactly what I hope for.” ThinkProgress’s Travis Waldron (2014) agreed that “it might be a little unfair to expect anything else than raw, honest emotion right after that game is finished.” Beyond simply circulating a burst of anti-racist indignation, this commentary distilled Sherman’s display into pure affect. Dean (2009) contends that communicative capitalism “reformats” political

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<sup>1</sup>A google search of “richard sherman” + “broke the internet” turned up approximately 24,000 results. This page from NJ.com (New Jersey) quizzing readers on whether a given quote had come from Sherman or Governor Chris Christie was the top hit: [http://www.nj.com/super-bowl/index.ssf/2014/01/who\\_said\\_it\\_richard\\_sherman\\_or\\_chris\\_christie\\_take\\_our\\_quiz.html](http://www.nj.com/super-bowl/index.ssf/2014/01/who_said_it_richard_sherman_or_chris_christie_take_our_quiz.html)

energy “to speaking and saying and exposing and explaining, a reduction key to a democracy conceived of in terms of discussion and deliberation” (p. 32). This kind of discourse produces the illusion that something political is going on, while “reinforcing the hold of neoliberalism’s technological infrastructure” (Dean, 2009, p. 32). This is not to say that racist epithets are undeserving of rebuttal, but that the disproportionate response performs neoliberalism’s injunction to reduce politics to “dialogue” and “awareness.”

ESPN’s Ian O’Connor interviewed Sherman for an article one week after the NFC championship game. Insisting that “Richard Sherman did us all a favor,” O’Connor (2014) argued that “by raging against the stereotype of the black athlete, he encouraged a helpful discourse on the language of race in sports. And by informing those who wouldn’t guess otherwise that he’s really a nerd, at heart, with a Stanford degree, Sherman showed kids in Compton, Calif., and other American cities like it that they should never let anyone hang a low ceiling over their dreams.” At a basic rhetorical level, O’Connor illustrates how the definition of a “helpful discourse” about race requires the associated fantasy of social mobility that sustains neoliberal hegemony. O’Connor asked Sherman if “he felt he’d inspired a healthy conversation about the language of black and white in sports.” Sherman’s reply animated the fantasy through an unmistakable cultural trope: “I think it did have some effect on opening up the channels of communication and conversation and dialogue [...] I want people to understand that everybody should be judged by their character, and who they are as a person, and not by the color of their skin.” The echo of Martin Luther King in this context evokes the idea that the barrier impeding the path out of America’s iconic ghetto assumes the form of race as such, located in a culture of race, distorting colorblind judgment. Colorblindness, of course, here tells its paradigmatic lie, but “when communication serves as the key category of left politics, whether communication be configured as discussion, spectacle, or publicity, this politics ensures its political failure in advance: doing is reduced to talking, to contributing to the media environment” (Dean, 2009, p. 32). However “helpful,” O’Connor’s line of reasoning misses the investment that anti-racism makes in dialogue as such.

Put differently, Richard Sherman is good for the dialogue business. *Deadspin* revealed a lively conversation about thug-ness, but their failure to provide any meaningful context to the 625 televised utterances of “thug” subordinated the content of any argument to the ongoing accumulation of contributions. Sherman’s defenders were quick to discredit Twitter as both inimical to meaningful dialogue and inclined to abet racist expression. Despite Twitter’s insipid work as a “dry brush,” said Paola Boivin (2014) of the *Arizona Republic*, “the sheer volume of discussion catapults the story into a stratosphere that suggests greater importance.” The discussion, in other words, alerts us to itself. Twitter may trivialize and oversimplify but it also activates a determination to drown racist talk in an ocean of conversation.

