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## **From Save The Crew to Saved The Crew: Constitutive Rhetoric, Myth, and Fan Opposition to Sports Team Relocation**

Stephen Andon

Montclair State University, [andons@mail.montclair.edu](mailto:andons@mail.montclair.edu)

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# From Save The Crew to Saved The Crew: Constitutive Rhetoric, Myth, and Fan Opposition to Sports Team Relocation

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Stephen P. Andon<sup>1</sup> 

## Abstract

Sports franchise relocation is a hallmark of the American sports landscape. Teams relocate at their owners' whims, leaving fans with little more to do than voice their angst. When the Columbus Crew of Major League Soccer announced in 2017 that ownership was set to move the team to Austin, a group of the Crew's most ardent supporters initially seemed resigned to the franchise's predetermined fate. However, over the course of months, those fans embarked on a grass roots campaign that generated attention worldwide and, ultimately, convinced a new ownership group to purchase the team and keep it in Columbus. This paper analyzes the efforts of these supporters through the lens of constitutive rhetoric, an ideologically-based concept that can galvanize disparate communities, shift their collective perspective, and set them on a course for action. In using this approach, the Save The Crew movement used myth to deploy a unique rhetorical power that successfully opposed the powerful capitalist logic of team relocation.

## Keywords

rhetoric, identity, myth, fans, franchise relocation, sports ownership

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<sup>1</sup> School of Communication and Media, Montclair State University, NJ, USA

## Corresponding Author:

Stephen P. Andon, School of Communication and Media, Montclair State University, Morehead Hall M143, 1 Normal Avenue, Montclair, NJ 07043, USA.

Email: [andons@montclair.edu](mailto:andons@montclair.edu)

On October 16, 2017, *Sports Illustrated* writer Grant Wahl broke the news that the Columbus Crew Soccer Club, one of Major League Soccer's (MLS) original clubs, was looking to relocate to Austin, Texas for the 2019 season. While announcing that the decision was not "set in stone," team owner Anthony Precourt seemed to have made his mind up on moving out of Columbus. In a press call the following day, he announced, "There is a growing disparity in attendance and corporate support when comparing Crew SC with its MLS peers and with other mid-size markets, such as Kansas City, Orlando, Portland and Salt Lake City. Despite increased efforts and investments, our current course is not sustainable" (Columbus Crew SC, 2017, para. 2). Such neoliberalist language is common in sport and the revelation was not altogether unsurprising coming from Precourt, a Californian venture capital CEO and son of Jay Precourt, an oil executive and former Halliburton board member (Anderson, 2017).

For American soccer fans, and certainly those in Columbus, the news was significant in that the Crew has a reputation as an historic MLS franchise (Davis, 2013). The success and tradition of the team, as well as the historical significance at Mapfre Stadium (previously Crew Stadium) for a series of important victories by the U.S. Men's National Team, garnered a sort of aura around the place and a sense of security for a loyal fan base (Andon, 2017). While attendance figures at Crew games did not lead MLS, they remained consistently steady, despite what *The Ringer* writer Mark Titus claimed on Twitter were intentional efforts "to sink the team" during the five seasons under Precourt's ownership (@clubtrillion, 2017). Accusations of deliberately suppressing team attendance and business revenue figures were coupled with the revelation that, upon purchasing the team in 2013, Anthony Precourt and MLS had agreed to a previously-undisclosed clause that would allow him to relocate to Austin at any time of his choosing.

Initially, Crew "supporters"—a portion of the team's most hardcore fans that act as a cohesive social group—seemed resigned to their team's fate. As sport so often mirrors religion in its appreciation of ceremony, these supporters had planned a "funeral" on October 17, 2017, at a local bar, where they "planned to gather; to hug; to cry; to reminisce; and to say goodbye to their team" (Bushnell, 2017, para. 6). But at some point between the announcement and the funeral, their sentiments changed. What began at that bar was a grassroots movement to save their team, aptly named "Save the Crew," with a social media hashtag, a website, and a planned public rally at Columbus City Hall. As Morgan Hughes, one of the leaders of the movement, proclaimed at the rally, "After we all went through our mourning period which lasted, I'd say, six hours, I think the city of Columbus decided, 'Nope, done. Done being [Precourt's] victim. Let's get to work'" (Hughes, 2017).

Across the American sports landscape, the relocation of sports franchises is typical and fans are nearly powerless to do anything about it. Numerous examples pervade throughout the National Football League, National Basketball Association, National Hockey League, and Major League Baseball. In these cases, there is an overwhelming sense of inevitability when sports franchise owners fail to extract

their particular demands from the cities they inhabit—typically centered on the amount of public funding teams receive to build or renovate stadiums and arenas—and move their teams elsewhere. This defenselessness is particularly acute in Ohio, with the Cleveland Browns relocating to Baltimore in 1996, despite what O’Rourke (2003) detailed as then-unprecedented efforts by “the mayor . . . tens of thousands of loyal fans, [and] a global community of backers” to fight for their team to stay in the “unique mythic community” the team and community had built (p. 75).

