

**'Part-time athlete, full-time serious thinker':
Kareem Abdul-Jabbar and Arthur Ashe in the
'long 1970s'**



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Abstract

This dissertation of 11,997 words examines African-American politics around the years 1968 to 1984 through the experiences of two prominent sportspeople, Kareem Abdul-Jabbar and Arthur Ashe. Through these examples, it looks to explore how activists responded to the challenges of the post-civil rights movement era, and what ideologies motivated these actors. First, it will outline their philosophies about activism, suggesting that their beliefs challenge the idea of a hard line between 'radical' and 'moderate' currents in black activism. It then focuses on two case studies of this idea, beginning with an exploration of interactions with Africa, in particular the anti-apartheid movement and State Department tours, which suggest that activists used a variety of methods, including protest, isolation and engagement to achieve their aims. Then, it will examine how Abdul-Jabbar and Ashe approached domestic politics after the expansion of legal rights in the 1960s, especially how African-Americans should look to achieve social advancement in this era, including debates over affirmative action, the importance of individualism and the role of sport in the social advancement of black Americans. This example will again suggest a variety of ideologies, including Black Power, liberalism and conservatism were able to influence the thoughts of activists in this era, rather than having one influence.

The dissertation explores these questions through a primary source base consisting of a variety of newspapers and magazines, including mainstream titles like the *New York Times* and *Sports Illustrated*, as well as African-American newspapers such as *Afro-American* and *New York Amsterdam News*, and the six autobiographical titles published by Abdul-Jabbar and Ashe between 1975 and 2017. These sources will show a wide section of opinion towards these figures and their activism in the period, as well as their own personal reflections and articulations of their experiences.

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Introduction

In 2019 and the years that preceded it, the links between sport and African-American politics in the United States are not hard to miss. Some of America's most famous sportspeople, most notably American football's Colin Kaepernick and basketball's LeBron James, have used their platform to speak out on a variety of issues, not least police brutality, the Trump presidency and racism in American society.¹ But our current era does not represent the only time where black athletes became politicised in the U.S. That is where the subjects of this dissertation, Arthur Ashe and Kareem Abdul-Jabbar, come in.

For context, it is worth outlining the life histories of the subjects of this dissertation. Arthur Ashe was born in Jim Crow-era Richmond, Virginia on July 10, 1943, and attended the University of California at Los Angeles (UCLA) between 1961 and 1966.² He then became the first African-American to win the U.S. Tennis Open in 1968, and the Australian Open in 1970, before he became the first black man to win Wimbledon in 1975.³ Kareem Abdul-Jabbar was born as Lew Alcindor in Harlem on April 16, 1947, and grew up in city-owned housing projects in New York City.⁴ He also attended UCLA, studying there between 1965 and 1969 and winning three consecutive basketball titles in the NCAA championship (the main tournament for American university sports), before embarking on a twenty-year professional career with the Milwaukee Bucks and Los Angeles Lakers, winning him six NBA titles and 'Most Valuable Player' Awards.⁵ However, as Barack Obama put it when awarding Abdul-Jabbar the Presidential Medal of Freedom in 2016, he "is more than just a pair of goggles and the skyhook".⁶ During the previous peak of black athlete politicisation from the 1960s, these two figures represented two of the most prominent athlete voices in some of the most significant political discussions of

¹ Steve Wyche, 'Colin Kaepernick explains why he sat during national anthem', <http://www.nfl.com/news/story/0ap3000000691077/article/colin-kaepernick-explains-protest-of-national-anthem>, accessed 03/04/19; 'LeBron James tears into Donald Trump's 'laughable and scary' views', <https://www.theguardian.com/sport/2018/feb/15/lebron-james-donald-trump-criticism-nba>, accessed 03/04/19.

² 'Life Story', <https://arthurashe.ucla.edu/life-story/>, accessed 16/04/2019.

³ 'Ashe First Negro Win U.S. Net Crown', *Call and Post*, September 14, 1968, p.1A; 'Ashe Claims First Leg on Grand Slam', *Los Angeles Times*, January 28, 1970, p.OC_B1; B. Lorge, 'Ashe Crushes Connors at Wimbledon', *Washington Post*, July 6, 1975, p.29.

⁴ J.M. Smith, "'It's Not Really My Country": Lew Alcindor and the Revolt of the Black Athlete', *Journal of Sport History*, 36/2 (2009), p.225.

⁵ K. Abdul-Jabbar and M. McCarthy, *Kareem*, (New York, 1990), pp.231-32.

⁶ Barack Obama, 'Remarks on Presenting the Presidential Medal of Freedom', November 22, 2016, <https://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/documents/remarks-presenting-the-presidential-medal-freedom-15>, accessed 05/05/2019.

the era. Ashe's activism saw him speak most famously as an opponent of apartheid, but he also discussed issues like black educational achievement and affirmative action, often taking stances that drew criticism from other African-Americans because of their moderate, accommodating tone.⁷ Abdul-Jabbar became a prominent activist during the 1960s as a participant in the Olympic Project for Human Rights (OPHR) that sought to organise a boycott of the 1968 Olympics, and became a prominent voice for Orthodox Islam after his conversion in 1968, taking the name Kareem Abdul-Jabbar publicly in 1971.⁸

Therefore, an examination of the journeys of Ashe and Abdul-Jabbar through the political climate from the turbulence of 1968 to the Reagan era and the early 1980s can shed light on what became of activist athletes following their most well-known activities in the protests of the 1968 Olympics, and how two of the most prominent figures in African-American political movements adapted to the changing political environment following the reforms and protests of the 1960s. Additionally, the sporting careers of both made them two of the most well-known politically active black individuals in the period, meaning their perspective would have a particularly wide audience. Moreover, their differing backgrounds in the segregated South and urban North provides a useful comparison between the two major areas of settlement for African-Americans in the U.S., whilst the contrast in their sports, with Ashe the only major black player in the sport during his career whilst Abdul-Jabbar competed in a league that was 75% black by the time of his retirement in 1989, also provides a point of difference between a figure that lived in an almost exclusively white world, and one that was increasingly the domain of African-Americans.⁹

However, the historiography of the areas examined in this dissertation usually pays little attention to Ashe and Abdul-Jabbar. Within sport history, studies of the links between African-American athletes and activism are often focused on the 1960s and the 1968 'Revolt of the Black Athlete' that culminated in Tommie Smith and John Carlos' protest

⁷ 'Ashe on South Africa', *New Journal and Guide*, February 22, 1975, p.10; A. Ashe, 'Send Your Children to the Libraries', *New York Times*, February 6, 1977, p.S2; C. Austin, 'I Support the Bakke Decision', Ashe says', *Afro-American*, March 24, 1979, p.8.

⁸ A. Goudsouzian, 'From Lew Alcindor to Kareem Abdul-Jabbar: Race, Religion and Representation in Basketball, 1968-1975', *Journal of American Studies*, 51/2 (2017), pp.441-42; 'Kareem Abdul Jabbar Is My Name Says Lew', *Call and Post*, June 12, 1971, p.13A.

⁹ A. Ashe and F. Deford, *Arthur Ashe: Portrait in Motion*, (Boston, 1975), p.173; Richard Lapchick and Angelica Guiao, 'The 2015 Racial and Gender Report Card: The National Basketball Association', p.22, <http://nebula.wsimg.com/6e1489cc3560e1e1a2fa88e3030f5149?AccessKeyId=DAC3A56D8FB782449D2A&disposition=0&alloworigin=1>, accessed 17/04/2019.

on the podium at the 1968 Olympic Games in Mexico City, most notably from Amy Bass and Douglas Hartmann.¹⁰ Elsewhere, the focus has been on activism on university campuses in the 1960s, in particular the conflicts between black players and their white coaches and administrators over issues such as the right to protest, player exploitation and off-campus discrimination.¹¹ When these studies venture into the 1970s, they remain centred on campus and Olympic activism, obscuring athletes like Ashe and Abdul-Jabbar who had moved into professional sports and were not able to compete at the Olympics.¹² These temporal limits also effect some of the works that do exist on the subjects of this dissertation. For instance, Smith and Goudsouzian's studies of Abdul-Jabbar finish in 1968 and 1975 respectively, limiting their narrative to one that locates him as a symbol for the Black Power movement rejected by mainstream America, neglecting the changes that took place in his views and public perceptions of Abdul-Jabbar after this timeframe.¹³ Whilst Hall's study of Ashe provides a comprehensive examination of his life and activism, a contrast with Abdul-Jabbar can provide a useful point of comparison, whilst challenging the notion of these figures representing divergent radical and conservative trends in the African-American community, because of their growing alignment in views by the 1980s.¹⁴

The cases of Ashe and Abdul-Jabbar can also affirm and challenge the current historiography of African-Americans in the 'long 1970s'. For example, the fluctuating views on whether African-American activism should emphasise gradualism or radical change expressed by Ashe and Abdul-Jabbar, shows how the long-term blurred divisions in activist tactics identified by Tuck continued into this era, and the continuation of debates over what form activism should take.¹⁵ Moreover, the prominence of both in anti-apartheid movements affirms Nesbitt's idea that sport and culture played a central role in this form of activism, as well as a resurgence in organised movements against the South African system in the 1980s, although the fluctuation in views will challenge the

¹⁰ D. Hartmann, *Race, Culture and the Revolt of the Black Athlete: The 1968 Olympic Protests and their Aftermath*, (Chicago, 2003); A. Bass, *Not the Triumph But the Struggle: The 1968 Olympics and the Making of the Black Athlete*, (Minneapolis, 2002).