Zirin placed Sherman’s intervention into the historical context that marks the horizon of race politics in sport. Regarding Sherman’s hypothesis that “thug” is a stand-in for “the n-word,” Zirin (2014b) said, “Richard Sherman said something that has needed to be said since Jack Johnson commented that he would be Jim Jeffries’s ‘master’ a mere 40 years after the end of slavery [...] It has needed to be said since Muhammad Ali said, ‘I don’t have to be what you want me to be.’” The comparison was meant to reveal Sherman’s “ability to use words as weapons and spit arguments as easily as he spits insults. That makes him interesting. That makes him provocative. That makes him dangerous” (Zirin, 2014b). Even if “danger” here refers to a multicultural platitude about colorblindness, Sherman is said to have resonated within a furious political buzz. Dean sees somewhat less disruptive potential. She claims that the transformation of messages into contributions is homologous to the distinction between use value and exchange value in capitalism (Dean, 2009, p. 27). Messages are oriented to the understanding, whereas contributions are oriented to circulation, their value derived from their movement through the communication network, where only “the popularity, the penetration and duration of a contribution, marks its acceptance or success” (Dean, 2009, p. 27). Decodings of “thug” traveled through the “rapidly moving and

changing flow of content” as contributions carrying the exchange value required for our attention, interest, and energy (Dean, 2009, p. 28).

### Black respectability and the decline of symbolic efficiency

Most articles about Sherman open to comments could claim vast numbers of participants, some anonymous, and others identified by a Facebook profile or other avatar. Participation was an open affair but rapidly acquired the character of a privileged hub in a complex network. Dean (2009) contends that, “on the Web, as in any scale-free network, there are hubs and hierarchies. Some sites are more equal than others. [...] New sites don’t link randomly, but to the most popular sites which then become hubs” (p. 30). Dean calls this phenomenon the “power-law dynamic” of networks. With respect to the Sherman conversation on race, a handful of six crucial articles constituted a “hub” governing the network’s power-law. Scores of others discussed Sherman in relation to race and anti-racism, but almost without exception either cited one of the pieces in the hub or addressed the themes in much the same terms as those therein. These sites centered a conversation that staged the putatively important communicative action.

Ta-Nahesi Coates’s brief article (2014) was possibly the most widely cited. Beginning with a tweet from basketball star Andre Iguodala that simply asserted, “we just got set back 500 years,” he noted that Iguodala’s statement “reflects a rather ancient strain of thought in America that holds that black men like Richard Sherman are the reason we can’t have nice things.” This contention took aim at the politics of black respectability, a discourse, according to Frederick Harris (2014) “that centers on managing the behavior of black people left behind in a society touted as being full of opportunity.” Veteran sportswriter Terence Moore (2014) issued a case in point with a “memo to all the Richard Sherman apologists” on CNN.com. Calling Sherman a role-model, “whether he likes it or not,” Moore bemoaned Sherman’s “dangerous” influence on “black youngsters” who “look toward the most visible people they see on television. Actors, rappers, athletes.” Moore’s commentary was pointed: “Whether we like it or not, somebody is always studying us. And the more visibility we have in life, the more responsibility we have to present ourselves in a way that will influence others for the positive.” Moore’s “us,” of course, means black folks, a pronoun that indexes its derivation from the politics of respectability. For Harris, respectability politics “like most other strategies for black progress articulated within the spaces where blacks discussed the best courses of action for black freedom, once lurked for the most part beneath the gaze of white America” (2014). Now, says Harris (2014), “the twenty-first-century version of the politics of respectability works to accommodate neoliberalism. The virtues of self-care and self-correction are framed as strategies to lift the black poor out of their condition by preparing them for the market economy.”

A critique of respectability politics informed many of the pro-Sherman arguments. Greg Howard (2014) proposed that “a public personality can be black, talented, or arrogant, but he can’t be any more than two of these traits at a time.” In offering a contrast that would come to operate as anti-racist common sense, Howard explained that “antics and soundbites from [white] guys like Brett Favre, Johnny Football, and Bryce Harper seem almost hyper-American, capable of capturing the country’s imagination, but black superstars like Sherman, Floyd Mayweather, and Cam Newton are seen as polarizing, as selfish, as glory boys, as distasteful and perhaps even *offensive*.” According to this line of reasoning, white athletes are afforded a degree of preposterousness but black athletes are expected to conform to a more respectable norm. Browne (2014) critiqued Iguodala’s tweet about being “set back 500 years” as evidence of the way this norm has been internalized by black folks who “suggest that Richard Sherman is a disruption to progress. [...] It highlights a notion—an old, classical racist tactic—of ‘them vs. us.’ The idea of separating the thugs (the *Shermans*) from the rest.” Howard (2014) put the point succinctly: “All this is based on the very common, very American belief that black males must know their place, and more tellingly, that their place is somewhere different than that of whites.” The challenge to racism ostensibly consists in the way this critique re-stages the signification of black outspokenness, rendering black identity complex and

