The Crisis of the Athlete-Intellectual

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Abstract

This paper asks what happens when a Black athlete thinks in public — and answers it through two cases. Its lead case study is Jaylen Brown; Kyrie Irving is the second case. Drawing on the author's own commentary from 2021 to 2026, both men stood on principle, paid for it and kept standing. The crisis is not that the athlete thinks in public. It is that a system — league, sponsors, handlers, and the sports media that serves them — treats Black intelligence in public as a problem to manage. The framework is ownership and containment: who controls the marketing, the handlers, and the microphone controls what a Black athlete is allowed to be.

Keywords: athlete-intellectual, Jaylen Brown, Kyrie Irving, containment, ownership, Nike

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Introduction: The scared versus the fearless

There are two kinds of people in this story. The scared, and the fearless. The scared run from the consequence. The fearless put it out there anyway.

The question is this: "The Crisis of an Athlete-Intellectual: Jaylen Brown, Kyrie Irving, Independence, Black Consciousness, Intelligence as an athlete."[1] My answer is that the crisis is not the athlete thinking. The crisis is a system that punishes thinking — and the answer is more athletes thinking out loud, together.

Kyrie stood, was punished, and came back playing home games without complying. On March 24, 2022, he had won — the city changed the rule; he did not change his position.[2]

The system includes peers. After Kyrie posted the link to Hebrews to Negroes: Wake Up Black America in October 2022, LeBron James — his former teammate, the biggest star in the league — said publicly that what Kyrie did "caused some harm to a lot of people."[3] He later said Kyrie should be allowed to play, but his first word was condemnation. When Jaylen said on Twitch that handlers steer players away from their communities, Kyle Kuzma answered on X: "I hear JB frustration but this ain't it."[4] The pressure to conform does not only come from the league office or the shoe company. It comes from the locker room too.

My authority comes from coaching. I have coached kids from middle school who went on to play Division 1 basketball — that is how I know what happens to these players on the way up. I grew up playing with close friends who went on to coach Division 1 college basketball and the NBA, and I have close associations who played in the NBA, some for more than a decade. This is what my observations are rooted in: about a decade of seeing how teams, and media, operate from the inside out, and most of this is based on personal observations. I bring five years of watching two men think in public, keeping the receipts.

The framework: ownership and containment

Three terms carry this paper. **The athlete-intellectual** is not the athlete with the most degrees. It is the athlete who thinks in public and acts on what he thinks. An athlete-intellectual asks who decides what an athlete is allowed to be, and answers the question himself. **Containment** is the system's reply: suspension, the unnamed source, the "unmarketable" label, the roster snub, the handler's warning, the shutdown. It rarely says "stop thinking." It says "thinking will cost you." **Ownership** is the counter-move: control the marketing, the handlers, and the microphone, and you control what a Black athlete is allowed to be. Frances Cress Welsing defines the system this paper is describing: "the local and global power system structured and maintained by persons who classify themselves as white," operating "simultaneously in all areas of people activity" — economics, education, entertainment, labor, law, politics, religion, sex, and war.[5]

This framework sits inside a scholarly conversation. William C. Rhoden's *Forty Million Dollar Slaves* (2006) is its closest ancestor: Black athletes can earn tens of millions and still stand in a slave-like relation to the sports industry — not because they are unpaid, but because they do not own the system that profits from them.[6] One caution: the copy supplied for this paper was a 28-page Bookey summary, not the book itself, so no Rhoden sentence is quoted here and no page number is given; the argument is paraphrased, and page citations await verification against the 2006 Crown print edition.[7]

Harry Edwards's *The Revolt of the Black Athlete* (1969) is the foundation: the Black athlete's revolt springs from the same roots as the sit-ins and freedom rides.[8] David J. Leonard's *After Artest* (2012) is the closest existing book to this case: after the 2004 Palace brawl, the NBA moved to govern Black players and the expression of Blackness itself.[9] Ben Carrington's *Race, Sport and Politics* (2010) supplies the theory: sport is a central site where race is made, contested, and resisted.[10] The predecessors are documented: Amy Bass on the 1968 protest;[11] Dave Zirin on athletes who resisted;[12] Martin B. Duberman on Paul Robeson;[13] Brad Snyder on Curt Flood;[14] Stuart Hall on representation and encoding/decoding.[15] The Black intellectual tradition — Du Bois, Woodson, Givens's *Fugitive Pedagogy* (2021) — shapes Jaylen's self-education.[16] One counterpoint: John Hoberman's *Darwin's Athletes* (1997) argues that fixation on Black athletic achievement preserves the myth that Black success is bodily, not intellectual. I argue against Hoberman: the intellect was there all along.[17]

What has not changed: from slavery to the league

The punishment of the athlete who thinks is not new — slavery built the pattern, and the league inherited it.

The body earns for someone else. Enslaved people were skilled swimmers and divers, and owners put that skill to work in lucrative diving occupations.[18] On the plantations, owners staged boxing and wrestling matches between their men, and the losing man was the bet — the body itself was the wager.[19] Now the athlete's body still earns for someone else: the league, the shoe company, the network. Rhoden's point: the price went up, the ownership did not change hands.

Skill buys leverage, not freedom. Diving was dangerous and required exceptional skill, so owners sometimes rewarded enslaved divers with limited privileges. Privileges, not freedom. The skill made the man valuable. It did not make him free.[20] Frances Cress Welsing says it the same way: "Even when high level income is allowed, there is no true

power in its ultimate sense — meaning to support, protect and defend the lives of one's self, one's wife and one's children."[21]

The spectacle and the wager. The matches were staged for white entertainment.[22] The humiliation was part of the show.[23] The punishment is performed in public: the apology tour, the press conference, the anonymous sources. The league does not just punish; it stages the punishment. Welsing, writing on ball games, saw the same pattern: "the owners always must be white so that no matter who wins or who is the star, the white owners control the big brown balls and who gets to play with them."[24] And the spectacle did not end with lynching — it was refined: "in the last 100 years, the white collective simply has moved from the overt sport and entertainment of lynching and castrating Black men... to a more highly refined series of symbolic representations of the same act: ball games."[25]

The stage is sports television. ESPN and the sports-talk shows are built around overt criticism, and the harshest criticism is reserved for football and basketball. A baseball player's personal life is not under a microscope; there are few ad hominem attacks. The same with tennis, golf, water sports, NASCAR. But in the NBA and the NFL, the Black athlete faces the most scrutiny. Chris Kaman posed with guns and was never suspended.[26] Andrei Kirilenko's nickname was AK-47, and fans called Austin Reaves AR-15 — Reaves has since distanced himself from the name.[27] But when Ja Morant flashed a gun on camera for less than two seconds, it became the talk of sports radio and television.[28] The situations were not identical — Kaman posed at home and at the range, Morant flashed his on a livestream from a nightclub — but the difference in what followed is the point.