This article will argue that the success of the year-long Save The Crew (STC) movement relied on a multifaceted, multimedia movement that hailed audiences through identification. In order to do so, the rhetoric of STC relied upon an historical narrative for Columbus and the Crew that could supersede the capitalist logic of sports franchise relocation. In this way, the movement activated a constitutive rhetoric, as outlined by Charland (1987), that interpellated supporters from around the globe in order to first, mount significant and persistent pressure on Anthony Precourt and Major League Soccer to keep the team in Columbus and second, inspire a new local ownership group to purchase the team. Because Charland (1987) notes that “not all constitutive rhetorics succeed,” the success of STC is instructive for a wide range of communication campaigns (p. 141). Their work revealed the process by which a group of individuals responding to a crisis were able to harness strategic communication tactics to construct and communicate the power of myth and collective identity across the United States and throughout the greater soccer world.

Organized within 14 days of the Austin relocation announcement, STC quickly expanded to 58 people working in 12 teams that “include[d] everything from design and brand management to financing, from PR to business relations, from legal to governmental relations, from event marketing to merchandising, and more” (Bushnell, 2017, para. 9). The sheer volume of work originating from STC would position them as a de facto team front office, but in order to focus on their rhetorical efforts this paper will identify a variety of texts utilized throughout the course of the STC movement. To organize this approach, I will follow the time frame of events, beginning with Precourt’s announcement and ending with the official conclusion of the Crew relocation saga. In identifying these various texts deployed over time, I will center this analysis on three loci akin to the three ideological effects of constitutive rhetoric. The first efforts from STC focus on rhetoric that interpellated an audience of support for the movement. The second examines the mantras used to shift the perspective of this hailed audience to think of the Crew as an immovable entity, not just another sports franchise subservient to the capitalist logic of modern sport but an entrenched club. Finally, the third locus centers on the use of constitutive rhetoric to orient an audience, and specifically future owners, to finish the narrative of keeping the roots of the Crew firmly in Columbus. In analyzing the work of STC, I will also show how their constitutive rhetorical strategies were manifest in reception, and, ultimately, parroted back by the audiences hailed into the collectively identifying movement.

## Constitutive Rhetoric and Sport

Generally speaking, the conceptualization of constitutive rhetoric has been defined by the ideas of both James Boyd White (1985) and Charland (1987), although in somewhat different contexts. White (1985) uses a legal approach to consider how a rhetor invokes ethos in the moment “to create, a community of people, talking to and about each other” (p. 690). This legal approach ultimately bears a striking contrast from Charland (1987), who focuses on using Kenneth Burke’s notion of identification to outline the social community that rhetoric hails. The declaration of the term *Québécois* began with the simple phrase “Nous sommes des Québécois” (“We are *Québécois*”) as the launchpad for the campaign for Quebec sovereignty. The following white paper released by the *Parti Québécois* (PQ), the political party formed to separate Quebec from the rest of Canada, relied on an identifying narrative myth defined by centuries of oppression of the *Québécois* by British conquerors. The purpose of such a myth, Charland (1987) asserts by channeling McGee (1975), focuses the debate around the legitimacy of independence claims by the *Québécois* “centered upon whether a *people Québécois* exists, and . . . on whether that *people* is the kind of people that legitimates a sovereign state” (p. 135). Thus, the white paper’s work is substantial in that it first must interpellate or hail, borrowing from Althusser (1970), a new social group by creating a *Québécois* collective that transcends “divisive individual or class interests and concerns” (Charland, 1987, p. 138). For Charland (1987), this unifying process, a kind of audience conversion, is the first ideological effect of constitutive rhetoric. The second ideological effect of the white paper is to shift the perspective of the audience by offering a consubstantiality between the first French settlers of North America and those living in Quebec presently, despite the centuries that separate them. In other words, the white paper functions constitutively in that its narrative provides a continuity for a *Québécois* people now with generations preceding before. Far from relegated to “dead history, [or] mere stories,” Charland (1987) reveals that this kind of constitutive rhetoric is powerful “because [it is] oriented towards action” (p. 143). The third ideological effect of the white paper, then, provides the constituted subject or audience with a certain set of acts to perform in the interest of “narrative consistency” (p. 143). Because the story of the *Québécois* is unfinished, that is, their independence—a claim stretching hundreds of years – is not yet achieved, constitutive rhetoric leaves the audience with the only logical choice to finish the narrative.

In the field of sport, an explicit approach to constitutive rhetoric is yet an emerging form of analysis. However, constitutive rhetoric as a more implicit methodology is well established. Butterworth and Moskal (2009) argue that sport is a “striking omission” from Charland’s list of ideological practices in society, given that sport is just as—if not more—popular a form as music, drama, fashion, amid others. This notion is supported by Jasinski’s (1998) claim that constitutive rhetoric is “an ubiquitous force,” that can be understood in “specific moments wherein an American community . . . confront[s] threats to its existence and engage[s] in its own

reconstitution” (p. 77). An emphasis on confrontations is especially relevant for sport, as Butterworth (2008) argues, “because [sport] is a site in which audiences, ideas, and arguments are invented and defined through dramatic contests” (p. 263). As such, constitutive rhetoric and the coalesced identity it fosters have been further applied in sport to reveal “considerable insight into the means by which identities are constituted, maintained, and challenged in public culture” (Butterworth, 2014a, p. 3). These insights extend into literature that surround the power of mythology generally, given that the field of sporting mythology is an exceptionally verdant one for rhetorical study (Butterworth, 2016). While especially pertinent in discussions of mythic constructions of race and gender (Butterworth, 2007; Grano, 2007), the field includes investigations of myths in sports advertising campaigns (Gee, 2009) as well as in television shows and films (Butterworth & Shuck, 2016; Frederick et al., 2019).