unpredictable. It amounts to a refusal to be positioned, a demand for mobility, an empowerment claimed in the full complexity of one's unique identity.

This claim, however, disregards its own influence over the conversation's power law; the anti-racism generated by the hub vastly outweighed the racism discovered in it. In an important sense, this dynamic stems from an anxiety regarding essentialism at the heart of liberalism's racial problematic. Despite what amounts to a refusal, critiques of black respectability presuppose the broad appeal of their premises. Liberal social movements throughout the 20th century are surely responsible for helping us understand Sherman in a context structured by difference. Eric Liu (2014) argued in *The Atlantic* that conversation about Sherman worked like a cultural mirror, a "story that we tell over and over again, as if working out conflicting memories of a highway accident or reading a kaleidoscopic Tim O'Brien short story about combat, to try to make sense of who we are and what's happening to us in a time when tribe and identity are getting scrambled and realigned explosively." The scrambling and realignment of tribe and identity are supposed to be the payoff of liberal social movements. We cannot take identity for granted. Nothing is as it seems. Dean (2009) seems to agree: "As a result of the critical work of these movements, as well as the accompanying decline of the welfare state and empowering of neoliberalism, racial, sexual, and ethnic identities are less fixed, less stable, less available as determinate subject positions" (p. 65).

Dean points to the possibility that Harris's formulation of the relation between neoliberalism and respectability politics may move in the wrong direction. Instead of saying that black respectability accommodates neoliberalism, it may be the case that neoliberalism accommodates the critique of respectability. Following Slavoj Žižek, Dean (2009) claims that whereas symbolic identities under the Keynesian welfare state "were mobilized politically in and as civil society" through instantiations of community as "sites from which we can see ourselves," under neoliberalism they became "fluid, hybrid, and mobile imaginary identities" (p. 65). The movement from symbolic to imaginary identity entails a collapse of stability in the categories required to produce collective action. Imaginary identity is evanescent and radically mutable, aligned ideologically with capitalism in atomizing social life and in attaching market value to the transience of the self. In Sherman's context, the anti-racist critique of black respectability obtains its warrant from imaginary identity. Instead of mobilizing reliable symbols of socioeconomic injustice, the critique of respectability turns Sherman over to capital, freeing him (and us) to express his blackness in any fashion that meets market demand. Essentialism is subverted, but race politics are left without an "ultimate guarantor of meaning, no recognized authority that stops our questioning or assuages our doubts" (Dean, 2009, p. 64). Tribe and identity may scramble but never realign, at least not for very long, and never in ways that generate enduring symbols around which collective resistance might be mounted.

Imaginary identity thrives under a condition Mark Andrejevic (2007), also following Žižek, calls the decline of symbolic efficiency, a "generalized skepticism towards metanarratives" that claim to underpin the social order or organize collectivities and solidarities. To the extent that neoliberalism urges endless refashioning, social subjects are inclined to disengage from collective sensibilities that put market participation at risk. All identity is strategic performance, which not only demands exceptional creativity, but also alerts us to the refashionings of others. The consequence is widespread attention not to the substance or content of speech, but to its strategic function, a pervasive "mistrust of what is said in favor of what can be detected" (Andrejevic, 2007). Sherman provoked neoliberal impulses to peel back, look beneath, and decode both the myopia of his critics on Twitter and the profitable ingenuity of his rant. Moreover, neoliberalism's reliance on imaginary identities trades attention to capitalism's social form for the fluidity of cultural expression as the arena of political struggle, opening anti-racism to co-optation. Consider Kevin Beckford's (2014) defense of Sherman in the *Huffington Post*. He writes, "Society has very specific boundaries for Black men and those boundaries are not supposed to be muddled. We are not supposed to be multidimensional. We are told that we are supposed to be static." Things would be not be better if black people were unidimensional or static, but the positing of identity's boundary—itsself belied by the preponderance of anti-racist reckoning—reaches for the decline of symbolic efficiency as a