The right to respond is denied. Black movement was policed, Black gathering was watched, Black recreation happened under the master's eye.[29], [30] The unwritten law: you do not answer back. Around 3 a.m. on July 26, 2025, near Fourth and Elm in downtown Cincinnati — during Cincinnati Music Festival weekend, after the festival let out — a white man slapped a Black man, and the clip that went around showed the beating that followed, not the slap that preceded it.[31] The rule has a paper trail. After Bacon's Rebellion in 1676 — when laborers of African and European descent united against the plantation elite — Virginia's lawmakers answered by dividing them: Black people lost the right to testify in court, to gather with more than two or three of their fellows, to travel without permission.[32] The laws went further: no testifying against a white person, no weapon of any kind, and a public lashing for raising a hand against any white person.[33] By 1857 the Supreme Court made it constitutional doctrine: in Dred Scott, Black people had never been citizens and could never be citizens, and could claim none of the rights of the Constitution.[34] Now the same law says: shut up and dribble. The right to respond is still not included in the contract.

Identity through the physical. As Jon Griffith writes, "Sports permitted Africans and ultimately African Americans the opportunity to develop a separate identity amidst slavery." Wrestling was a rite of passage — strength, courage, manhood, proven before the tribe.[35] Now Kyrie and Jaylen assert selfhood through the body the league owns. "Choose yourself." "Lead your own kingdom." The form changed. The act did not. Welsing names the mechanism: when grievance "cannot be redressed directly at its source under fear of death," it is forced into "areas of people activity where greater degrees of maleness are permitted to be expressed (i.e., sex, sports and entertainment)."[36]

The break is ownership. That is where the continuity breaks: Jaylen turned down a reported $50 million or more in endorsement offers, including from Nike, and launched 741. The athlete stops being the wager and becomes the owner of the table.

§1. Two men, one pattern

Jaylen Brown: the renaissance man

Jaylen Brown is the lead case in this paper. He built his mind in public while the league was watching — and was punished for letting it show. I have described him as a genius, a Finals MVP, a champion, and a man who signed a five-year, $304 million supermax.[37] He is a renaissance man — "everything America does not like. A confident black man. A confident, intelligent black man."

The profile: guest lecturer at Harvard's Graduate School of Education in March 2018 and a 2019 MIT Media Lab Director's Fellow, youngest NBPA vice president at 22 — and a Finals MVP and Eastern Conference Finals MVP who was still passed over when a roster spot opened in July.[38] What is verified is the contract and the snub: a five-year, $304 million supermax extension with Boston in July 2023, and no place on the 2024 Olympic roster.[39]

Then, in July 2026, Boston moved him. The Celtics traded Jaylen to the Philadelphia 76ers for Paul George, two first-round picks, and two second-round picks.[40] He had not asked to be traded, and he had asked to be involved in choosing where he went. They ignored that. On his Twitch livestream, he said he had "found out quickly" the front office may not have valued him the way he thought.

Kyrie Irving: he always followed his own mind

Kyrie Irving is the second case. He has always followed his own mind. I witnessed this one myself. As a rookie, the veterans tried to haze him — carry their bags. Kyrie refused. "I

ain't carrying [—]. I'm already carrying the team, you get your own bags. I'm a starter."

I am explicit: Kyrie's stand, as I present it, is a freedom-of-choice and man-first stand, not a medical claim.[41] The deeper claim is the one I made in 2021: "You're not a basketball player, you're a man first... when it comes to sports athletes aren't given that humanity, especially black athletes, they're only valuable to the extent that they can entertain the masses."

Two men, one pattern. Both refused the single story — just an athlete — and insisted on being men first.

§2. The price of thinking out loud

This is the evidence section. Read the items together — the argument is the pattern.

First, the Olympic team. The 12-man roster announced April 17, 2024 contained neither Jaylen nor Kyrie — it came out before either of his MVP awards. He won the Eastern Conference Finals MVP on May 27, 2024 and the Finals MVP on June 17, 2024. When Kawhi Leonard withdrew, White, his teammate, was picked over him: White was named Leonard's replacement on July 10, 2024.[42] Jaylen answered that day with three monocle emojis, then "@nike this what we doing ?"[43]

I argue the snub was because of their stance against Nike. The other side is on the record: USA Basketball managing director Grant Hill denied it, saying in July 2024 that the decision was about building a team, and again in July 2026 that to imply a shoe company told him what to do was to question his character.[44] The facts — Finals MVP, passed over when the spot opened; teammate, selected — are not in dispute. The reason is.

And I argue the Black Wall Street plan cost him too. Jaylen said in 2023 that he wanted to recreate Black Wall Street in Boston, and he followed through — "I told you I was going to commit and invest in the city, and that's what we did."[45] On his Twitch livestream on August 31, 2026, he tied the treatment directly to that work: "They said I had a disease... They call me the smartest person in the room and all this type stuff for just trying to uplift my community."[46] The people around the league's most influential players, he said, "are steering them away... from helping the people in the situation they came from," because "there's no benefit for these people that are representing them. They do not care about your community, they care about dollars." "They are pushing you away, and it's weird. It's super weird, and it takes a real strong mind and some real courage to even go against it." The snub was not only about a shoe company.

Second, Beverly Hills. On Saturday evening, February 14, 2026, during All-Star Weekend, Jaylen hosted a private panel at the Trousdale home of Oakley founder Jim Jannard. Police shut it down. He had spent about $250,000 to $300,000 on the event. "I know how to follow the rules. I'm smart enough to follow the guidelines... out of everybody that was doing something, it seemed like I was the only one to get shut down." The police first said a permit had been applied for and denied; Jaylen's answer was that none had ever been applied for — "We never applied for one."[47] Less than a week later, on February 19–20, 2026, the city apologized, admitting no permit application was submitted or denied and the home had no prior violations.[48] The city apologized for the inaccurate statement, not for the shutdown itself. The money can be sued back. The moment cannot.