These mythologies are further extended to portrayals of halls of fames (Butterworth, 2010) and, particularly relevant for this study, stadiums (Trumbour, 2007). Situated within these challenges and confrontations of identity for fans, the stadium is a nexus of memory, nostalgia, and political relations. Historically, team owners have manipulated those memories to extract public tax money and, if they don’t receive every item on their financial compensation wish list, often claim they have “no choice” but to relocate (O’Rourke, 2003, p. 73). As Norman et al. (2015) affirm, “fans and citizens often have little agency in the face of these stadium politics and relocation,” so any resistance to the hegemonic neoliberalist characterization of sport is limited (p. 24). While exceptions may include cities with deeply embedded and previously established community organizations ready to oppose stadium development (Saito, 2019), cities with strong judicial oversight (Lekakis, 2016), and cities like New York with powerful and critical media organizations (Delaney & Eckstein, 2008), none of these conditions existed to the same degree in Columbus. In the case of the Browns’ relocation, the strongest resistance was manifest by Cleveland’s mayor, who launched a “two-pronged campaign” that both flexed the city’s legal options and encouraged fans to direct their disapproval to NFL owners and officials (O’Rourke, 2003, p. 76). While their efforts to “Save Our Browns,” were significant, and support came from Browns fans across the country, the team moved to Baltimore anyway (Newberry, 1996; Withers, 1999). As a part of an agreement with the city, however, the NFL agreed to keep the name and colors of the Browns in Cleveland for an expansion franchise established 3 years later.

Thus, given sport’s inherent agonistic nature, its reliance upon mythic narratives, its prevalence across a variety of texts, and its focus on collective identity and action, constitutive rhetoric is a useful frame to understand the STC movement. Positioned as a struggle against Anthony Precourt, MLS, and the capitalist logic of sports franchise relocation, the movement was elevated by narratives that reinforced Columbus’ place as the symbolic center of soccer in the United States. But more than merely contained within the realm of sport, understanding the tactics of the STC movement and its concurrent narratives around identity, community, memory, place, and protest, firmly place this study within a wider context of rhetorical study (Grano

& Butterworth, 2019). As Butterworth (2014a) summarizes, the pursuit of “questions of identity, culture, and power” coming from the world of sport warrant criticism that is not compartmentalized to sports scholarship but is instead applied more widely to help “theorize communication” (p. 14).

## History and Identity in Columbus

Identification and unity are common tropes applied throughout the sporting world. Both teams and fans celebrate and perpetuate these tropes, given the teams’ desire for increasing attendance and fans’ need to belong (Theodorakis et al., 2012; Wann et al., 2001). That identification is particularly prescient in Columbus, a middle-American metropolis with a strong sense of civic identity. Some of the local pride that is reflected onto Crew supporters originates from a perceived sense of disrespect. Columbus is one of the smallest markets in MLS and as local sports freelance journalist Steve Sirk wrote for the Crew in 2012, “To this day, newspapers around the country make sure to append ‘OH’ . . . despite the fact that our Columbus metro area is six times the size of all of America’s other Columbuses combined” (Sirk, 2012, para. 3). Crew supporters, amid this general sense of disrespect, had been primed to unite in the face of opposition, but the history of soccer in Columbus is also relevant to a wider audience. Over the decades, the Crew’s stadium has accrued a sense of aura, for its place as the first soccer-specific stadium, its simplicity, and the steady success of both the Crew and the US Men’s National Team (USMNT). With its metal bench seating and concession stands hidden away in dull concrete concourses, the stadium is a strictly functional venue that belies a no-frills, hard-working image of the club best encapsulated in the team’s original logo: a shield with three silhouetted men wearing construction hats with their sleeves rolled-up. In this way, the manner in which the stadium was built, in conjunction with the logo, allows for the stadium to enact further rhetorical symbolism as noted in studies of stadiums as places in Las Vegas, Dallas, New Orleans, respectively (Burroughs et al., 2019; Cavaiani, 2020; Grano & Zagacki, 2011). Mapfre Stadium embodies the meanings of midwestern, blue-collar values, assuming a quintessential American symbolism not typically afforded to soccer venues. As former Crew player Frankie Hejduk explained in 2013, “we [don’t] have the coolest stadium, but . . . it stands for everything American” (McIntosh, 2013, p. 31).