¹¹ L. Demas, *Integrating the Gridiron: Black Civil Rights and American College Football*, (New Brunswick, 2010), pp.105-06.

¹² Hartmann, *Race, Culture and the Revolt*, pp.241-42.

¹³ Smith, "'It's Not Really My Country'", p.223; Goudsouzian, 'From Lew Alcindor to Kareem Abdul-Jabbar', p.437.

¹⁴ E.A. Hall, *Arthur Ashe: Tennis and Justice in the Civil Rights Era*, (Baltimore, 2014); D. Thomas, "'Don't Tell Me How to Think": Arthur Ashe and the Burden of 'Being Black'", *The International Journal of the History of Sport*, 27/8 (2010), p.1314; Goudsouzian, 'From Lew Alcindor to Kareem Abdul-Jabbar', pp.438-39.

¹⁵ S. Tuck, *We Ain't What We Ought to Be: The Black Freedom Struggle from Emancipation to Obama*, (Cambridge, 2010), pp.4-5.

idea that their activism always boosted the anti-apartheid cause.¹⁶ These examples also challenge Chappell's idea of a 'lost decade' in activism, with the campaigns and public speaking on political issues done by Ashe and Abdul-Jabbar suggesting these activist spirits did not die out with the 1960s, even if these were sometimes influenced by conservatism.¹⁷ Therefore, the dissertation will look to combine these strands in the scholarship on sports and African-American history to examine the issues of anti-apartheid activism and involvement with Africa, African-American social mobility and debates over forms of activism. This will demonstrate that even though at times Ashe and Abdul-Jabbar held differing views on issues, both represent a trend within black politics to combine ideological strands, rather than solely being influenced by one set of ideas.

¹⁶ F.N. Nesbitt, *Race for Sanctions: African-Americans Against Apartheid*, (Bloomington, 2004), pp.82-83,111-12.

¹⁷ D. Chappell, 'The Lost Decade of Civil Rights', *Historically Speaking*, 10/2 (2009), p.37.

Chapter 1- Philosophies of activism

This chapter will explore the differences and similarities in the views of Arthur Ashe and Kareem Abdul-Jabbar towards how African-American activism should conduct itself in the 'long 1970s'. Aside from just outlining the personal views of Ashe and Abdul-Jabbar, it will place their perspectives within wider trends in African-American political campaigning, especially debates over whether winning the respect of white Americans and integrating into their society or racial pride and radical political change should be the goal of activists. It will also reveal that although these figures had personal beliefs about styles of activism, these ideologies were not necessarily diametrically opposed in the period, with activists using methods influenced by a number of outlooks, with the prominence of these ideas varying by the context.

For most of the decade preceding the period examined here, tactics emphasising converting white Americans to the cause of racial equality were firmly in the ascendancy. Looking to capitalise on changing white opinion on race, with the number believing black people to be as intelligent as their white counterparts rising from less than half in 1944 to 80% in 1956, African-American activists sought to use non-violent protests in the South to gain attention from the mainstream press, and thus gain support for their cause from increasingly sympathetic whites and federal government, as happened in campaigns such as the one led by Martin Luther King in Birmingham, Alabama in 1963.¹⁸ However, a rising discontent with the lack of results of these strategies amongst African-Americans, especially those in the urban North, influenced a changing outlook that was marked by a declining faith in the usefulness of pressuring government to legislate for changes in the condition of black Americans, with their frustration encapsulated in the 300 riots involving 500,000 African-Americans in the years after 1965.¹⁹

The power of this immediate context is particularly evident in Abdul-Jabbar's case. Growing up in Harlem in 1960s, the racial politics of the decade is portrayed as having a crucial politicising effect. The bombing of a black church in Birmingham in 1963 is described as encouraging him to,

Forget about assimilation, harmony through brotherhood, freedom through justice...
The government couldn't care less. Behind the pious pronouncements from

¹⁸ Tuck, *We Ain't What We Ought to Be*, pp.285-86,294-95.

¹⁹ V. Harding, R. Kelley and E. Lewis, 'We Changed the World' in R. Kelley and E. Lewis (eds.), *To Make Our World Anew: A History of African-Americans*, (Oxford, 2005), p.245.

Washington and the local law enforcement communiques, it was obvious that the identity of the killers was common knowledge.²⁰

Closer to home, the mood in the neighbourhood at the time of the July 1964 riots there, sparked after an off-duty white policeman shot and killed a 15-year-old black boy, is described as,

Nobody believed the cop would do a moment's time; and if anyone was believing his penitence, it still wasn't enough. The cop was on the force, and the boy was dead. White people had been murdering blacks for too long. That night the streets belonged to the people.²¹

This can reinforce the sense of hopelessness in traditional institutions as a way of righting social injustices, with no faith in the local police force to treat the black community with respect and provide justice, and thus turning to violence as a means of catharsis and showing their anger at the failure of these institutions. When these sentiments combined with poor living conditions and minimal economic opportunities for African-Americans in places like Harlem, they led Abdul-Jabbar to strive to be 'Black rage personified... I was no longer going to pussyfoot around the whites.'²²

The impact of this philosophy on the activism in Abdul-Jabbar is seen clearly in the latter part of the 1960s with his involvement in the Olympic Project for Human Rights (OPHR). Founded by the San Jose State College sociologist Harry Edwards in 1967, the group sought to use a boycott of the 1968 Olympic Games in Mexico City to achieve a variety of aims, particularly raising global awareness of domestic race relations and the exclusion of South Africa and Rhodesia from the games.²³ At their Thanksgiving workshop held in Los Angeles in 1967, Abdul-Jabbar's status as the leading college basketball player in the country meant his name was frequently at the top of media reports on the session, where a voice vote approved a boycott of the 1968 games.²⁴

²⁰ K. Abdul-Jabbar and P. Knobler, *Giant Steps: The Autobiography of Kareem Abdul-Jabbar*, (New York, 1983), pp.60-61.

²¹ Abdul-Jabbar and Knobler, *Giant Steps*, p.72.

²² Abdul-Jabbar and Knobler, *Giant Steps*, pp.61-62; L. Alcindor and J. Olsen, 'My Story', *Sports Illustrated*, October 27, 1969, p.98.

²³ M. Lomax, 'Bedazzle Them with Brilliance, Bamboozle Them with Bull: Harry Edwards, Black Power and the Revolt of the Black Athlete Revisited' in M. Lomax (ed.), *Sports and the Racial Divide: African-American and Latino Experience in an Era of Change*, (Jackson, 2008), p.71.

²⁴ J. Prugh, 'Negro Group Votes to Boycott '68 Olympics', *Los Angeles Times*, November 24, 1967, p.C1; 'Olympics Boycott Voted by Negroes', *New York Times*, November 24,

However, it was not just Abdul-Jabbar's fame that made his presence notable. His remarks at the meeting, described by Edwards as 'the most moving and dynamic statement in behalf of the boycott', recounted his experiences in Harlem as convincing him that 'we don't catch hell because we aren't basketball stars or because we don't have money. We catch hell because we are black. Somewhere each of us has got to make a stand', earning him a five-minute standing ovation from those present.²⁵ The locating of motivations for an Olympic boycott in the urban African-American experience further reinforces the power of these conditions for motivating radical activism by the late 1960s, with his audience's appreciation for his remarks suggesting its influence was not limited to Abdul-Jabbar.

Similarly, the context of the late 1960s also had a crucial impact on Ashe's activism. Having largely avoided politics for much of the decade, Ashe was the subject of lobbying from a variety of influential figures from across the civil rights movement, including Martin Luther King, Stokely Carmichael and Jesse Jackson, to use his public profile to advocate on behalf of African-Americans.²⁶ The political climate by the late 1960s is crucial in explaining why Ashe broke his silence in 1968, particularly the recognition that 'The status quo would not do' in politics. His experiences as a lieutenant at the West Point military academy also contributed to the radicalised political climate, where 'it seemed there was a funeral every day' for soldiers from the Vietnam War, a conflict where a 'disproportionate number of young blacks were paying the price for faulty American foreign policy'.²⁷ Ashe used a speech at a Washington, D.C. church in March 1968 to begin his career in activism, emphasising the crucial role of black athletes in raising consciousness of political issues in the black community, showing how these sentiments were able to spread beyond black power figures like Harry Edwards to reach figures like Ashe that had stayed away from politics even at the height of the civil rights movement.²⁸ The speech is also depicted as a liberating event for Ashe, who described getting 'a strange sense of satisfaction for speaking out... The speech released a great deal of anxiety and guilt I had repressed and marked the beginning of a period of political activity', indicating that the climate of the late 1960s helped to inspire more

1967, p.30; J. Rodgers, 'A Step to an Olympic Boycott', *Sports Illustrated*, December 4, 1967, p.30.