Figure 1. Celebrity marketing play of the week.

resource, undermining “a firm place to stand, a position from which one can make sense of one’s world.” Richard Sherman, like the rest of us, is one-of-a-kind.

Three days after the NFC title game, the *Los Angeles Times* (Sherman’s hometown newspaper) ran an editorial cartoon (Figure 1) and brief article by Pulitzer Prize winner David Horsey (2014). The image featured a white man in a suit standing beside a TV analyst’s monitor bearing the sign, “Celebrity Marketing Play of the Week.”

Horsey wrote beneath the cartoon that Richard Sherman’s “actions have made him a central character in television’s biggest annual show, the Super Bowl, and that makes his boorish behavior a brilliant career move.” Admitting that Sherman may have made a “bad impression,” Horsey suggested that “now he has a stage from which he can shape that image by shaping his flamboyant style and good humor.”

*Advertising Age* confirmed Horsey’s line of reasoning in explaining 10 reasons why Sherman “is emerging as the breakout marketing star of Super Bowl XLVII” (McCarthy & Bulik, 2014). Among them: He pleased his existing sponsor, Beats by Dr. Dre, whose spokesperson said, “Whatever he meant by [the post-game display], we love it all.” *Advertising Age* quoted Lee Teller, a sports marketing executive, who suggested that Sherman’s post-game rant “was a well-thought out and smart move on his part,” adding that “he’s inserted himself into the conversation around the Super Bowl in a big way.” Sherman’s agent Jamie Fritz assured CNN that the moment had secured advertiser interest, suggesting, “I think that he’s more likeable. People love this. The brand managers love this” (Reyes, 2014). Another marketing executive confirmed the assessment, telling CNN that Sherman would be a very hot interview in the next couple of weeks” (Reyes, 2014). Citing an ESPN story, Fox News quoted the Beats by Dr. Dre head of global marketing as saying, “Richard Sherman is winning right now. If you look up Beats by Dre and Sherman on Twitter, there’s like one tweet per minute, and it’s all organic conversation. We’re rivaling some of the biggest brands that are out there thanks to the conversation he generates” (Jones, 2014).

Conversation, presumably the same agency that delivers our racial enlightenment, is also the true function of the dialogue business under neoliberalism. We need not know what the tweets say, just that there are many of them. Fox News reported that the day after “Sherman unleashed his tirade, nearly 1.5 million tweets have mentioned his name compared to the Seahawks (1 million) and 49ers

(551,000)” (Jones, 2014). Dialogue drained of use value moves so quickly that its acquired exchange value transcends the limits of morality. Naming Sherman’s postgame moment “a rant good for business,” Kavitha Davidson (2014) reminded readers of Bloomberg News that “whatever your moral stance, one thing is indisputable: Big personalities and big controversies make for big business.” The market, we are told, is a zone of moral neutrality, with freedom and mobility intrinsic to its operation, and dialog, awareness, and conversation its surplus effect. Davidson (2014) credited the sports media, who “struck gold with Sherman’s interview, adding a conversation about race, sportsmanship and role models to the Super Bowl buildup. It’s the story that keeps on giving.”