The most revealing punishment came with a label. In May 2024, on ESPN's *First Take*, Stephen A. Smith read a text from an unnamed NBA source: "Jaylen Brown, it's not so much that he's underrated, it's that he's just not liked because of his I-am-better-than-you attitude... It's the same reason he is not as marketable as he should be."[49] Jaylen answered on May 26, 2024, with two words: "State your source."[50] On October 21, 2024, he walked onto Stephen A.'s own show and confronted him: "You recited an unnamed source who I felt attacked my character. And, one, I didn't really get a chance to defend myself. And two, the damage kind of is already done."[51] He closed: "I think it's cowardice... I walk with God, I'm going to be me and stand with my community in this life and the next."[52]

Then the "disease" narrative — the same livestream, quoted above. That is Jaylen's account, and I present it as his account, not as a verified fact about Cowherd's sources.[53]

The film has a name, and the record should carry it. On October 27, 2022, Kyrie posted a link to Hebrews to Negroes: Wake Up Black America. The film was widely condemned as antisemitic — and that condemnation, not the fact that he thought in public, is the reason the Nets and Nike gave for what followed. The Nets suspended him for refusing to unequivocally say he has no antisemitic beliefs; Nike suspended the relationship the next day. At the October 29 press conference he defended posting it.[54] This paper does not dispute that the film drew fire, or that the fire was real. The argument is about what the punishment became once it started — the apology tour, the list of conditions, the months of it — and whether that scale fits the post, or fits a system that needed a public example.

On October 29, 2022, Kyrie sat for a post-game press conference and refused to answer on the media's terms: "Let's move on. Let's move on. Let's move on, don't dehumanize me up here," and, "I can post whatever I want, so say that, and shut it down and move on to the next question."[55] He closed: "I'm not going to stand down on anything that I believe in. I'm only going to get stronger because I'm not alone. I have a whole army around me."[56] This

paper frames that night as the press-conference standoff and the punishment that followed, and nothing more.

On November 3, 2022, the Brooklyn Nets — not the NBA league office — suspended Kyrie for at least five games without pay, saying he was "currently unfit to be associated with the Brooklyn Nets."[57] The next day, November 4, Nike suspended its relationship with him and cancelled the Kyrie 8 launch.[58] Five games was supposed to be the end of it. In my account, the suspension was set to lift against the Lakers — but the Nets went 5–3 over the eight games and kept him out longer. I cite no dollar figure for the suspension, because the reporting conflicts and I will not present a disputed number as settled.[59]

And it is not new. In March 1996, the NBA suspended Denver guard Mahmoud Abdul-Rauf for one game for refusing to stand for the national anthem. He had stayed in the locker room or stood in prayer instead, on religious grounds, and the league said he had broken its rule that players stand in a "dignified posture." He was leading the Nuggets in scoring. A compromise let him stand and pray with his head bowed — but the message was sent.[60] In 1991, Craig Hodges of the Chicago Bulls went to the White House in a dashiki and handed President George H. W. Bush a letter urging him to address the conditions facing Black communities. After that season — his second straight championship, his third straight three-point contest title — the Bulls did not re-sign him, and no team in the league would give him a tryout. He sued the league, saying it had blackballed him for speaking out; the suit was dismissed, and the league denied any plot. He never played in the NBA again.[61]

That is the catalog — snub, shutdown, unnamed source, disease label, suspension, Nike split. Together, they are the pattern — and the pattern is the argument.

§3. The machinery — how containment works

Punishment is the visible part. Machinery makes punishment look normal.

Handlers steer players away from community. Jaylen said it on that same livestream — the people around the league's most influential players steer them away from their communities, because there is no benefit in it for the people representing them. Agents and financial advisors do the same work with money, steering players away from investing in their own communities with the old tropes about where Black money belongs. I have seen it myself: a player invested in a Black-owned restaurant, and his agent said, "What are you doing investing in that restaurant? You can't put your money into something that looks this black."

The indoctrination pipeline. The handlers do not start in the NBA. They start in middle school, where blue-chip prospects are identified young and put into all-white Catholic and private schools. "At the age of 13, 14, you're associating white with white... by the time they're a rookie, they're anywhere from seven to 10 years into their indoctrination... they're taught not to trust their people." Carter G. Woodson argued in *The Mis-Education of the Negro* (1933) that Black people are taught, in schools built by others, to distrust their own people, their own history, and their own minds.[62] Givens's *Fugitive Pedagogy* (2021) names the other side: Black teaching as subversive education.[63] Welsing calls the process inferiorization: once it is installed, "the oppressors need not be troubled to hold the oppressed constantly under gun and key," because "the oppressors mold the oppressed to share fully in the process of their own oppression" — and "no system of oppression ever maximally develops those whom the system is specifically structured to dominate."[64]

The AAU pipeline. It starts earlier than the NBA. In middle school and high school AAU, players are trained to go along and not question, and their social media is policed for anything controversial. The ones who do not conform get punished — I have watched coaches say bad things about a player to other coaches after he was labelled controversial, making it hard for him to transfer teams. The pipeline does not just find talent. It trains obedience.

Nike and the marketing machine. "Nike ultimately they're the ones who are in control of the marketing for the NBA and they have been since the 80s. If you want to be a great player in the NBA or listed as the greatest... you must be signed by Nike." Goldman and Papson's *Nike Culture* (1998) argues that Nike sells not shoes but a sign, while the company controls the meaning.[65] Nike decides whose transcendence gets marketed and whose gets punished.

Jaylen was signed to Adidas when drafted in 2016; that deal expired in 2021, and he has been a sneaker free agent since. In 2024 he turned down a reported $50 million or more in endorsement offers, including from Nike, to launch his own brand, 741 Performance. His reason, in his own words as reported: "You sign these contracts... we can terminate your deal, terminate your contract. So that kind of makes you not have a voice. So I just told them I'd pass."[66] He did not leave Nike. He refused the money in the first place. The Nike thread ties the two cases together: "who are the two players that everyone universally say was snubbed off of Team USA? Kyrie Irving and Jaylen Brown. Two pro black men that dare to stand up to Nike."