²⁵ H. Edwards, *The Revolt of the Black Athlete*, (50th anniversary edn., Urbana, 2017), pp.48-49.

²⁶ Hall, *Arthur Ashe*, p.5; A. Ashe and A. Rampersad, *Days of Grace: A Memoir*, (New York, 1993), pp.127-28.

²⁷ A. Ashe and N. Amdur, *Off the Court*, (New York, 1981), pp.102-03.

²⁸ F. Lee, 'Ashe Speaks to Ghetto, says, 'Do it Yourself'', *Afro-American*, March 16th, 1968, p.26.

activism, even for figures not associated with the Black Power movement that is depicted as being in the ascendency within African-American activism.²⁹

Moreover, the impact of these conditions was not limited to the political realm. As Kelley highlights, the period also encouraged a greater pride in, celebration and knowledge of race and its heritage by cultural figures such as artists, writers and musicians, but the examples of Abdul-Jabbar and Ashe can also show how this revolution also impacted in sport.³⁰ In fashion, outfits that sought to show pride in African heritage became commonplace, with Abdul-Jabbar adorning such an outfit in the photo used on the first page of his three-part *Sports Illustrated* series of articles in 1969, whilst Ashe played for much of his career in the 1970s with a short Afro-style haircut.³¹ The personal significance of traditional African dress at this time for Abdul-Jabbar was recounted as 'my statement that I was finding my roots... I felt just a bit rebellious and defiant', showing how cultural styles such as dress became a focal point of African-American activism as a statement of pride in being black and the cultural heritage that came with it, as opposed to the tendency to integrate into the American mainstream that preceded it.³² This cultural change is also manifested in a rediscovery of African-American history, with both Abdul-Jabbar and Ashe both highlighting how learning about figures and events like Marcus Garvey, W.E.B. DuBois and the Harlem Renaissance helped to further reinforce a growing racial pride and sense of reclaiming black accomplishments that had been lost in a white-dominated education system.³³ Ashe would also make his own contribution to this effort to educate about black history, publishing *A Hard Road to Glory* in 1988, a three volume book that sought to overcome the lack of sources for the history of African-American sport, reinforcing how education on black history was seen as a key facet of liberating black Americans culturally in this period.³⁴

However, despite the impact of the context of upheaval in the late 1960s, some significant philosophical continuities remained with the recent past. As much as Abdul-Jabbar's experiences of Harlem in the 1960s provided powerful encouragement for radicalism, those of Ashe in Richmond, Virginia in the 1950s helped to shape a different set of beliefs about how African-Americans should approach political activism. The

²⁹ Ashe and Amdur, *Off the Court*, p.102.

³⁰ Harding, Kelley and Lewis, 'We Changed the World', p.259.

³¹ Alcindor and Olsen, 'My Story', p.82; T. Rogers, 'Ashe Faulting India's Default', *New York Times*, December 17, 1974, p.47.

³² K. Abdul-Jabbar, *Coach Wooden and Me: Our 50-Year Friendship On and Off the Court*, (Boston, 2017), pp.174-75.

³³ Abdul-Jabbar and Knobler, *Giant Steps*, pp.70-71; F. Deford, 'The Once and Future Diplomat', *Sports Illustrated*, March 1, 1971, p.81.

³⁴ Ashe and Rampersad, *Days of Grace*, pp.194-95.

continued enforcement of Jim Crow laws during his childhood there, with discrimination towards black people in public spaces and severe underinvestment in infrastructure in the areas that they were confined to, helped to foster a fatalistic sentiment that saw this racial dynamic as permanent, which encouraged African-Americans to only challenge the dominant order through small, targeted acts of resistance, rather than public contesting that risked further repression.³⁵ This can be seen as similar to the ideas identified by Tuck in describing the attitudes of Southern African-Americans in the interwar period, where the need to survive meant that quiet resistance was the only possible way to challenge the system, whilst many saw little capacity for overturning the system.³⁶

These values were further reinforced by the teachings of his childhood coach, Robert Walter Johnson. In particular, Johnson imparted the value of deference to white crowds and opponents, especially through impeccable on-court manners and the concession of any close calls to white opponents.³⁷ Whilst these ideas had relevance first and foremost to the tennis court, they also translated to race relations off the court. For example, within the realm of electoral politics, Ashe continued to emphasise engagement and participation with the system, saying 'It is important to me that I keep my faith in electoral politics... principled, inspired skilled politicians, such as Robert Kennedy, can make a difference', even as black turnout fell to just 49% in the 1976 presidential election.³⁸ This faith can be seen with his close ties to many figures within the political establishment, serving on the advisory board of Sargent Shriver, brother-in-law to the Kennedys and former cabinet official, when he ran for president in 1976.³⁹ Ashe then had his wedding officiated by American Ambassador to the United Nations Andrew Young at the U.N. in 1977, and played in charity tennis matches with Senators Ted Kennedy and Jacob Javits throughout the 1970s.⁴⁰ This can suggest that the power of ideologies that previous gradualist beliefs about activism had not totally been removed by the changes of the late 1960s, with the mentality of African-Americans like Ashe encouraging continued engagement on the terms of the current system.

³⁵ Hall, "'I Guess I'm Becoming More and More Militant'", pp.475-76.

³⁶ Tuck, *We Ain't What We Ought to Be*, pp.180-81.

³⁷ Ashe and Amdur, *Off the Court*, p.42.

³⁸ Ashe and Rampersad, *Days of Grace*, p.130; R. Kelley, 'Into the Fire' in R. Kelley and E. Lewis (eds.), *To Make Our World Anew: A History of African-Americans Since 1880*, p.261.

³⁹ W. Weaver, 'Shriver Enters the '76 Presidential Race', *New York Times*, September 21, 1975, p.27.

⁴⁰ Ashe and Amdur, *Off the Court*, pp.192-93; 'Ball in Sen. Kennedy's Court', *New York Times*, June 26, 1973, p.56; P. Ehrlich, 'Future Events', *New York Times*, August 18, 1974, p.50.

Moreover, despite his emphasis on the potential power of black athletes speaking out on political issues in his 1968 speech that opened his activist career, Ashe often came to reject the idea of this group having any need to be politically active. For instance, he complained in 1975, 'It really burns me up when blacks expect me to have certain pre-ordained interests, to structure my life only as a well-defined black-tennis-player-person... Nobody ever asks Stan Smith why he's not out helping poor little Presbyterian white kids', highlighting how activism was increasingly seen as more of an unfair burden on famous African-Americans than the social good it was viewed to be by Ashe in 1968.⁴¹ A more cautious attitude is also evident from Abdul-Jabbar at times. Even around the time of his involvement with OPHR, he was often reluctant to place himself at the forefront of activism, declaring 'I am a basketball player. I am not a sociologist. I am not a politician', illustrating how the sporting obligations of these figures were still often prioritised over political issues in the period, and implied that even politicised athletes rejected the idea of having authority on wider social issues at times.⁴² Moreover, despite making a powerful contribution at OPHR's workshop in favour of a boycott, Abdul-Jabbar was much more reluctant to affirm his support in later interviews, saying 'I haven't made up my mind. I'll just wait until the time comes', and although he turned down a call-up to the American squad for the Olympics in 1968, the decision was put down to the need to graduate on time, rather than politics, suggesting athletes were willing to minimise their activism publicly despite the politically-charged climate.⁴³

In addition, despite the perceived decline in support for the ideas of Martin Luther King by the end of the decade, the philosophies of Abdul-Jabbar and Ashe suggest a longer afterlife for these ideas. Just as King urged that 'Darkness cannot drive out darkness: only light can do that. Hate cannot drive out hate: only love can do that' and for the need to 'break the chain reaction of evil' in reference to the increasing rejection of alliances with white Americans by Black Power groups, Abdul-Jabbar articulated similar thoughts with reference to the evolution of his own beliefs.⁴⁴ For instance, he describes how the hatred of white people he developed in Harlem in the 1960s made him a 'blinded individual', with the solution as 'communication that results from a sincere effort to know all your brothers in the family of man. When the time comes that everyone can

⁴¹ Ashe and Deford, *Arthur Ashe*, pp.172-73.

⁴² J. Prugh, 'Alcindor Would Rather Take Case to Court', *Los Angeles Times*, December 1, 1967, p.I1.

⁴³ J. Prugh, 'Alcindor Says Olympic Boycott Doesn't Bind Him Personally', *Los Angeles Times*, November 25, 1967, p.21; P. Zimmerman, 'Olympic Bids Rejected by 3 Bruins, Trojan', *Los Angeles Times*, February 28, 1968, p.B1.