Sherman’s post-game comments positioned him as an alluring enigma. “It’s tough to find the real Sherman,” as one *USA Today* column put it (Chase, 2014b). Or, said another *USA Today* article, “Maybe the rant was theater. Maybe the Stanford graduate with a degree in communications knew exactly what he was doing,” (Reyes, 2014). Matthew Sprague (2014) surmised that “Sherman is laughing all the way to the bank.” “Sherman clearly grasps that the NFL is merely reality TV,” said Mac Engel (2014). “Characters like Jerry [Jones] and Sherman only make it more interesting and themselves more bankable.” These observations point to the trouble with figuring a political orientation around the decline of symbolic efficiency. The radical contingency of imaginary identity, if true of the self, is also true of the other, so “the premium attitude of the non-duped is one peppered with scare quotes: every ‘truth’ can be deconstructed, every ‘reality’ revealed as one more artifice, and all subjective dispositions construed as performances” (Andrejevic, 2007). Sherman demonstrates how the decline of symbolic efficiency summons communicative capitalism to fill the crevice created between a dissonant state of affairs, between knowing we are being duped and appreciating the performance. Theater is how people get paid.

## Conclusion

Zirin (2014c) hoped that Sherman would prove “perilous to his paymasters,” but in the weeks and months following the Seahawks’ Super Bowl victory, Sherman signed a new NFL contract valued at \$57.4 million and negotiated endorsement contracts with Campbell’s, Nike, and Oberto’s Beef Jerky (Blount, 2014). The problem is not that Sherman got rich, nor even that Zirin mistakenly identified him as dangerous, but that neoliberalism asks us to behold Sherman’s oppositional potential despite the logic it entails. We get to have our politics and our market, too. To enact anti-racism in this way is to accept the hope that conversation, awareness, or dialogue might generate enough energy to restructure racial hierarchies without altering basic socioeconomic structures. The politicization of race, in this instance, is simultaneously a depoliticization of capitalist relations.

In Sherman’s television commercial for Campbell’s Chunky Soup (NFL.com, 2014), Sherman’s mother, “Mama Sherman,” commands a helicopter on a mission to get Richard his soup. Hovering above the football stadium, a fan painted blue and dressed in Seahawks gear descends on a rope to scoop up Sherman and spirit him away. As they hang in tow, the fan asks Sherman to sign his football. Sherman agrees, but the football escapes his clutches and spills into nicely spiraling free fall. The pilot dives, and Sherman snatches it out of the air with one hand. “You’re the man! Best corner in the game! Dangle this man from a chopper and that’s what you’re gonna get!,” the fan shouts with gratitude. Sherman looks up at the chopper above them and says, “Whoa, hold on there, it’s not all me! There’s the pilot, the navigator, the communications specialist. I did it as part of a team!” Mama Sherman nods and smiles from the cockpit as the fan agrees, “You’re right, I got caught up in the passion of the moment.” At the end, Sherman and the rest of the helicopter team enjoy Beer Cheese with Beef and Bacon Chunky soup in Mama Sherman’s kitchen. Critics of respectability politics will see this for what it is, a domestication of Sherman’s threatening blackness through motherhood, teamwork, playful mischief, and forgiveness. It is an ideological refiguring as well, one that ensures that the rant’s contribution survives in cultural conversation as a parody of itself, ultimately realizing its fundamental message as a rant good for business.

Communicative capitalism is neoliberalism's means of redirecting political energy around the market's steady advance through the social formation; it deflects claims of polarizing inequity with promises of participation and mobility. Dean (2009) presents an incisive mockery of communicative capitalism's transformation of politics into consumerism: "Antiracist? Wear a Malcolm X t-shirt. Gay-friendly? Fly a rainbow flag" (p. 34). She worries that "the ease of political expression, the quick availability of the affective thrill of radically" (p. 34) delivers the subjective impression of political engagement without the objective hardships associated with anti-capitalist political engagement—class consciousness, solidarity, and collective action. The prevailing form of anti-racism mounted in defense of Sherman cannot be reduced to bumper stickers or t-shirt slogans, but Browne (2014) presents a telling response to the demand for black respectability: "It makes you want to give people all the wrong impressions. It makes you want to trade out that suit for a Huey Newton T-shirt. It makes you want to grow your hair long a keep strangers on edge. It makes you want to be loud, brash, in-your-face, and unapologetic. You know, like Stanford's Richard Sherman." Certainly, Rembert Browne can wear whatever he chooses, but we ought to bear in mind that calling those choices our politics is precisely what neoliberalism encourages us to do.

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