ESPN had this to say about the stadium in 2013: “Crew Stadium . . . is something out of a bygone era in American soccer . . . and holds just more than 20,000 people and a healthy amount of American soccer’s limited history” (Davis, 2013, para. 1). According to *Sports Illustrated*, the stadium is a place where “its ghosts more than make up for its lack of grandeur” (Straus, 2013, para. 4). Over a period of 12 years, 2001 to 2013, the USMNT played its arch-rival Mexico at Crew Stadium four times. The venue was selected particularly by US coach Bruce Arena, who believed he could “get a competitive advantage . . . by playing in a smaller stadium, a Midwest market and a passionate crowd” (Straus, 2013, para. 16). That advantage led to four

eerily-coincidental 2-0 wins for the US, making the stadium a kind of spiritual home of American soccer that the nation could cherish. The powerful draw of the place made the game a ritualized and sacred pilgrimage destination, as ESPN broadcaster J.P. Dellacamera noted that fans from “43 states and the District of Columbia” were in attendance for the 2009 matchup.

The victories against Mexico established the foremost USMNT myth, known as “Dos-A-Cero,” marking a decade of surging success against their biggest rival. Cementing that myth, just before the 2013 match in Columbus between the USMNT and Mexico, supporters in Columbus unfurled an oversized tifo in the stadium with the declaration “Home,” just below an oversized drawing of an eagle and a giant star with the words “Columbus: E pluribus unum USMNT.” The banner underlined both the connection for over 100 local Columbus supporters, who designed and painted the giant banner over a matter of weeks, and spoke to the sentiments of USMNT supporters generally (Etchison, 2013). Therefore, the Crew’s stadium, a place with “the lore . . . of Fenway Park or Augusta National,” holds a distinctly unifying myth—not just for Crew supporters but supporters of men’s soccer throughout America—a myth that is only further elevated given a general absence of pervasive myths in the sport (Straus, 2013, para. 6).

### **Interpellation: “If It Can Happen Here . . .”**

Given this background of identity in sport, in Columbus and American soccer specifically, various materials created, written, and delivered by STC movement implemented the ideological functions of constitutive rhetoric in the areas of hailing a collective community to their cause. The very beginnings of the STC movement started online, with the purchase of the web domain *savethecrew.com* and a hashtag on Twitter. While that phrase resonated on social media, leaders of Columbus Crew supporters’ groups – known as the Nordecke—were meeting in a local bar and crafting a statement on October 18, 2017. That statement concluded with the words, “Together, we are massive. We are Columbus. Columbus Til I Die” (Nordecke, 2017). Using these terms, while important to their audience in Columbus, would not be an effective way to interpellate a wider audience. As such, the Nordecke statement referred to a planned upcoming rally at city hall as a “#SaveTheCrew rally” (Nordecke, 2017). The term would be the defining name moving forward from that first meeting in the bar. Similar to the declaration of “Nous sommes des Québécois” (“We are Québécois”), the STC name “marked the entry of the term . . . into the mainstream” of American sports discourse and was critically important for interpellating an audience (Charland, 1987, p. 134).

Save the Crew, as a call for identification, is more inclusive than using any form of “we are,” and more effective at interpellation than “Save Our Browns.” Most importantly, it does not require a supporter to reject their own team. A rival supporter can want to defeat the Crew on the field and still see that the Crew franchise is not relocated, as supporters and podcasters of Atlanta United FC explained before



their playoff matchup with the Crew on October 26, 2017, just 9 days after the relocation announcement. As the group concluded their discussion of the upcoming playoff matchup, they signed off the broadcast with the following:

Hashtag Beat The Crew

Yeah

Save the Crew, beat the Crew

[Crosstalk]

Beat them, then save them.

When you do it on Twitter and on social media, just, it's hashtag beat the crew dot, dot, dot hashtag save the crew.

I can do that.

Order of operation, just like math. (Quintana et al., 2017)

Atlanta supporters took to those instructions with vigor, both on social media and with homemade banners and clothing approximating some amalgamation of "Beat the Crew" and "Save the Crew" (JohnRClem, 2017; keoverman, 2017). Given that identification, as Burke (1969) stated, is "compensatory to division," an inclusive name for the movement that maximized solidarity was a crucial element for the movement. Focusing on a more unifying term in "Save The Crew," the organization capitalized on "mediated sport's ability to constitute an 'us,'" while limiting the "necessary . . . construction of a 'them'" (Butterworth, 2014b, p. 204).

The Nordecke mission statement, beyond announcing a STC rally, implemented a number of constitutive rhetorical strategies for the purpose of hailing. After expressing shock at the relocation announcement, the statement argues,

Not only does this club have history in Columbus, but all of MLS does as well, and we hope that supporters of clubs across the league take notice of what's happening here. If they can do this to Columbus, they can do this to any team. We are humbled by the support we have received from fans of the beautiful game across the country. Today we call on you for help. We want to send the message that the actions of Precourt Sports Ventures are unacceptable in MLS. Please call and write to your team owner and the MLS offices and tell them to reject the reported move of the Columbus Crew SC to Austin. (Nordecke, 2017)