Media puppets and unnamed sources. The media is not a mirror. It is a machine, and the machine has a payroll. Stephen A. Smith said it himself, on air: "I wake up every morning

with two thoughts: one, how do I make my bosses more money, and two, how do I get some of it." The machinery works through unnamed sources: one calls Jaylen unmarketable, another tells Colin Cowherd that Jaylen has a disease. The source never has to show his face. The same trick ran on Kyrie in November 2022: days after reports said he was not complying, anonymous sources told the press he had gone "over and above." "Whenever they say anonymous sources you can almost guarantee that's a lie." That is why "State your source" is not a slogan. It is a demand for a fair fight.

Hall's framework explains why this works. Representation is not a mirror of reality but a signifying practice, and the racialized Other is constructed through spectacle.[67] "Unmarketable," "distraction," "disease of thinking he's better" — these are constructions of Jaylen Brown, not descriptions of him. Their audiences decode oppositionally — "State your source."[68]

§4. The counter-model — what the athlete-intellectual actually does

The machine is real. Welsing's definition of Black mental health is behavior that "resists self- and group-negation and destruction" — and that is what the athlete-intellectual does: he thinks out loud and refuses to be negated.[69]

The sacrifice test. "Who's willing to sacrifice a check for what they believe in." Both passed it. I call the position that survives that test moral capitalism: "when that money comes at the expense of what I believe in... that's where I draw the line."

The chess move. Kyrie answered the punishment with money for his own people. In November 2022 he donated $115,000 — $65,000 to the family of Shanquella Robinson, the Black woman who died under suspicious circumstances in Mexico, and $50,000 to the family of Devin Chandler, a University of Virginia football player killed that month — and I called it a chess move, checkmate.[70] The same voices who had demanded he apologize — Sharpe, O'Neal, Barkley, Jemele Hill — now faced a question: what have you got on the tab of another Black person?

Militancy IS marketable. The system's favorite lie is that a principled Black athlete cannot sell. "They don't want another Paul Robeson... don't want another Muhammad Ali... don't let them tell you black athletes that speak up are [not] marketable." "Militancy is most definitely marketable, they choose not to market it. It's a choice, not a fact." Paul Robeson was one of the most popular men in America — and he was all of it at once. In sports: a two-time All-American football player at Rutgers, Phi Beta Kappa, valedictorian of his class in 1919. In music: "Ol' Man River" in Show Boat made him famous around the world. In

acting: Othello on Broadway in 1943, 296 performances, still the longest run of a Shakespeare play on Broadway, and The Emperor Jones on film. And he was outspoken the whole time — for labor, for civil rights, against colonialism. His militancy did not cost him his audience. What stopped him was the state: his passport revoked in 1950, his concerts cancelled, his name blacklisted.[71] Same with Ali. Three-time heavyweight champion, the Rumble in the Jungle, the Thrilla in Manila — and he was stripped of his titles and banned from boxing in his prime for refusing the draft. He came back bigger.[72] Smith and Carlos were reviled in 1968 and became the defining image of the Games;[73] Flood lost his case and won free agency.[74] The market follows the vindication. It never leads it.

Choose yourself. "I encourage you not to even choose sides, choose yourself." And there are no more leaders coming — it is up to you to be the leader you are seeking.

Positive propaganda. "Propaganda is the most powerful weapon... it don't take just a little bit of positive propaganda to neutralize a thousand negative propaganda." Jaylen started streaming because, in his words, "these industries be so corrupt, bro"; I built a channel for people who think beyond the surface.

§5. What independence looks like in practice

Independence is not a speech. It is a set of moves.

Play outside the league's permission. On August 26, 2023, Jaylen played in Ice Cube's Big3 All-Star Game in London — the first active NBA player to play in the Big3.[75]

Join the political process. Jaylen became the youngest vice president of the National Basketball Players Association at 22. He joined the political process... he made these chess moves while he was quiet.

Build Black Wall Street where you are. Jaylen said he wanted to recreate Black Wall Street in Boston. The promise dates to 2023, and it is being carried out through the Boston XChange initiative. The $1 million investment with Jrue Holiday came through an accelerator fund launched in late 2024 in partnership with Boston XChange.[45]

Own your shoe. After Nike cut him, Kyrie did not go looking for another endorsement — he signed a five-year deal with ANTA in July 2023 as its Chief Creative Officer of basketball, with his own signature line. The ANTA KAI 1 came out in March 2024. He went from a Nike athlete a company could terminate for speaking to an executive who designs the shoe and owns the message on it.[76]

Start your own platform. Jaylen started streaming because the industries are corrupt. Kyrie does the same on his own channels — Twitch, X, Instagram — speaking straight to people instead of through team or league media. Own the microphone, and no one can take your voice. Welsing's rule for the game: "you do not win a chess game if you have no knowledge of the exact objective and rules of the game."[77]

"When you step outside of the boundaries there will be a consequence. But it's only a consequence because only one or two people step out. If everybody stepped out it wouldn't be a consequence anymore."

Answering the questions

Three questions, answered directly.

1. Is it problematic for players to exude agency when making personal decisions regarding their status? No — agency is the point. The problem is a system that treats a player's agency as a threat. Jaylen's whole case is agency exercised deliberately: the players' union at 22, a reported $50 million or more in endorsement offers, including from Nike, turned down for his own brand, investment in his community on his own terms. Kyrie's case is the same: he refused the rookie hazing, refused to back down in the press conference, and stood on principle at the cost of games and money. What the system calls "problematic" is a Black man deciding for himself.

2. Is it fair that athletes such as Jaylen Brown and Kyrie Irving are penalized for being intelligent? No, it is not fair — and the punishment catalog is the evidence. Jaylen was called unmarketable by an unnamed source, labelled as having a disease for uplifting his community, and left off the Olympic team after winning Finals MVP. Kyrie was suspended by the Nets and cut loose by Nike. None of these were for performance. They were for thinking in public. Wealth does not protect them; it makes the punishment more visible.