⁴⁴ M.L. King, *Where Do We Go From Here: Chaos or Community?* (Boston, 2010), p.65.

see his fellow man as a real person, that battle might just be won.⁴⁵ This suggests that despite the ascendancy of Black Power in the late 1960s, ideas of racial reconciliation held up by activists like King still remained an essential philosophy for activists on the eve of the 1970s. Similar sentiments are also visible in Ashe's writing on activism, praising King's close confidant Andrew Young as 'a conciliator committed to the cause, someone who could haggle, bargain and win compromises with whites', further showing how ideologies based on political reform rather than revolution still had a constituency after their peak in the civil rights era.⁴⁶

Therefore, this chapter has demonstrated the complexity of the ways in which Abdul-Jabbar and Ashe thought about activism in the period. Despite being categorised as representative of radical and conservative African-Americans in the historiography, respectively, the variation in their views, with both emphasising themes closely associated with Black Power, such as cultural liberation and rejecting the current system, at times, whilst also accepting the need for racial conciliation and working within the existing system at others.⁴⁷ The next two chapters will showcase how these ideologies manifested themselves in Abdul-Jabbar and Ashe's engagement in politics through the period using two case studies: Africa and anti-apartheid activism, and black social mobility.

⁴⁵ L. Alcindor and J. Olsen, 'A Year of Turmoil and Decision', *Sports Illustrated*, November 10, 1969, p.46.

⁴⁶ Ashe and Amdur, *Off the Court*, p.89.

⁴⁷ Goudsouzian, 'From Lew Alcindor to Kareem Abdul-Jabbar', p.437; Thomas, "'Don't Tell Me How to Think'", p.1314.

Chapter 2- The Anti-Apartheid Movement and African diplomacy

This chapter will examine Ashe and Abdul-Jabbar's relationship with the continent of Africa in the period. Through the case studies of anti-apartheid activism and diplomatic visits to Africa, it will reinforce that attitudes to these issues were not static, with approaches of engaging with official channels or isolating them fluctuating in prominence at various points. In particular, this emphasises the influential nature of the Black Power movement over attitudes to these subjects in the late 1960s and early 1970s, with protest and isolation the main themes of activism, before taking a turn towards contact and engagement with South Africa in the mid-1970s, exemplified by Ashe's visits after 1973. This trend then saw a return to approaches of protest and isolation by the 1980s, with the popularity of the movement by this time suggesting a conscious recalling of the civil rights movement was able to provide a point of unity for African-American activists.

At the start of the period examined, South African apartheid had become one of the most prominent issues in sporting politics. South Africa's refusal to field a racially integrated Olympic team earned them a suspension from the 1964 Olympics, but the International Olympic Committee (IOC) decision to readmit the nation for the 1968 edition in Mexico City provoked boycott threats from numerous nations including the Soviet Union, Brazil and Nigeria.⁴⁸ However, the reaction against this decision was not limited to other nations. The OPHR group that Abdul-Jabbar became part of also adopted the cause as one of its main issues following its foundation in 1967, making the aim of excluding South Africa from the Olympic Games foremost among the goals of a proposed boycott.⁴⁹ Although Ashe lacked the same direct involvement with OPHR as Abdul-Jabbar, his name can still be found on a statement in support of a boycott of the 1968 Games over South Africa's admission drawn up by the American Committee on Africa.⁵⁰ That the cause of a boycott in protest at South Africa could draw the support of a figure like Ashe who had previously stayed away from politics for most of the 1960s, reinforces how the aims of movements with connections to the Black Power movement like OPHR could gain significant traction amongst African-American athletes in the climate of the 1960s.⁵¹ Furthermore, the success of the movement on this issue, with the IOC

⁴⁸ Bass, *Not the Triumph But the Struggle*, pp.159,161-62.

⁴⁹ Hartmann, *Race, Culture and the Revolt*, pp.95-96.

⁵⁰ F. Litsky, '65 Athletes Support Boycott Of Olympics on S. Africa Issue', *New York Times*, April 12, 1968, p.28.

⁵¹ E.A. Hall, 'I Guess I'm Becoming More and More Militant': Arthur Ashe and the Black Freedom Movement, 1961-1968', *The Journal of African-American History*, 96/4 (2011), p.485.

reversing its decision to readmit South Africa in April 1968, implies that opposing apartheid provided a key area of success for black activists in 1968, especially given increasing divisions within the group over whether to continue the boycott strategy that followed their success on this issue.⁵² Moreover, Ashe's activism on South Africa in the years that followed 1968 suggests a continuation of the tactics successfully employed by OPHR to force the nation from the Olympic Games. After the forcing of South Africa from that event, Ashe frequently urged their exclusion from the Davis Cup (the main nation-based men's tournament) and the International Lawn Tennis Federation (ILTF) (the sport's governing body), including giving testimony on the subject to the United Nations' Apartheid Committee in 1970.⁵³ This underlines how the tactics used by the OPHR to undermine apartheid retained their currency with activists after 1968, with sport as a useful tool to isolate the South African government.

However, other efforts made by Ashe on the issue of South Africa also highlight approaches that conflict with isolating the nation. This is shown most prominently in Ashe's recurring efforts to obtain a visa to enter and compete in South Africa, applying unsuccessfully several times after 1969, despite the intervention of Secretary of State William Rodgers in an effort to persuade the South African government in his favour.⁵⁴ Although the efforts partly represented continuity with the aim of publicly embarrassing the nation, as suggested by his intention to 'go right to the South African embassy in New York. If they want to turn me down, they'll have to do it right there in front of all of you', these efforts also highlight the tendency to seek engagement with existing political systems stressed in the opening chapter.⁵⁵ For instance, when applying for his visa in 1969, Ashe described his visit as being motivated by 'desire... to play tennis and only to play tennis' and offered to 'guarantee that the only statements regarding South Africa that I will make from today until a reasonable period of time... will be confined entirely to tennis.'⁵⁶ Although this statement would have been influenced by the need to convince the government that the trip was not intended to damage them politically and thus increase the chances of being admitted, the focus on being able to experience the South African system personally and his willingness to minimise the negative publicity the

⁵² D. Thomas, *Globetrotting: African-American Athletes and Cold War Politics*, (Urbana, 2012), p.155.

⁵³ 'Ashe Urges Davis Cup Ban for S. Africa', *Los Angeles Times*, July 3, 1969, p.C2; R. Estabrook, 'Ashe Carriers Argument on S. Africa Into U.N.', *Washington Post*, April 15, 1970, p.D3.

⁵⁴ N. Amdur, 'Ashe to Test So. Africa policy', *New York Times*, July 30, 1969, p.32; D. Gray, 'Visa Not Likely for Ashe', *The Guardian*, February 12, 1971, p.18.

⁵⁵ Amdur, 'Ashe to Test So. Africa policy', p.32.

⁵⁶ 'Arthur Ashe Makes Formal South Africa Visa Application', *Chicago Daily Defender*, December 20, 1969, p.37.

government would receive, reinforces how working through government still had a place in African-American activism.

The prominence of working with established channels is also emphasised by how Ashe approached his eventual visit to South Africa. Having had his visa application approved in November 1973, he competed at the South African Open for the first time later that month, winning the doubles title and losing the final of the singles tournament.⁵⁷ The demands that Ashe made for his participation in the tournament- freedom of movement, integrated stands, no 'honorary white' status and a meeting with the government- show how Ashe sought to use his visit to extract concessions from the South African government, and suggests piecemeal reforms were seen as more effective than the tactics of international isolation espoused earlier.⁵⁸ For instance, although he recognised that the visit would mostly be symbolic, he saw the potential for a lasting impact on the country, asking 'once you pause apartheid for five minutes, how can you go back? The next time you'll have to pause ten', whilst claiming that the 'first breezes of change' were reaching South Africa.⁵⁹

Also, the similarities between Ashe's belief in the power of individual political leaders in the American context is also reflected during this phase of his South African activism. Furthermore, Ashe's visit reinforces the significance of dialogue and conciliation in his activism. This is seen particularly in his frequent praise for Minister of Sports Piet Koornhof after their meeting, who he described as one of the more enlightened members of the government who was likely to create change through his actions, in a similar fashion to the way American leaders like Kennedy and King were applauded for their politics and ability to force change.⁶⁰ As well as this, Ashe visited the black settlement of Soweto north of Johannesburg, holding a tennis clinic and discussing the merits of his decision to compete in South Africa with local residents, including those highly critical of his actions.⁶¹ However, Ashe also visited Stellenbosch University, a centre of support for apartheid, following the conclusion of the tournament in Johannesburg, debating with and challenging the views of proponents of the system amongst faculty and students.⁶² The emphasis on discussion with numerous groups and perspectives can highlight how

⁵⁷ 'South Africa Grants Visa to Ashe', *Washington Post*, November 1, 1973, p.D7; 'Ashe Bows in Final in So. Africa', *New York Times*, November 27, 1973, p.55.

⁵⁸ Ashe and Deford, *Arthur Ashe*, p.18.