The argument is centered on the idea that this move was being considered despite Columbus' rich history as both an inaugural MLS franchise and the unofficial home of the USMNT and, as such, this kind of shocking relocation could happen to any team. As STC asserts, a kind of dangerous precedent could be set if team owners were given permission to relocate from the only real historic place in American

men's soccer. This strategy sought to interpellate supporters across MLS teams by suggesting that they could face a similar situation. As *The Columbus Dispatch* reported, this goal was specifically designed "to pull at the heartstrings of soccer supporters [worldwide]" (Ward, 2018, para. 19). The approach tapped into a potent collective pain – often in the form of metaphorical death or divorce, bitterness, and heartbreak—that supporters of any sports team feel after their team relocates (Brewer, 2009; Hyatt, 2007; Mitrano, 1999; O'Rourke, 2003). Soon after, a mission statement was posted to the STC website, reaffirming this hailing approach by concluding, in bold type:

WE WANT TO JOIN WITH SOCCER FANS WORLDWIDE who love their club and who believe that the beautiful game belongs to the world's communities and its spirit cannot just be uprooted. We vehemently stand against any such move because IF IT CAN HAPPEN IN COLUMBUS, IT CAN HAPPEN ANYWHERE. (Save The Crew, 2017a)

More than just on social media or through releasing statements, this unifying call was emphasized in the speeches delivered at the STC rally held on the steps of Columbus City Hall and streamed live on social media on October 22, 2017. In his remarks, Morgan Hughes, one of the leaders of the STC effort, referred to the unifying approach to bring in wider audiences by specifically mentioning locations across the country with MLS teams: "The point that we need to hammer home is that if this can happen in Columbus, it can happen anywhere . . . so this matters in Columbus, and Portland, and Seattle, and Cincinnati and everywhere else, in New York and in Texas, in Arizona." Another speaker at the rally, local chef entrepreneur Jeni Britton Bauer, elucidated the point further:

And I have a message to sports fans across America. What happens here in Columbus will happen to you, it is only a matter of time. We need to stand together or the entire world of sports is without meaning. Our fight is your fight. Stand with us. Soccer cities, soccer moms and dads, MLS fans across the country, Buckeye fans, Bluejackets, Cavs, Browns, all of you. Thank you for your support, and I call on you to unite your voice with ours and let the world know that businessmen cannot build loyalty to a team, use it when it works for them, and then turn their backs on us this easily. Not without exhausting every other option first.

The rally not only drew roughly 2,000 people, including local business owners and former Crew players, to a makeshift stage on the steps of City Hall, but national and international attention. Hughes' speaking ability in particular landed him on radio and television shows throughout the country and even as far as the BBC World Service, where he spread the STC movement: "We are encouraging people to stand with us, to remind them that if [Precourt] destroys this team, destroys this community, they destroy the foundation of this game in this country . . . and we, as a global soccer community are standing up to save the Crew" (Crew Not Done Yet, 2017).

The final portion of the hailing campaign also reveals the exterior trajectories of reception and circulation that enrich the analysis of constitutive rhetoric. STC wrote an open letter to the executives of MLS and owners of all MLS teams and asked any MLS supporter or fan to sign it. The letter reiterated the claim that “if this can happen to Columbus, we feel it can then happen anywhere. And we cannot and do not want to imagine that happening to us” (Save the Crew, 2017b, para. 7). The letter received over 16,500 online signatures and included people from 50 countries. Further, according to STC, the signatures included supporters from every MLS team, “with 100+ signatures from supporters of 21 of the 23 teams and nearly 900 signatures from [Seattle] Sounders FC fans” (Save The Crew, 2017d).

In addition to online signatures, there were myriad other examples that illustrate the reception of STC’s constitutive claims. On the same Sunday as the STC Rally, MLS teams played their final regular season matches and STC related banners and signs appeared “in at least 10 of the 11 MLS stadiums hosting [games that day]” (Bushnell, 2017, para. 25). On an Ohio radio show, Morgan Hughes told the interviewer that those signs and banners were clear indications of “people outside of Columbus who are behind us” (Smith, 2017). There were thousands of visitors to the STC website and thousands of individuals across the globe exchanged their information with the site as part of a request for a STC banner. The Independent Supporters Council, a collective of over 70 soccer supporters groups for professional clubs throughout North America, issued a statement calling the potential Crew relocation, “[a] concern for every supporter in [MLS]” (Dane, 2017, para. 2). The statement echoed the hailing nature of STC’s constitutive rhetoric: “This year it is Columbus that is being held hostage. What club is next? . . . Make no mistake, if Mr. Precourt is allowed to take fans and the community hostage now . . . [other] owners will do so in the future” (Dane, 2017, para. 6). Two of the largest supporters groups in MLS, Seattle’s Emerald City Supporters (ECS) and Portland’s Timbers Army, long considered the forebears of supporter culture in the US, each issued separate statements. The ECS statement implemented an extended metaphor that underlined the inherent connectedness of the plight of supporters in Columbus with supporters of the sport in general, while the statement from the Timbers Army more closely emulated the constitutive rhetoric of STC in positing, “If [this move] can happen to a team as foundational to the origins and history of MLS as the Columbus Crew, it can happen anywhere” (Timbers Army, 2017, para. 6).