3. Is it a threat to the power structure to be considered an intelligent athlete? Yes — and the 1960s show why. Then, the music, the sports, and the grassroots were on one accord. America was at war, and Black cities from Los Angeles to Detroit, Chicago, Miami, Buffalo, and plenty more Black towns were on fire. The Kerner Commission, reporting in 1968, concluded the nation was moving toward "two societies, one black, one white — separate and unequal," and traced the anger to frustrated hopes: promises made and not kept.[78] And the music carried the message. Aretha Franklin singing "Think" and "Respect." Curtis Mayfield singing "Choice of Colors" — and "Move On Up," which arrived in 1970, carried the message into the new decade. James Brown singing "Say It Loud — I'm Black

and I'm Proud." The athletes carried it too: Muhammad Ali standing against the war, Jim Brown and Bill Russell standing against white supremacy. It all worked together, and that environment produced the Black Panthers and a budding revolution. Then the accord was broken. O.J. Simpson replaced Jim Brown in the early 1970s — the athlete as entertainer, not as a voice — and by the late 1970s the political message had been all but removed from R&B. That is what the machine learned: never let the three align again. The intelligent athlete is a threat because he is the one who could put them back together. That is why the response is containment rather than debate — and why the answer is collective.

Coda: the same pattern in music

The pattern does not stop at the court. It runs through music the same way, because the ownership is the same. Paul Robeson is the bridge — he was both, and the state still took his passport and cancelled his concerts when he would not stay quiet.[71] The label owns the masters the way the team owns the contract, and the artist who speaks gets shelved the way the athlete who thinks gets traded.

Prince saw it and named it. In 1993 he gave up his own name — as Prince told it, Warner Bros. owned the name "Prince" and his master recordings — and walked on stage with "SLAVE" written on his cheek. He did not get his masters back until 2014, twenty-one years later.[79] Michael Jackson bought the ATV catalog in 1985, kept half of Sony/ATV when he merged it in 1995, and in 2002 stood in public and accused Sony of burying his album *Invincible* to force him to sell that stake.[80] Billie Holiday sang "Strange Fruit" in 1939, a song about lynching, and federal narcotics agents warned her to stop singing it. She kept singing it. She was arrested in 1947 and lost her New York City cabaret card — she could not sing in the city's clubs. But she played a sold-out Carnegie Hall on March 27, 1948.[81]

Same ownership. Same punishment. Different uniform.

Conclusion: Stand ten toes down

"Kyrie Irving is the exception, Jaylen Brown is the exception. Not always popular, not always doing and saying what everyone wants to hear but when you stand 10 toes down look at how they come back around."

Jaylen stood and kept his voice, his shoe, and his community investment. Kyrie stood and came back playing home games without complying. Neither man was destroyed. Both are still standing.

And the last piece is the one Du Bois named: double consciousness. We grow up loving people who hate us — Hulk Hogan was a pillar of my childhood. The job is to see that clearly and stand on your square anyway.[82]

The crisis is not that the athlete thinks in public. It is that a system treats Black intelligence in public as a problem to manage. The answer is not to think more quietly. The answer is to think out loud, together, until the consequence stops being a consequence.

That is the question I leave with you. Not whether Jaylen and Kyrie were right. Whether you will be scared, or fearless.

Method and limitations

This paper is built from the author's own livestreamed commentary on his YouTube channel (@dwannb), recorded between October 2021 and September 2026. The arguments are presented here in the author's own words; no individual shows are listed and no links are given, so the paper stands on its own.

Selection: the source base was every video on the channel with "Kyrie" or "Jaylen Brown" in the title, found by searching the channel itself. The shows were coded for the paper's themes — independence, Black consciousness, intelligence as an athlete, and league or media punishment for thinking out loud — and for the author's strongest arguments and best lines in his own voice. Tangents, other topics, and callers were cut, except for two caller remarks kept as context. The paper is built only from what the author actually said. No positions were invented, and no quotations from Kyrie Irving, Jaylen Brown, or Stephen A. Smith were invented; every such quotation comes from the author's own commentary or from a verified primary source.

Positionality: the author speaks as an insider to the NBA world — courtside at All-Star Weekend, in the Finals chairman's room, in meetings with players and agents — and as a Black American music historian, a communication studies graduate of California State University, Northridge, with a minor in cultural anthropology and a debate team background, a former Department of Mental Health worker of more than ten years, and a basketball coach of more than seven years, including AAU basketball. Most of the evidence here is personal observation — about a decade of watching teams and media operate from the inside out — and it is presented as such. That insider position is a strength: it is why the eyewitness material in §3 exists. It is also a limit: the author is a participant in the

world he describes, not a neutral observer, and the paper argues a position rather than pretending not to.

Limitations, stated plainly. There are no interviews with Kyrie Irving or Jaylen Brown for this paper; everything about them is mediated through the author's shows, clips, and the verified reporting cited in the notes. There are no interviews with league, Nike, or media insiders, and no access to league or Nike internal records. The sample is the author's own archive — a strength for voice, a limit for generalizability. The case studies are NBA men only; there are no women athletes among them. The paper discusses athletes from other sports — Muhammad Ali, Paul Robeson, Curt Flood, Tommie Smith and John Carlos — as predecessors and parallels, not as case studies, so it is a case study, not a general theory of the athlete-intellectual. One of the author's causal claims — the Olympic snub because of Nike — is presented as the author's words and analysis, not as settled fact. The Bacon's Rebellion and Dred Scott history in the historical framing is sourced in the notes. The Rhoden framework is paraphrased, not quoted, because the copy supplied was a summary; page citations await the print edition. The Harvard and MIT details in Jaylen Brown's profile are verified against primary sources (see n. 38); the NASA internship offer reported in secondary accounts could not be verified and is not relied on. Griffith's 'Sports in Shackles' (2010) is a student-journal study drawing on slave narratives; it is used here for its narrative evidence, and Dawson and Lucas carry the weight.

Discussion questions

Three questions:

1. Where do you see containment working in your own life — a coach, a teacher, a boss, a platform — and what did it cost to push back?
2. Jaylen and Kyrie had money and fame and were still punished. What does that say about what power actually is — and what would ownership look like for someone without their platform?
3. Welsing says no system of oppression develops the people it dominates. If that's true, what would a league — or a university — that actually developed its athletes look like?

Notes

1. The framing question of this paper.

2. New York City lifted the private-sector mandate exemption for athletes and performers on March 24, 2022; Irving's home debut was March 27, 2022.

3. LeBron James, comments to reporters, November 4, 2022, as reported by Sports Illustrated, November 5, 2022, https://www.si.com/nba/2022/11/05/lebron-james-nba-players-havent-spoken-out-against-kyrie-irving-suspension; James (@KingJames), post on X, November 10, 2022.