⁵⁹ 'Scorecard', *Sports Illustrated*, December 24, 1973, p.19; 'Ashe Says S.A. 'tried'', *Chicago Defender*, December 4, 1973, p.21.

⁶⁰ Ashe and Deford, *Arthur Ashe*, p.17

⁶¹ Hall, *Arthur Ashe*, pp.174-75.

⁶² Ashe and Deford, *Arthur Ashe*, pp.140-41.

the problem of apartheid was partly conceptualised as one of a lack of understanding between groups, and could therefore be solved by conciliation between white and black groups within South Africa, rather than external pressures on the country. This is further supported by his frequent positioning of himself between the 'extremes' of the apartheid government and black South Africans opposing his visit, reinforcing the idea of apartheid being a problem that could be solved once both parties were able to put aside their differences, instead of looking to force change.⁶³

Although Thomas and Morgan have viewed his actions as a galvanising force for the anti-apartheid movement, the trip created significant fissures within the movement.⁶⁴ In the American context, his visit drew a variety of reactions within African-American opinion, with the *New Journal and Guide* describing Ashe as 'almost single-handedly demolishing South Africa's well-known racism' and 'making a shambles of apartheid' whilst favourably quoting Ashe's appeal 'that people not be so emotional about South Africa', highlighting how Ashe's strategy of small engagements with South Africa had a constituency amongst some African-Americans, with gradualist opinion still able to survive after the civil rights movement.⁶⁵ A favourable response also came when Ashe sought the opinion of some prominent figures in African-American politics before his visit, with figures such as Representatives Andrew Young and Barbara Jordan, the SNCC co-founder Julian Bond and the poet Nikki Giovanni all seeing a visit as constructive.⁶⁶ On the other hand, others in the community pointed out that despite the claims of an impending demolition of apartheid, many key representatives of black South Africans, including the African National Congress, remained banned with little prospect of change, showing how the symbolic, temporary measures arising from Ashe's visit also caused dissent amongst African-Americans.⁶⁷ Moreover, the divides created by these disagreements had lasting impacts for the years ahead, with Ashe still being heckled over his stance and arguing with critics at university speeches in 1978.⁶⁸ Also, although Ashe's status as a global star on the tennis circuit amplified the impact of his activism, this also helped to undermine the movement on a global level. In particular, his criticism

⁶³ Hall, *Arthur Ashe*, p.195; Ashe and Amdur, *Off the Court*, pp.152-53.

⁶⁴ Thomas, *Globetrotting*, p.170; E. Morgan, 'Black and White at Center Court: Arthur Ashe and the Confrontation of Apartheid in South Africa', *Diplomatic History*, 36/5 (2012), p.816.

⁶⁵ F. Clarke, Jr., 'Ashe Fights Racism- Without Emotion', *New Journal and Guide*, February 15, 1975, p.1; 'Ashe- 40, Segregation- Love!', *New Journal and Guide*, May 31, 1975, p.8.

⁶⁶ Ashe and Deford, *Arthur Ashe*, p.42.

⁶⁷ H. Amana, 'South African Rulers Get Over Big on Arthur Ashe', *Philadelphia Tribune*, January 15, 1974, p.4.

⁶⁸ Morgan, 'Black and White at Center Court', p.838.

of the decisions of the Indian and Mexican Davis Cup teams to refuse to play South Africa in the competition in 1974 and 1976, respectively, meant that Ashe's rejection of international boycotts to pressure the government impacted beyond America, with his authority as an anti-apartheid figure and successful black athlete used to discredit these efforts at isolating South Africa.⁶⁹ The worldwide divisions created by the visit are also visible in South Africa itself, with Ashe facing hostility from 'militants' when visiting Soweto as well as from some black journalists at a reception for his visit, but also supportive comments from figures including the Pan-Africanist Congress founder Robert Sobukwe and the poet Don Mattera. This further demonstrates how Ashe's decision made unity more difficult amongst black South Africans and weakened anti-apartheid movements as a result.⁷⁰

Another example of the philosophy of engaging with existing institutions is the State Department visits that both Ashe and Abdul-Jabbar took part in, in 1970 and 1971 respectively. As Thomas notes, the need for the United States to assuage fears in the non-white world about the state of its domestic race relations in the Cold War era, so that it could win the favour of the newly independent nations of Africa and Asia, meant that visits by African-American cultural figures such as musicians and athletes became common place in the 1950s and 1960s, with their status used to implicitly show the progress of integration.⁷¹ Although these visits declined in prominence as tools of American diplomacy to Africa and Asia by the end of the 1960s with a lessening of external pressure on race relations after the passing of landmark legislation such as the Civil Rights Act and Voting Rights Act, Ashe and Abdul-Jabbar still had African trips sponsored by the State Department in 1970 and 1971.⁷² As well as the decision to accept an invitation from the State Department itself suggesting a willingness to cooperate with the American government, Ashe's conduct on the tour also suggests a willingness to work with American authority, pledging 'For three weeks, I'll do anything they want me to.'⁷³ Moreover, the theme of working with power is also present throughout Ashe's visit, particularly his frustration with the lack of African-Americans present at American diplomatic missions, frequently stating his desire to take up such a

⁶⁹ 'Mexico again boycotts S. Africa in Davis Cup', *Afro-American*, January 31, 1976, p.9; 'Ashe Calls India's Davis Cup Default Poor Strategic Move', *Los Angeles Times*, December 17, 1974, p.F6.

⁷⁰ Ashe and Deford, *Arthur Ashe*, pp.126-28; Ashe and Amdur, *Off the Court*, pp.154-55.

⁷¹ Thomas, *Globetrotting*, pp.4-5.

⁷² T. Borstelmann, *The Cold War and the Color Line: American Race Relations in the Global Arena*, (Cambridge, 2001), p.222; K. Witherspoon, 'Going 'to the fountainhead': Black American Athletes as Cultural Ambassadors in Africa, 1970-1971', *The International Journal of the History of Sport*, 30/13 (2013), p.1511.

⁷³ Deford, 'The Once and Future Diplomat', p.65.

role and create an African-American foreign policy pressure group, something that he would eventually do with TransAfrica in the 1980s.⁷⁴ Thus, this shows how Ashe was an example of an African-American still looking to work through government systems and integrate themselves into them, rather than rejecting co-operation altogether. It also suggests that a growing fascination with Africa amongst activists was not just limited to the Black Power groups identified by historians like Parrott.⁷⁵

However, the experiences of Abdul-Jabbar indicate the aims of integration into official American circles were not shared even by all of those taking in State Department tours. For instance, his visit became the occasion when he first publicly insisted on being called by his Muslim name Kareem Abdul-Jabbar, rather than his former name of Lew Alcindor that he had publicly still gone by in the time since his conversion to Islam in 1968. Abdul-Jabbar viewed this as a rejection of the slave identity bestowed on his ancestors, highlighting his desire for distance from American institutions and his willingness to embrace a different identity to that as an American.⁷⁶ Moreover, the unwillingness of Abdul-Jabbar to acquiesce to the aims of American diplomats to give a positive image of the country, criticising the Vietnam War and refusing to downplay racial tensions in the U.S., further suggests a sense of alienation from American identity.⁷⁷ Also, the differences in recollection between Ashe and Abdul-Jabbar of their visits sheds light on their attitudes to their visits and role as ambassadors. For instance, whilst Ashe described 'every conversation on this trip, every encounter, more enlightening than the last one' and devoted four pages of his memoir to a fond recollection of the tour, Abdul-Jabbar's only reference to the trip in his autobiographies consists of a few lines.⁷⁸ This reaffirms how despite the growing sense of cultural connection with Africa amongst black Americans, the degree of deeper interest varied significantly amongst individuals, with those more associated with Black Power not necessarily those with a greater interest, as well as a hesitancy to embrace co-operation with government in the early 1970s.

However, by the 1980s there were signs of greater unity amongst African-Americans on questions of Apartheid. As Tuck highlights, the cause of opposing apartheid became a key rallying point for black activists after the re-election of Ronald Reagan in 1984, with

⁷⁴ Deford, 'The Once and Future Diplomat', pp.65-66; Ashe and Amdur, *Off the Court*, p.144; Hall, *Arthur Ashe*, p.227.

⁷⁵ R.J. Parrott, 'Boycott Gulf! Angolan Oil and the Black Power Roots of American Anti-Apartheid Organising', *Modern American History*, 1/2 (2018), pp.195-96.

⁷⁶ 'Morning Briefing- Lew Alcindor Takes Islamic Name', *Los Angeles Times*, June 4, 1971, p.E2; Abdul-Jabbar, *Coach Wooden and Me*, pp.172-73.

⁷⁷ Witherspoon, 'Going 'to the fountainhead'', p.1516.