Circulation of the STC name and its attempt to interpellate an audience also manifest in various media personalities throughout MLS. During halftime of a national broadcast of a first round playoff matchup between the Chicago Fire and New York Red Bulls on October 25, 2017, color analyst Stuart Holden recognized the emergence of STC, “I’m talk[ing] to all the Crew fans out there . . . I’ve seen all the Save The Crew [efforts], the rally in downtown Columbus,” and concluded with an impassioned plea to STC, “to continue to prove to ownership that [the Crew] deserves to stay in Columbus.” His counterpart, veteran play-by-play commentator JP Dellacamera finished the segment by declaring, “Well said [Stu].

Columbus, we are rooting for you to succeed and stay there.” Lead soccer host for Fox Sports Rob Stone tweeted his support for STC on October 26, 2017 and at halftime of the MLS Cup Final, ESPN analyst and former Crew player Alejandro Moreno wore a “Save The Crew” scarf on television while voicing his support for the movement.

The staying power of this interpellation lasted well beyond the first few weeks of the relocation announcement. In January of 2018, during the middle of the offseason, MLS held their draft at the Pennsylvania Convention Center in Philadelphia. Drowning out Commissioner Don Garber’s announcement of the first overall pick, the Sons of Ben, a supporters group for the Philadelphia Union, chanted “Save The Crew” on live television. Their appearance at the event and support of the STC movement was all the more surprising given that the Union had no draft picks to make that day. Thus, despite having little incentive to attend the draft at all, the supporters of the Union, as *ESPN* reported, “made sure to let MLS commissioner Don Garber know that the issue remains at the forefront of the minds of fans around the league” (Carlisle, 2018, para. 21).

As a first step, uniting fans of disparate teams across the nation, in addition to corralling the primary media personalities covering the league, was unprecedented. Again, given sport’s agonistic nature, such a unity across fans of professional sports teams is rare – saved perhaps only for moments of silence or military appreciation. But, for STC, gathering such a large audience was necessary for their subsequent messages to reverberate in stadiums, on tv, and social media. By signaling an audience that, like Columbus itself, stubbornly fights for respect among the major sports leagues in America, STC ignited the passions of a community that was primed to be hailed.

### **Changing Perspective—“This is not over . . .”**

In addition to hailing an audience, the constitutive rhetoric of STC also aimed to give their audience a new perspective. While it made sense to STC that the Crew belonged to Columbus and, simply, could not be relocated, the capitalist logic of modern American sport dictates that owners can move teams at their will. To shift this perspective to their interpellated audience, STC would have to first convince their audience that the team was not dead in Columbus and, second, that soccer in the US should be held to a community standard akin to foreign soccer leagues where relocation is inconceivable. To begin, STC adopted a mantra that served as a rhetorical focus for shifting the expectation that Precourt’s relocation announcement was a death sentence. It was critically important for STC to overcome what *The Guardian* described as “a sense of inevitability to the Crew’s story . . . [because] the move to Austin was finished before fans knew about it” (Frankowicz, 2017, para. 15). Consequently, the STC shift in perspective utilized a defiant optimism to defuse that inevitability. This approach first manifest in the local bar that birthed the STC

movement, the night after the Precourt relocation announcement. As Morgan Hughes recounted the story on a global soccer podcast, *The Total Soccer Show*, “It was my mission to go around to people [at the bar] and tell them, ‘if you’re here for a wake, if you’re here for a funeral, you’ve come to the wrong place. We’re fighting this. This is not over. Tell everyone you know.’ And that just started to be the rallying cry” (Grove, 2017). This mantra was furthered by Hughes on Twitter: “Anyone who thinks this is over, you’re wrong. This is not over. Tell everyone you know” (Morgan\_Hughes, 2017). The phrase was mentioned in eight different Tweets from Hughes in the first 2 days after the relocation announcement. At the STC rally, Hughes told the thousands in attendance,

Here’s what we’re going to do, because it does not stop here. This is where it starts. We’re going to save the Crew. And here’s how we’re going to do it . . . What we need to do as a city, and as a country, and a global soccer community is keep our focus on this and never waver, until the Crew is saved . . . And we have proved that we can do stuff like this . . . we’re not going to let this story go away. We’re going to save the Crew (Hughes, 2017).

It was a mantra that STC and Hughes repeated time and time again online and in myriad media appearances. On October 17, 2017, Hughes made radio appearances on two local commercial radio stations as well as participated in an Ask Me Anything (AMA) discussion on Reddit, “If I didn’t believe that we were going to save the Crew, I wouldn’t be involved with the #SaveTheCrew movement . . . This is not over. Tell everyone you know” (Save The Crew, 2017c). When he joined the BBC World Service and was asked what STC was doing to stop the team from moving, he replied succinctly: “First of all, this is not over. This move is not happening . . . we’re not going to let this be the precedent they set going forward. It’s about more than just Columbus, it’s about the soul of the beautiful game” (Crew Not Done Yet, 2017).