4. Kyle Kuzma, posts on X, September 2, 2026, as reported by Fadeaway World, September 2, 2026, https://fadeawayworld.net/nba/philadelphia-76ers/jaylen-brown-exposes-weird-reality-behind-why-black-athletes-separated-from-communities.

5. Frances Cress Welsing, *The Isis Papers: The Keys to the Colors* (Chicago: Third World Press, 1991), xi–xii.

6. William C. Rhoden, *Forty Million Dollar Slaves: The Rise, Fall, and Redemption of the Black Athlete* (New York: Crown Publishers, 2006). Argument paraphrased; no page citation — see n. 7.

7. The copy of Rhoden supplied for this paper was a 28-page Bookey summary (https://cdn.bookey.app/files/pdf/book/en/forty-million-dollar-slaves.pdf), not the book itself. It has no Rhoden page numbers and no verified verbatim Rhoden quotations. No Bookey paraphrase is presented in this paper as a Rhoden quotation, and page citations await verification against the 2006 Crown print edition.

8. Harry Edwards, *The Revolt of the Black Athlete* (New York: Free Press, 1969).

9. David J. Leonard, *After Artest: The NBA and the Assault on Blackness* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2012).

10. Ben Carrington, *Race, Sport and Politics: The Sporting Black Diaspora* (London: SAGE, 2010).

11. Amy Bass, *Not the Triumph but the Struggle: The 1968 Olympics and the Making of the Black Athlete* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2002).

12. Dave Zirin, *What's My Name, Fool? Sports and Resistance in the United States* (Chicago: Haymarket Books, 2005).

13. Martin B. Duberman, *Paul Robeson: A Biography* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1988).

14. Brad Snyder, *A Well-Paid Slave: Curt Flood's Fight for Free Agency in Professional Sports* (New York: Viking, 2006).

15. Stuart Hall, ed., *Representation: Cultural Representations and Signifying Practices* (London: SAGE, 1997); Stuart Hall, "Encoding and Decoding in the Television

Discourse," 1973, in *Culture, Media, Language*, ed. Stuart Hall et al. (London: Hutchinson, 1980), 128–38.

16. W. E. B. Du Bois, *The Souls of Black Folk* (Chicago: A. C. McClurg, 1903); Carter G. Woodson, *The Mis-Education of the Negro* (Washington, DC: Associated Publishers, 1933); Jarvis R. Givens, *Fugitive Pedagogy* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2021).
17. John Hoberman, *Darwin's Athletes* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1997). Cited as a counterpoint to be argued against, not adopted.
18. Kevin Dawson, "Enslaved Swimmers and Divers in the Atlantic World," *Journal of American History* 93, no. 4 (March 2006): 1329, 1347.
19. Jon Griffith, "Sports in Shackles: The Athletic and Recreational Habits of Slaves on Southern Plantations," *Voces Novae: Chapman University Historical Review* 2, no. 1 (2010): 66, citing Will Adams, *Born in Slavery: Slave Narratives from the Federal Writers' Project, 1936–1938*, Interview 420241, 1–4, Library of Congress, Washington, DC.
20. Dawson, "Enslaved Swimmers and Divers," 1342, 1347, 1350.
21. Welsing, *The Isis Papers*, 87.
22. Dawson, "Enslaved Swimmers and Divers," 1340–41.
23. Griffith, "Sports in Shackles," 66, 68.
24. Welsing, *The Isis Papers*, 135.
25. Welsing, *The Isis Papers*, 141.
26. Chris Kaman tweeted a photo of himself holding two rifles and wearing an ammunition belt in July 2012, two days after the Aurora theater massacre; he received no suspension. "Chris Kaman Shows Questionable Judgment in Wake of Colorado Shooting," *The Postgame*, July 2012, http://www.thepostgame.com/blog/dish/201207/wake-colorado-shooting-chris-kaman-shows-his-guns.
27. Andrei Kirilenko was known as "AK-47" for his initials and jersey number 47; fans called Lakers guard Austin Reaves "AR-15" for his initials and jersey number 15, and Reaves distanced himself from the name after the Uvalde school shooting. A. Joseph Dial, "Ja Morant Shows How a 'Good Guy With a Gun' Can Never Be Black," *The Good Men Project*, June 26, 2023, https://goodmenproject.com/featured-content/ja-morant-shows-how-a-good-guy-with-a-gun-can-never-be-black/.

28. Ja Morant flashed a gun on Instagram Live at a Denver-area nightclub on March 4, 2023, and was suspended eight games without pay; he flashed a gun again in a car livestream on May 13, 2023, and was suspended 25 games. "Ja Morant Suspended 8 Games Without Pay for Conduct Detrimental to League," NBA.com, March 15, 2023, https://www.nba.com/news/ja-morant-suspended-8-games-by-nba; "Everything You Need to Know About Ja Morant's 25-Game Suspension," ESPN.com, June 16, 2023, https://www.espn.com/nba/story/_/id/37864109/everything-need-know-ja-morant-25-game-suspension.

29. Marion B. Lucas, *A History of Blacks in Kentucky: From Slavery to Segregation, 1760–1891*, 2nd ed. (Frankfort: Kentucky Historical Society, 2003), 29–32, 34.

30. Griffith, "Sports in Shackles," 61, 67, 69.

31. The brawl erupted around 3 a.m. on July 26, 2025, near the corner of Fourth and Elm streets in downtown Cincinnati, after the Cincinnati Music Festival let out; trial testimony described a white man slapping a Black man in the face — a detective called it "a light slap." Cincinnati Enquirer, October 27, 2026, https://www.cincinnati.com/story/news/crime/2026/10/27/trial-begins-man-downtown-cincinnati-brawl-patrick-rosemond/92465711007/.

32. Jacqueline Battalora, *Birth of a White Nation: The Invention of White People and Its Relevance Today*, 2nd ed. (New York: Routledge, 2021), 30–31. The passage on lost rights: Gary Nash, *Red, White, and Black: The Peoples of Early America*, 3rd ed. (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall, 1992), 159, quoted in Battalora, 31.

33. Battalora, *Birth of a White Nation*, 41.

34. Battalora, *Birth of a White Nation*, 57; *Dred Scott v. Sandford*, 60 U.S. (19 How.) 393 (1857).

35. Griffith, "Sports in Shackles," 60, 64–65, citing Sterling Stuckey, *Slave Culture: Nationalist Theory and the Foundations of Black America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1987), 1–11.