⁷⁸ Deford 'The Once and Future Diplomat', p.66; Ashe and Amdur, *Off the Court*, pp.140-43; Abdul-Jabbar and Knobler, *Giant Steps*, pp.234-35.

both the increasing brutality of the government in South Africa and the steadfast support offered by the Reagan administration making the issue a key point for campaigners.⁷⁹ The increased repression carried out by the South African government is also seen as having a profound impact on Ashe's activism. After the Soweto Uprising in 1976, where 174 black South African protestors were killed by police, Ashe realised 'Outsiders like me also had to change our approach. We could not rely on the occasional letter to a congressman or senator. We had to raise our ante. I had to get bolder just to keep up'.⁸⁰ This increasing boldness materialised in the 1980s, with Ashe amongst those taking part in the sit-in at the South African embassy in November 1984 that galvanised protests in a dozen cities and saw 201 arrested in the embassy protests alone by January 1985.⁸¹

This increasingly confrontational approach is also shown in the demands of the movement, with the Artists and Athletes Against Apartheid group Ashe co-chaired looking to enforce a cultural boycott, including Ashe personally intervening to stop American tennis player John McEnroe competing in South Africa. Similarly, the Comprehensive Anti-Apartheid Act of 1986 that the activists involved in the movement supported (and passed with enough votes to override Reagan's veto) obliged the U.S. 'to use economic, political, diplomatic and other means to remove the apartheid system'.⁸² Therefore, this suggests that a more unified and powerful climate existed within African-American activism at the start of the 1980s, with the cause of opposing apartheid and a conscious recalling of the tactics of the civil rights movement such as sit-ins and boycotts, able to motivate a spectrum of activists from more cautious figures like Ashe, to symbols of the civil rights movement like Coretta Scott King and Rosa Parks, but also figures like Abdul-Jabbar and TransAfrica chair Randall Robinson that had associations with the Black Power movement and previously used boycotts against apartheid.⁸³ The power of this context is also shown by Ashe's continued hesitancy about taking part in protest personally, with fears it could undermine his public image and influence, and his admission that 'I preferred to work more quietly with TransAfrica Forum', suggesting

⁷⁹ Tuck, *We Ain't What We Ought to Be*, pp.179-80.

⁸⁰ N. Clark and W. Worger, *South Africa: The Rise and Fall of Apartheid*, (Abingdon, 2016), p.104; Ashe and Amdur, *Off the Court*, p.157.

⁸¹ K. Barker and M. Marriott, '1960s Tactics Revived for Embassy Sit-Ins', *Washington Post*, November 29, 1984, p.A1; K. Barker, 'Arthur Ashe Jailed in Apartheid Protest', *Washington Post*, January 12, 1985, p.B1.

⁸² L. Christon, 'Artists Respond to Call for S. Africa Boycott', *Los Angeles Times*, October 6, 1983, p.J1; N. Amdur, 'South Africa Is Out for Borg-McEnroe', *New York Times*, October 17, 1980, p.B6; 'H.R.4868- Comprehensive Anti-Apartheid Act of 1986', <https://www.congress.gov/bill/99th-congress/house-bill/4868>, accessed 29/04/2019.

⁸³ B. Gamarekian, 'Apartheid Protest Takes Page from 60's History', *New York Times*, November 30, 1984, p.A13; 'Artists/Athletes Against Apartheid', *Los Angeles Sentinel*, September 29, 1983, p.B7.

that the momentum created by the relative harmony within the campaign was able to move figures like Ashe to protest, and shows the continued power of the civil rights movement's tactics and memory in engaging activists.⁸⁴

Therefore, this chapter has illustrated the frequently changing nature of black activism related to Africa. Although the influence of the Black Power movement is shown by the successful campaign to exclude South Africa from the Olympics in 1968 led by the OPHR, the engagement of Ashe and Abdul-Jabbar with governments in the U.S. and South Africa through State Department and individual visits to Africa and South Africa can show how this influence often co-existed with a willingness to work with established authorities like governments. However, the American and South African political climate by the early 1980s helped to bring about a position closer to that of the 1960s, with a greater emphasis on boycotts and protests over co-operation with governments.

⁸⁴ Ashe and Rampersad, *Days of Grace*, pp.122-23,129.

Chapter 3- African-American Social Mobility

This chapter will focus on how Abdul-Jabbar and Ashe envisioned the path for African-Americans to progress through American society in the 'long 1970s'. It will explore how these figures reacted to the decline in faith in the legislative approach to change amongst African-Americans in the late 1960s, and how far their perspectives were influenced by the emergence of the Black Power movement, but also the increasing sway of conservative narratives about society in the 1970s and 1980s. It will also discuss how these figures interacted with narratives about the role of sport in social progress, showing how Abdul-Jabbar and Ashe rejected the idea of sport as a driver of advancement for black Americans, but also affirming it at various points in the period.

By the start of the period this chapter focuses on in 1968, African-American activists faced a considerable roadblock in their activism. Following the passage of landmark legislation such as the Civil Rights Act in 1964 and the Voting Rights Act in 1965, frustration with a lack of further progress towards equality brought about a loss of faith amongst many African-Americans. As Martin Luther King wrote in 1967,

The word [The government's promise of equality] was broken, and the free-running expectations of the Negro crashed into the stone walls of white resistance... Negroes felt cheated... while many whites felt that the Negroes had gained so much it was virtually impudent and greedy to ask for more so soon.⁸⁵

In this context, with the federal government unwilling and not trusted to deliver further change and growing resistance from white Americans to any further change, the avenues used by the civil rights movement to achieve advancements came under greater scrutiny. Given these circumstances, the Black Power movement, with its emphasis on its difference with the tactics of nonviolence and conciliation advocated by the civil rights movement, instead promoting radical change in the culture, politics and economy of black communities, a message that struck a chord at a time when African-Americans had double the white rate of unemployment, infant mortality and deployment to the Vietnam War.⁸⁶

⁸⁵ King, *Where Do We Go From Here*, p.4.

⁸⁶ Tuck, *We Ain't What We Ought to Be*, pp.336-37; King, *Where Do We Go From Here*, p.7.

This dissatisfaction is seen particularly in the case of Abdul-Jabbar, whose experience of New York City in the 1960s and the powerlessness of African-Americans there encouraged him towards radical figures like Malcolm X, saying,

Reading Malcolm made me examine my entire racial thinking... Integrated rest rooms- Did we want to sit down next to white people on the toilet?... And were these misguided goals even reachable? Black people were being denied all access to economic and political power.⁸⁷

Although Ashe had grown up in the different context of Jim Crow-era Virginia and then to the overwhelmingly white world of tennis, in the context of 1968 he was still willing to defend Black Power on the CBS show *Face the Nation*, describing it as 'very American', and the political climate as 'a mandate that you do something. You cannot sit by and let the world go by', suggesting the movement was able to use the environment of the late 1960s to develop a significant constituency that extended beyond urban black Americans.⁸⁸ Moreover, his comment that 'I've been forced to become a militant... I am not a Rap Brown or a Stokely Carmichael, but I have to support them because they are on my side' can further show how the sense of upheaval in the 1960s pushed activists towards more radical solutions, with even figures like Ashe that were sceptical about the tactics of Black Power leaders recognising the movement's importance.⁸⁹ This broad section of support is also reflected in the opinion polls of African-Americans, with a majority sympathetic to Black Power, whilst only 20% approved of the performance of the more moderate NAACP by 1969.⁹⁰

The influence of Black Power is also visible in the types of work that both did in black communities. Just as activists in the movement often emphasised the importance of the local community in their work, Abdul-Jabbar and Ashe also placed an emphasis on these areas as the best site to create change. For instance, when Abdul-Jabbar declined to join the American Olympic basketball squad in the summer of 1968, he spent his time working with Operation Sports Rescue in New York City, an organisation set up to work with black children in the city, an experience he reflected on by saying 'the pride I instilled in those hundreds of inner-city black kids by teaching and paying attention to them was ultimately worth more than whatever I could have contributed to the national

⁸⁷ Abdul-Jabbar and Knobler, *Giant Steps*, pp.140-41.

⁸⁸ 'Arthur Ashe Lauds Positive Black Power', *Chicago Daily Defender*, September 17, 1968, p.25.

⁸⁹ R. Robinson, 'Black Power Echo', *The Times of India*, December 31, 1968, p.16.

⁹⁰ Tuck, *We Ain't What We Ought to Be*, pp.334.

morale by way of an Olympic gold medal.⁹¹ Similarly, Ashe also showed a similar concern for local issues, pledging to help raise funds for a Howard University students' campaign to build a hospital in the overwhelmingly black Quitman County in Mississippi, and played frequently at charity matches for college funds for African-Americans.⁹² This is also affirmed in the 1968 speech that began Ashe's activist career, where he urged campaigners to begin at 'home', clarified by saying 'Home is the ghetto; home is 125th Street and Eighth Avenue (Harlem); Home is Bedford-Stuyvesant; home is Desire in New Orleans'.⁹³ Therefore, this shows how following the decline in faith in federal government solutions to national problems in the 1960s, the use of community-focused actions as an effort to alleviate the issues of African-Americans became a key technique of activists.