The powerfully optimistic opposition in the face of a pending relocation was, again, unprecedented. But the conscious decision to stay positive, despite the availability of villification of Precourt as an entitled outsider, reflected both an ethical and pragmatic choice to avoid negativity. It also set the stage for STC to shrewdly parrot MLS’ own marketing language, which claims that the three stars on the league logo stand for “community, club, and country.” Because of this community element, the opening of the STC mission statement supported the logic that soccer cannot abide by the same rules as other professional American sports:

Soccer, the world’s beloved game, often plants a deep, spiritual root into its fans’ very civic identities—one that the modern American sports business models do not always account for. In short, no matter where you go in the world, A SOCCER CLUB IS A COMMUNITY. (STC, 2017, para. 1)

The thrust of this argument was furthered in a STC letter to MLS Owners and the Commissioner that was made public in the weeks after the relocation announcement. “The league says it wants to market itself by ingraining teams into the fabric of their unique communities,” the letter read, and:

This proposed move would undermine that idea as nothing but a hollow marketing tactic. It forces fans to question if their own clubs are at the whim of an owner who seeks ownership solely as an investment portfolio item, and not as a steward of the history and hearts of a proud local community. (Save The Crew, 2017b, paras. 5–6)

The argument stems from a worldwide belief that soccer clubs belong to fans and cannot be moved because owners are merely “stewards of the club” that is, presumably, owned by a community of supporters (Scott, 2013, para. 10). For example, upon purchasing the English Premier League team Liverpool FC in 2010, principal owner John Henry announced, “We regard our role as that of stewards for the club” (Clegg, 2010, para. 4). Community and stewardship are, therefore, a critical part of soccer culture – extending beyond Europe and into MLS. As the Emerald City Supporters (ECS) stated in their statement regarding the Crew relocation announcement, “We believe . . . that our coaches and owners are stewards of the Seattle Sounders, entrusted with the care taking of our club” (ECS, 2017, para. 2).

Being able to express that the Crew must be saved because soccer is a community represents a shift in perspective that runs counter to established ideas about franchise relocation in American sport. The shift is explained by the attempt to differentiate soccer from other American professional sports leagues and borrow from abroad the idea of a club that is ingrained in the fabric of a community with owners acting as stewards, despite MLS’ single-entity ownership structure. Deployed by STC, this tactic pushed the discourse away from talks of balance sheets and business metrics, the familiar laments of team owners who claim they have “no choice” but to move. Supporters from around the league received this conclusion that a community cannot be uprooted at the whim of a corporate owner because of soccer’s unique position in the American professional sports landscape. In Kansas City, supporters of Sporting KC wrote, “We realize that relocation is a reality in the sporting world . . . But it ought not, and should not, be the reality for the city of Columbus and its legions of fans clad in yellow and black” (Atcheson, 2017, para. 4). The ECS most clearly articulated the sentiment in an open letter to the ownership group of Seattle Sounders,

We’re writing to you today to save our ideals. That our sport can be different. That soccer in North America can be about more than profit margins and business metrics. It *is* more. Soccer is a fabric made up of players, fans, sponsors, city pride, and national hope, all woven together. But this move tears at that fabric. And if it is not stopped, it will be the unravelling of our collective trust as fans in the owners of our clubs. (ECS, 2017, paras. 5–6)

The same fabric metaphor insisting that this relocation simply could not happen in soccer also made its way into the mainstream press. In a *Sports Illustrated* article titled “Crew’s fabric is interwoven into Columbus,” writer Brian Straus argued that “the [Crew] has no business being plucked from its roots” because, he furthered, “The Crew aren’t an extension of Anthony Precourt, they’re an extension of Columbus” (Straus, 2017, para. 18). In sum, the second ideological step of constitutive rhetoric is to shift perspective. This is, as Charland (1987) outlines, a “logic [or] way of understanding the world” (p. 143). For STC, this logic, cleverly wrapped in MLS’ own marketing language, presented a way of understanding that the relocation of the Crew both would not and could not happen lest the league embrace an utter hypocrisy.

### **Taking Action by “Respecting Your Roots”**

Both the process of interpellation and shifting perspective remained ongoing during the STC movement, but ultimately, the power of constitutive rhetoric must enable those interpellated to take action. As Charland (1987) explains, “constitutive rhetorics leave the task of narrative closure to their constituted subjects” (p. 143). Interpellation asked for soccer supporters and sports fans throughout the world to join the STC movement through written and visual support both online and offline. The shift in perspective asked that audience to equate an American sports franchise with the ingrained locality of soccer clubs in foreign countries. Finally, the ultimate goal of the STC movement looked for a new ownership group to respect the history of the Crew by keeping the team in Columbus.

The STC movement, in the words of Charland (1987), “oriented those addressed towards particular future acts” in several ways (p. 143). The first thrust of their constitutive rhetoric centered on the rooted-ness of Columbus with the Crew, on account of the team’s history as the league’s inaugural franchise. It appeared in the STC letter to MLS owners and the Commissioner in 2017, which began by stating,

First, the Crew has been a fixture in Columbus since the league’s inception as the very first chartered team in Major League Soccer. Moving this franchise will uproot league history and devalue and damage the league’s future marketing opportunities and messages centered around longevity and stability. Moving an original team destroys a piece of history that can never be reclaimed. (Save The Crew, 2017b, para. 3)