36. Welsing, *The Isis Papers*, 87.

37. Brown hired agent Jason Glushon in 2019, and Glushon negotiated the $304 million supermax. Sports Business Journal, October 21, 2024.

38. Jaylen Brown spoke at the Harvard Graduate School of Education's Askwith Forum on March 1, 2018 ("One and One with Jaylen Brown: Athlete and Intellectual," with Associate Professor Jal Mehta); Harvard Graduate School of Education, "Askwith Essentials: Who Is Jaylen Brown?," February 27, 2018,

https://www.gse.harvard.edu/ideas/askwith-education-forum/18/02/askwith-essentials-who-jaylen-brown; "Celtics' Jaylen Brown Talks Self-Identity, Social Empowerment at Harvard," Harvard Crimson, March 2, 2018, https://www.thecrimson.com/article/2018/3/2/jaylen-brown-harvard-ed-2018/. Brown was named a 2019 Director's Fellow of the MIT Media Lab; MIT News, "MIT Media Lab Director's Fellows announced for 2019," July 1, 2019, https://news.mit.edu/2019/media-lab-directors-fellows-0701. The NASA internship offer reported in secondary accounts could not be verified against a primary source and is not relied on here.

39. Brown signed a five-year, $304 million supermax extension in July 2023; the 2024 Olympic roster announced April 17, 2024 contained neither Brown nor Irving.

40. Shams Charania, ESPN, July 1, 2026: "BLOCKBUSTER: The Boston Celtics have agreed to trade Jaylen Brown to the Philadelphia 76ers for Paul George, two first-round picks and two second-round picks, sources tell ESPN." The picks: the 2028 first-round pick (which could convert to a swap more favorable to Boston), the unprotected 2031 Philadelphia first, and second-round picks in 2028 and 2030; the trade became official July 6, 2026. Kris Rhim, "Jaylen Brown says 'nothing to talk about' with Tatum ahead of 76ers-Celtics," ESPN, November 9, 2026, https://www.espn.ph/nba/story/_/id/50427885/jaylen-brown-says-talk-tatum-ahead-76ers-celtics. Brown never requested the trade, and he asked to be involved in choosing where he went; the Celtics did not involve him, as reported by ESPN and summarized in "ESPN Claims Celtics' Brian Scalabrine's Jaylen Brown Report Had 'No Truth to It'," Heavy, November 10, 2026, https://heavy.com/sports/nba/boston-celtics/espn-brian-scalabrines-jaylen-brown-report/. The "found out quickly" line is from Brown's August 31, 2026 Twitch livestream, as recapped in EssentiallySports, August 31, 2026 (see n. 45).

41. Author's framing note: the paper presents Irving's stand as a freedom-of-choice and man-first stand, not a medical claim.

42. USA Basketball, "2024 USA Basketball Men's National Team Announced," April 17, 2024, https://usab.prowly.com/311775-2024-usa-basketball-mens-national-team-announced; Derrick White named Kawhi Leonard's replacement, July 10, 2024. Brown won the Eastern Conference Finals MVP (the Larry Bird Trophy) on May 27, 2024, and the Finals MVP on June 17, 2024. NBC Sports Boston, May 27, 2024.

43. Jaylen Brown, posts on X, July 10, 2024.

44. Grant Hill, denial, July 11, 2024, and again July 20, 2026, on *The Road Trippin' Show*.

45. "I want to launch a project to bring Black Wall Street here to Boston" — Jaylen Brown at the MIT Media Lab after signing the $304 million extension in 2023; Brown launched

Boston XChange in August 2024, and the $1 million investment with Jrue Holiday came through an accelerator fund launched in late 2024 in partnership with Boston XChange and the Holidays' JLH Social Impact Fund. Boston Globe, October 17, 2024; "They Said I Had a Disease": Jaylen Brown Reveals How NBA Players Are Being Steered Away From Helping Their Communities," EssentiallySports, August 31, 2026, https://www.essentiallysports.com/nba-active-basketball-news-they-said-i-had-a-disease-jaylen-brown-reveals-how-nba-players-are-being-steered-away-from-helping-their-communities/.

46. Jaylen Brown, Twitch livestream, August 31, 2026, as reported in Yardbarker, September 2, 2026.

47. Beverly Hills Police Department statement, February 15, 2026, as given to the *Boston Globe*; Jaylen Brown's response.

48. City of Beverly Hills apology, February 20, 2026, as reported in *Black Enterprise*, February 20, 2026, https://www.blackenterprise.com/beverly-hills-apologizes-to-jaylen-brown/amp/.

49. Stephen A. Smith, *First Take*, ESPN, May 2024, reading an unnamed NBA source, as transcribed by Boston.com.

50. Jaylen Brown, post on X, May 26, 2024.

51. Gayle Troiani, "Jaylen Brown Tackles 'State Your Source' Saga with Stephen A. Smith," NESN, October 22, 2024.

52. Verified closing as reported by NESN, EssentiallySports, and Fadeaway World, October 2024. The line "I'll see you next lifetime" was not found in any published report of the October 21, 2024 show and is not quoted as Brown's words in this paper.

53. The "disease" line is Brown's account of what Colin Cowherd said league sources told him; presented here as Brown's account, not as a verified fact about Cowherd's sources.

54. Kyrie Irving posted a link to Hebrews to Negroes: Wake Up Black America on October 27, 2022. The film was widely condemned as antisemitic. The Nets suspended him on November 3, 2022, saying he had refused to unequivocally say he has no antisemitic beliefs; Nike suspended its relationship on November 4, 2022. Brooklyn Nets suspension statement, November 3, 2022; Nike statement, November 4, 2022.

55. "Kyrie Irving dismisses questions, defends his postings in a combative press conference," NetsDaily, October 30, 2022, https://www.netsdaily.com/2022/10/30/23430775/kyrie-irving-dismisses-questions-

defends-his-postings-in-a-combative-press-conference (transcript of the October 29, 2022 press conference).

56. NetsDaily, October 30, 2022.

57. Brooklyn Nets statement, November 3, 2022, as reproduced in NetsDaily, November 4, 2022. The suspension was by the Nets, for at least five games without pay.

58. Nike statement, November 4, 2022, as quoted by NPR, November 5, 2022; Associated Press, November 4, 2022.

59. Reporting conflicts on the salary cost of the suspension ($1.3 million vs. $2.2 million). No dollar figure is cited in this paper.