However, even within the context of Black Power's ascendancy, criticism of African-Americans themselves is also present in the rhetoric of these activists. In the same speech that stressed the need for local activism in African-American communities, Ashe also opined 'There is a lot we can do and we don't do because we're lazy. This may be brutal, but poverty is half laziness', suggesting that as faith in government solutions was lost in the 1960s, black activists saw a role for greater personal action as part of the replacement for this aid, as well as local community action.⁹⁴ The significance of individual action is also suggested in Abdul-Jabbar's explanation for his admiration for Malcolm X, who 'had gone from a white man's clown to society's outcast... then found the strength and vision to resurrect himself and, almost from scratch, create (there were no role models) a *black man*', suggesting that individual determination and will were essential for African-Americans to gain respect from society, rather than needing any other collective help.⁹⁵ On the other hand, as Matlin has suggested with the example of the poet and activist Amiri Baraka, personal uplift also had a place within the ideas of the Black Power movement, meaning the belief in individual action supported by Ashe and Abdul-Jabbar does not totally contradict the influence of more radical movements.⁹⁶ Moreover, even if these ideas did represent some contradiction with the ideas of Black Power, this combination of ideologies was embraced by figures like Ashe, who commented, 'We need aggressive militants, the Stokely Carmichael and Rap Brown and

⁹¹ Abdul-Jabbar and Knobler, *Giant Steps*, p.171.

⁹² 'Tennis Star to Seek Funds for the Poor', *New York Times*, April 11, 1971, p.44; 'Sports News Briefs', *New York Times*, October 9, 1975, p.58.

⁹³ M. Asher, 'Ashe Wants Athletes to Act', *Washington Post*, March 11, 1968, p.C1.

⁹⁴ Asher, 'Ashe Wants Athletes to Act', p.C1.

⁹⁵ Abdul-Jabbar and Knobler, *Giant Steps*, p.140.

⁹⁶ D. Matlin, "'Lift Up Yr Self!" Reinterpreting Amiri Baraka (LeRoi Jones), Black Power and the Uplift Tradition', *The Journal of American History*, 93/1 (2006), pp.92-93.

LeRoi Jones figures. You need men with charisma who can appeal to emotions. But without guys like me they are dead... You need other guys coming in to do the hard, practical bargaining', summed up as balancing 'the practical and the emotional'.⁹⁷ Therefore, this can show how although the ideologies of Black Power came to have a powerful influence over activism in the late 1960s, they were able to complement a continuing belief in the need for 'practicality' that typified the civil rights movement earlier in the decade.

As time moved on into the 1970s, the belief in individual initiative was to persist most strongly. As Berkowitz has suggested, the decade represented a renewed intellectual belief in the power of the marketplace and individual agency to regulate society after the emphasis on government action that had defined the 1960s.⁹⁸ This revived faith in the market posed particular questions for sport, which both as an institution and as a metaphor for society itself, had been viewed as a uniquely meritocratic arena, where talent alone could overcome the barriers of social structures and serve as a unifying force across divides like race and class.⁹⁹ These beliefs came to the fore when during OPHR's calls for an Olympic boycott in 1968, with the mythology around events such as Jesse Owens' four gold medals at the 1936 Berlin Olympics used to paint sport as a progressive racial force, where individual achievement could show the fallacy of racism and create change that benefited African-Americans.¹⁰⁰ The key proponents of individual enterprise in the 1970s and 1980s also embraced sport as a metaphor for society. For instance, Ronald Reagan used the triumphs of the American gymnast Mary Lou Retton to claim 'when people like Mary Lou have a dream, when they have the courage and opportunity to work hard, when they believe in the power of faith and hope, they not only perform great feats, they help pull all of us forward as well', reinforcing how sport provided a useful analogy for individualist narratives about society that suggested all that a person needed was determination and vision to achieve success.¹⁰¹ At times, Ashe and Abdul-Jabbar also engaged in these narratives about the power of sport. When

⁹⁷ H. McIlvanney, 'Arthur Ashe is Ready and Waiting to Serve', *The Observer*, July 7, 1968, p.18; H. McIlvanney, 'Ashe Finds Race Issue Tied in With His Court Prowess', *Los Angeles Times*, July 7, 1969, p.B1.

⁹⁸ E. Berkowitz, *Something Happened: A Political and Cultural Overview of the Seventies*, (New York, 2006), p.10.

⁹⁹ Hartmann, *Race, Culture and the Revolt*, pp.72-73.

¹⁰⁰ A. Daley, 'Sports of the Times', *New York Times*, November 28, 1967, p.60; 'Olympic Boycott Idea Draws Fire', *Washington Post*, November 25, 1967, p.C2; C. Garrity, 'Negroes Disagree on Games Boycott', *Los Angeles Times*, November 25, 1967, p.21.

¹⁰¹ Ronald Reagan, 'Radio Address to the Nation on Administration Policies', August 18, 1984, <https://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/documents/radio-address-the-nation-administration-policies-0>, accessed 01/05/2019.

advocating for a gradual solution to South African apartheid in the mid-1970s, Ashe argued,

The white guy who will sit next to a black spectator at the ball park and root for a bunch of black athletes wearing his city's name across their chests may have a conniption fit if you asked him to sit next to a black at work, or in school, or in church. But maybe next time, after the ball game, it won't seem so bad.¹⁰²

Meanwhile on the domestic front, he outlined his ideology of an ideal society as based on 'an equal chance, under one set of rules, as on a tennis court.'¹⁰³ Abdul-Jabbar also stressed the unifying power of sport at times, recounting how after a Los Angeles Lakers title win in 1985 'I remember thousands came out that day: people from Koreatown, Chinatown, East L.A., South Central L.A., the Valley, the Westside- everybody', showing how narratives about sport as a unifying force across social divisions could affect Ashe and Abdul-Jabbar.¹⁰⁴

However, more typically, both these figures were sceptical about how useful sport could be to African-American social advancement. In particular, both advanced arguments that sport had become too great a distraction from more worthwhile and realistic goals, namely being able to advance into professions such as medicine and law, and the focus on education that was required to get there. Ashe stated his views most clearly in an article published in the *New York Times* in 1977, which began 'I have become convinced that we blacks spend too much time on the playing fields and too little time in the libraries' and condemned a trend in black culture he perceived as encouraging children to pursue 'the dubious glories of professional sport'.¹⁰⁵ Similar sentiments were also expressed by Abdul-Jabbar, who said of African-American youth,

They should be thinking about going to school and having a career that lasts as long as they want it to last... Unfortunately, you have kids hoping for careers that hinge on their physical abilities, and that's not going to make it... It's part of the vicious cycle much of the black community has lived with.¹⁰⁶

¹⁰² Ashe and Deford, *Arthur Ashe*, p.145.

¹⁰³ Ashe and Rampersad, *Days of Grace*, p.170.

¹⁰⁴ Abdul-Jabbar and McCarthy, *Kareem*, p.126.

¹⁰⁵ Ashe, 'Send Your Children to the Libraries', p.S2.

¹⁰⁶ 'Kareem Jabbar Says, "Youth Must Aim at Other Careers"', *Atlanta Daily World*, June 5, 1986, p.5.

Therefore, these criticisms show how the belief in sport as a progressive force for African-Americans had declined significantly by the 1970s, with some of the most prominent black athletes rejecting its role as a symbolic way of breaking down racial barriers, instead viewing it as an impediment to real change. Moreover, the focus of these critiques on the 'culture' of black Americans highlights a similar decline in the structural, economic explanations for the deprivation of this group that were advanced by civil rights activists in the 1960s. These explanations fit with a wider trend to blame cultural factors for issues like crime and the urban crisis, such as the Moynihan Report's explanation of a 'tangle of pathology' in black families.¹⁰⁷ These examples also suggest the importance of individual action to directives for African-Americans to progress in American society, showing that although individual success through sport was discounted, it was still seen as appropriate in professional contexts as a replacement for government action as the centre of solutions to racial inequality.

Also, these solutions highlight an emphasis on the need to enter elite professions. As Rodgers points out, the 1970s saw a particular emphasis on the need for greater aspiration amongst African-Americans, but a need that was often expressed in terms of individual goals to be achieved through individual self-sacrifice and morality.¹⁰⁸ Ashe frequently articulated these themes in the numerous university speeches he delivered in the late 1970s, quipping 'What I want to see is more blacks, more minorities, represented in the NBA- the National Bar Association', but also rejecting federal government schemes like affirmative action designed to help African-Americans get to these positions, saying 'Philosophically, intellectually, I think affirmative action is just about indefensible'.¹⁰⁹ This attitude is also highlighted in reference to the *Bakke vs. Regents of the University of California* case in 1978, where the Supreme Court's decision to strike down the use of quotas based on race was supported by Ashe because of the need for African-Americans to 'stand on your own two feet and make it. You have to come to the realisation you're going to go through the door because you're fully qualified not because you're part of a quota'.¹¹⁰ This indicates how a philosophy developed within some African-Americans that favoured integration into the elite of white society, but placed the emphasis for achieving this on black Americans themselves, rather than the co-operation with government that the civil rights legislation of the 1960s was built on.