60. Mahmoud Abdul-Rauf, Denver Nuggets guard, was suspended by the NBA for one game on March 12, 1996, for refusing to stand for the national anthem; the league cited its rule that players stand in a "dignified posture." He was leading Denver in scoring (19.2 points per game) that season, and a compromise allowed him to stand and pray with his head bowed. ESPN, "The revival of Mahmoud Abdul-Rauf," February 15, 2017, https://www.espn.ph/espn/otl/story/_/id/18686629/before-colin-kaepernick-protested-national-anthem-nba-star-mahmoud-abdul-rauf-did-same-own-way.

61. Craig Hodges, Chicago Bulls guard, wore a dashiki to the White House in 1991 and handed President George H. W. Bush a letter urging action on conditions facing Black communities. After the 1991–92 season — his second straight championship and third straight three-point contest title — the Bulls did not re-sign him, and no other team signed him or invited him to camp. He sued the NBA in 1996, alleging blackballing; the suit was dismissed. LZ Granderson, "Trying to define Craig Hodges," ESPN, February 11, 2008, https://www.espn.ph/espn/blackhistory2008/news/story?page=granderson/080211.

62. Woodson, *The Mis-Education of the Negro*.

63. Givens, *Fugitive Pedagogy*.

64. Welsing, *The Isis Papers*, 242–43.

65. Robert Goldman and Stephen Papson, *Nike Culture: The Sign of the Swoosh* (London: SAGE, 1998).

66. Jaylen Brown, on turning down a reported $50 million or more in endorsement offers, including from Nike, to launch 741 Performance, as quoted in Yardbarker and Ball Exclusives, 2024. Brown was signed to Adidas to 2021 and has been a sneaker free agent since.

67. Hall, *Representation*.

68. Hall, "Encoding and Decoding."

69. Welsing, *The Isis Papers*, 80.

70. Kyrie Irving donated $115,000 in November 2022 — $65,000 to the family of Shanquella Robinson and $50,000 to the family of Devin Chandler; "Kyrie Irving Donates $115,000 To Families of Slain Shanquella Robinson and Devin Chandler," Black Enterprise, November 22, 2022, https://www.blackenterprise.com/brooklyn-nets-kyrie-irving-donates-115000-to-assist-families-of-slain-shanquella-robinson-devin-chandler/.

71. Duberman, *Paul Robeson*.

72. Zirin, *What's My Name, Fool?*; Bass, *Not the Triumph but the Struggle*.

73. Bass, *Not the Triumph but the Struggle*.

74. Snyder, *A Well-Paid Slave*.

75. Jaylen Brown played in the Big3 All-Star Game, London, August 26, 2023, the first active NBA player to play in the Big3.

76. Kyrie Irving signed a five-year deal with ANTA on July 12, 2023, and was named Chief Creative Officer of basketball; his first signature shoe, the ANTA KAI 1, released March 6, 2024, at $125. "Anta Kai," Baller Shoes DB, https://ballershoesdb.com/anta-kai/.

77. Welsing, *The Isis Papers*, 254.

78. National Advisory Commission on Civil Disorders, *Report of the National Advisory Commission on Civil Disorders* (Washington, DC: Government Printing Office, 1968). The report's basic conclusion: "Our nation is moving toward two societies, one black, one white — separate and unequal." On the anger's roots, the report pointed to "frustrated hopes," "the residue of the unfulfilled expectations aroused by the great judicial and legislative victories of the Civil Rights Movement."

79. Prince changed his name to an unpronounceable symbol on June 7, 1993, writing "SLAVE" on his cheek in protest; Warner Bros. owned the "Prince" trademark and his master recordings. He regained ownership of his Warner-era masters when he re-signed with the label on April 18, 2014. "Prince and Warner Brothers, Music's Turbulent but Iconic Partnership," Goldies Parade, accessed November 12, 2026, https://goldiesparade.co.uk/warner-bros-records/.

80. Michael Jackson bought the ATV music catalog, including the Beatles' publishing, in 1985 for $47.5 million; in 1995 he merged it with Sony's publishing operations to form Sony/ATV Music Publishing, keeping a 50 percent stake. "How Michael Jackson Bought the Publishing Rights to The Beatles' Catalogue," Mental Floss, August 29, 2016, https://www.mentalfloss.com/entertainment/music/how-michael-jackson-bought-

publishing-rights-beatles-catalogue. In July 2002 Jackson publicly accused Sony Music chairman Tommy Mottola of sabotaging the promotion of *Invincible* (2001) to force him to sell his stake — his accusation, not a settled fact. "Sony Music," Wikipedia, accessed November 12, 2026, https://en.m.wikipedia.org/wiki/Sony_Music.

81. Billie Holiday first sang "Strange Fruit" in public at Café Society in 1939; Federal Bureau of Narcotics agents warned her to stop singing it; she was arrested for narcotics possession in 1947, served a year and a day, and lost her New York City cabaret card on release. She played a sold-out comeback concert at Carnegie Hall on March 27, 1948. Johann Hari, *Chasing the Scream: The First and Last Days of the War on Drugs* (New York: Bloomsbury, 2015).

82. Du Bois, *The Souls of Black Folk*.

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suspension statement, November 3, 2022; Nike statement, November 4, 2022; USA Basketball 2024 Men's National Team announcement, April 17, 2024; Jaylen Brown vs. Stephen A. Smith, *The Stephen A. Smith Show*, October 21, 2024, as reported by NESN, October 22, 2024; Jaylen Brown, Twitch livestream, August 31, 2026, as reported by Yardbarker, September 2, 2026; Beverly Hills Police Department statement, February 15, 2026, and City of Beverly Hills apology, February 20, 2026; Chris Kaman gun photo, July 2012, as reported by *The Postgame*; A. Joseph Dial, "Ja Morant Shows How a 'Good Guy With a Gun' Can Never Be Black," *The Good Men Project*, June 26, 2023; Ja Morant suspensions, March 15 and June 16, 2023, NBA.com and ESPN.com; Cincinnati brawl trial testimony, October 27, 2026, Cincinnati Enquirer.

Appendix: A note on sources

This paper draws on the author's own livestreamed commentary on his YouTube channel (@dwannb) from October 2021 to September 2026. The arguments are presented here in the author's own words; no individual shows are listed and no links are given.

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