¹⁰⁷ D.P. Moynihan, 'The Negro Family: The Case for National Action', March 1965, p.29, <https://web.stanford.edu/~mrosenfe/Moynihan%27s%20The%20Negro%20Family.pdf>, accessed 03/05/2019.

¹⁰⁸ D. Rodgers, *Age of Fracture*, (Cambridge, 2011), pp.120-21.

¹⁰⁹ R. Allen, '500 College and High School Students Hear Arthur Ashe Address at FAMU', *Philadelphia Tribune*, April 22, 1980, p.A2; Ashe and Rampersad, *Days of Grace*, p.170.

¹¹⁰ Austin, 'I Support the Bakke Decision,' p.8.

Abdul-Jabbar also touched on similar themes in his opinions on African-American advancement, with an emphasis on the need for other black Americans to be willing to work themselves up through society, using a story about a Nicaraguan refugee that started working in menial jobs such as cleaning toilets and sweeping streets as an example for African-Americans, whilst praising groups such as Jewish and Asian-Americans for their emphasis on education.¹¹¹ This shows how the need for self-help became key to activist rhetoric on social mobility, with a change in the culture of black Americans needed if their situation was to change.

However, these ideas faced a mixed reception from African-Americans. These themes were affirmed by other athletes such as baseball's Reggie Jackson and basketball's Walt Frazier, whilst letter writers to the *New York Times* in response to Ashe's article involved with universities asserted the need to value education as part of 'an intellectual offensive to secure and maintain these rights [those won in the 1960s] for future generations'.¹¹² These sentiments can also be noticed in a significant segment of African-American opinion, with 64% prioritising ability over preferential treatment for minorities in 1977, whilst 52% agreed that African-Americans should take inspiration from the experiences of immigrant groups in 1988.¹¹³ On the other hand, critics sought to reinforce how the context of deprivation for African-Americans, especially those in urban areas, made the self-help philosophy espoused by Ashe and Abdul-Jabbar difficult to follow. For example, another response to Ashe pointed out that 'in New York City the library that the child might use is probably closed or, if not closed open only a few hours on one or two days a week', whilst others defended the traditional role of athletes as role models to poor black youth, suggesting sport still provided a sense of hope that black Americans lacked in the 1970s.¹¹⁴ These critiques can also highlight the influence of the personal perspectives of Ashe and Abdul-Jabbar. This is particularly pertinent when considering the shared black middle-class background of both, with the latter's Trinidadian immigrant roots enforcing the significance of education, whilst both had increasing acceptance within the white establishment in the 1970s. For example, Ashe boasted several major corporate endorsements, whilst Abdul-Jabbar was rehabilitated in mainstream opinion,

¹¹¹ Abdul-Jabbar and McCarthy, *Kareem*, pp.48,156.

¹¹² S. Jacobson, 'Sports in the Black Community', *Los Angeles Times*, July 17, 1979, p.D7; W. Frazier 'Talk About Doctors Instead of Athletes', *New York Times*, May 1, 1977, p.S2; 'Mailbox: Not for Blacks Only', *New York Times*, February 27, 1977, p.152.

¹¹³ C. Steeh and M. Krysan, 'Trends: Affirmative Action and the Public, 1970-1995', *The Public Opinion Quarterly*, 60/1 (1996), p.144.

¹¹⁴ H. Evans, 'Black Youth and Sports: Another Look', *New York Amsterdam News*, May 19, 1979, p.67; C. Belle, 'Askin' For A Kickin'', *New Pittsburgh Courier*, May 6, 1978, p.22; 'Mailbox', p.152.

encouraging both to see the value in co-operating with this group.¹¹⁵ For instance, the *Los Angeles Times* columnist Jim Murray, who dismissed Abdul-Jabbar as naïve for his criticisms of California in the 1960s, defended him from criticism in the late 1970s and praised his class when he retired in 1989.¹¹⁶ Therefore, this chapter has highlighted the variety of influences upon activists' prescriptions for African-American advancement in the period. The Black Power movement was able to exert considerable influence on these figures from the late 1960s, particularly the importance of local activism and community-based change, but the rise in prominence for individualist and self-help perspectives was able to intertwine with this influence, to create a perspective that prioritised entry to white professions on the basis of individual merit and determination.

¹¹⁵ Abdul-Jabbar and Knobler, *Giant Steps*, p.13; 'Arthur Ashe A Top Endorser', *New Pittsburgh Courier*, May 27, 1972, p.14.

¹¹⁶ J. Murray, 'Cali-ponia Here I Go', *Los Angeles Times*, March 5, 1967, p.11; J. Murray, 'A Winner Can't Win', *Los Angeles Times*, December 16, 1979, p.E1; J. Murray, 'Kareem Is Now Winning on Class', *Los Angeles Times*, May 14, 1989, p.C1.

Conclusion

This dissertation has shown how the cases of Kareem Abdul-Jabbar and Arthur Ashe can illuminate a number of themes in African-American history in the 'long 1970s'. In particular, their perspectives can highlight the multiple influences impacting on activists through the period, with the influences of the Black Power movement, civil rights movement and conservatism all visible in the ideas of Abdul-Jabbar and Ashe. Within their philosophies of activism generally, the belief in cultural liberation and pride from the Black Power movement had a significant influence, but the template of non-violent activism and racial reconciliation from the civil rights movement still provided a powerful example even after the campaigns that were founded on this philosophy declined.¹¹⁷ Moreover, the case of Ashe in particular can highlight the persistence of a traditional conservatism for African-Americans that experienced the Jim Crow-era, with this experience leaving a legacy that created hesitancy about protest and confrontation with power and emphasised the importance of deference as a means to build for gradual change.

These themes can also be seen in the examples of activism related to Africa and domestic social mobility for African-Americans. In the former, the increased interest in the continent and a desire to confront white supremacist regimes like South Africa and Rhodesia suggests that Black Power was able to exert its influence on the foreign policy of activists. However, the proliferation of the techniques of the civil rights movement, such as sit-ins and boycotts, shows how the activism of the 1960s remained influential, but the caution and patience that defined Ashe's anti-apartheid activism in the mid-1970s indicates that conservative beliefs about activism retained some influence in this decade.¹¹⁸ In the latter, the idea of an imperative for black athletes to use their voice to advance African-American political causes and the emphasis on local black issues in campaigns emphasises the effect of Black Power ideologies, but again the influence of the civil rights movement, with Martin Luther King's ability to negotiate with power frequently cited as a template, and particularly conservatism from the 1970s and the 1980s, with an emphasis on the problems of black culture and the need to conform with white elite society, stresses how multiple ideologies impacted on black activism by the end of the period.¹¹⁹

¹¹⁷ Lee, 'Ashe Speaks to Ghetto', p.26; Hall, "'I Guess I'm Becoming More and More Militant'", pp.475-76; Alcindor and Olsen, 'A Year of Turmoil and Decision', p.46.

¹¹⁸ Hartmann, *Race, Culture and the Revolt*, pp.95-96; Gamarekian, 'Apartheid Protest Takes Page from 60's History', p.A13; Ashe and Deford, *Arthur Ashe*, p.42.

¹¹⁹ 'Arthur Ashe Lauds Positive Black Power', p.25; McIlvanney, 'Ashe Finds Race Issue Tied in With His Court Prowess', p.B1; Abdul-Jabbar and McCarthy, *Kareem*, pp.48,156.

These conclusions also have implications for the historiography of both sport and African-Americans. For sport history, the cases of Abdul-Jabbar and Ashe can show how the discipline can shed significant insight into American history in the period, with sports figures able to show like their counterparts in other cultural forms such as music and literature the key trends of the era in African-American thought and activism. Moreover, within African-American history, they can illustrate the variety of ideological influences on the group suggested by Tuck, whilst providing examples of the politics of the growing black middle class described by Kelley.¹²⁰ It can also support Nesbitt's contention that sport played a key role as a weapon against apartheid, but also challenging its benefits for the movement by highlighting the divisive impact of Ashe's belief in negotiation and contact in the mid-1970s.¹²¹ Although Chappell's emphasis on the conservatism of African-American activism is supported by some of the views of Ashe and Abdul-Jabbar in this decade, the continued influence of liberal and radical perspectives and the revival of activism around opposing apartheid in the 1980s challenge this notion.¹²² Therefore, Arthur Ashe and Kareem Abdul-Jabbar provide insightful examples for analysing the black experience of the 'long 1970s' with their interactions with politics in the period painting a complex picture, where activists were influenced by numerous perspectives, with the most influential ideologies varying across the period. The Black Power movement was able to exert its influence particularly strongly at the start of the period, before conservatism gained authority from the mid-1970s, but with a resurgent liberal trend with similarities to the civil rights movement by its end.

¹²⁰ Tuck, *We Ain't What We Ought to Be*, p.400; Kelley, 'Into the Fire', pp.267-68.

¹²¹ Nesbitt, *Race for Sanctions*, pp.82-83.

¹²² Chappell, 'The Lost Decade of Civil Rights', pp.37-38.

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