The team, STC argued, could not be taken away because of its roots. The message was hammered home in a tifo display in Mapfre Stadium before the team’s final game of the 2017 season, the first leg of the Eastern Conference Finals against Toronto FC. Just before the start of the game, the Nordecke unveiled a banner that stretched the entire height of the lower field section that read, “Respect Your Roots” in brown lettering. Painted below was a giant tree with an enormous roots section. At the center of the roots was the inaugural construction-hat shield logo for the

Columbus Crew, with logos for seven other original franchises, painted in black and gold, scattered about the other tree roots. Just above the roots, at ground level, two headstones marked the “death” of the Miami Fusion and Tampa Bay Mutiny, two teams contracted after the 2001 season. The image was not only seen on the television broadcast before the match but shared widely on social media and repeated, nearly verbatim a month later during ESPN’s MLS Cup Final by Alejandro Moreno, “You have to respect your history. You have to respect your roots. You gotta know where you came from” (Carver, 2017). In using the stadium as a place for this visible messaging, and incorporating the team’s construction hat logo, STC, “buil[t] on a pre-existing meaning of a place to help make their point” (Endres & Senda-Cook, 2011, p. 259). The stadium, the team, the soccer mythology of Columbus, which embody a hard-working and steadfast place, could not simply be transferred. Ultimately, the “Respect Your Roots” messaging was a clarion call to league officials, and other MLS owners, to put an end to Precourt’s relocation crusade.

Besides channeling the narrative history of the Crew as rooted to Columbus, the STC movement approached orienting their audience to action in more concrete ways by operating as a de facto front office for the team. With Precourt having blamed the team’s poor local government support, minimal business support, low attendance figures, and lack of a downtown stadium plan, STC created plans to address all four in order to make saving the team a logical conclusion. Beginning with local government, STC members attended City of Columbus Council meetings and lobbied the group for help. In October of 2017, the City Council, having been “moved by the grassroots #SaveTheCrew campaign,” passed a resolution that the council would “do everything reasonably possible to make sure that the Columbus Crew stays within the city of Columbus” (Johnson, 2017, para. 2; Schudel, 2017, para. 10). Moving on to local businesses, STC went canvassing to create an ally network that pledged their support to keeping the Crew in Columbus. By February 2018, over 300 allies had joined to support STC, “from hyper-local to multinational companies” (Save\_The\_Crew, 2018). STC put up signage in these businesses and encouraged their audience to patronize them. On the STC web site, these business allies were organized by the varying levels of financial or in-kind support they pledged to keep the Crew in Columbus. By creating a local business network ready to support the team, STC provided a wave of resources ready for a new ownership group to purchase the team.

In order to address poor attendance figures, not only did STC create a network of dozens of volunteers as part of a “Fill Mapfre Stadium” campaign for the 2018 season known as “#FilltheFre,” but they embarked on an ambitious season ticket pledge drive. The Project 2019 season ticket program asked people to make a pledge to buy full or partial season ticket plans if the Crew was sold to new ownership. Crucially, STC promised to only hand over this information they collected to the new Crew ownership once the team had been sold. Over the course of several months, STC announced over 10,000 pledges had been collected and urged a new owner to make good on their promise:



There is no better time for those in the community with the means to purchase the team to band together and be the heroes we need. Following the transfer of this list of pledges, Save The Crew promises to work with new team ownership to ensure both the immediate and future success and sustainability of the club. (Save The Crew, 2018a, para. 4)

In connection with season ticket pledges, the STC movement also released plans and renderings for a new downtown stadium in Columbus, a stadium long-sought after by Precourt and considered a standard for new soccer-specific stadiums in MLS. At a media event unveiling the stadium plans, STC stated, “We view this stadium design as a launchpad to start a conversation about the future home of Columbus Crew SC, following the purchase by local ownership” (Spedden, 2018, para. 7). Tobias Roediger, one of the leaders of STC, told the *Columbus Business Journal* that the stadium design as presented was “viable . . . [and] not just a bunch of pretty pictures . . . because we want to continue to appeal to local owners and show that this is possible” (Bench, 2018a, para. 4). The plans were not a death knell to Mapfre Stadium per se, which Precourt had let fall into disrepair, but a lure for new owners (Yoder, 2018). The renderings also pushed back on Precourt’s claims that there was no community support for a new stadium—familiar tactics for team owners seeking to relocate—and revealed what Roediger called “the dedication” of STC’s calculated efforts to keep the team in Columbus (Bench, 2018a, para. 11).

In all, the efforts to present the Crew as a club ready for new owners to act as “heroes” and finish the narrative was best encapsulated by a May 2018 letter written by STC that was addressed to the hypothetical “Future Owner of Columbus Crew SC.” In the letter, STC argued that while they had “strengthened the deep roots of our city’s team,” the team has “never had majority local ownership, and thus has never fulfilled its true and glorious potential” (Save The Crew, 2018b, paras. 2–3). The letter invited a hypothetical new owner to develop that potential by promising, “it all changes with you.” When the new owner completes the purchase, “STC pledges to place the full might of this movement squarely behind you. We promise to support you completely” (Save The Crew, 2018b, para. 5). Given the historic strength of the movement to this point, the publicity, the media appearances, the outreach to local government officials, business leaders, and season ticket holders, the heft of this support was positioned as a kind of unstoppable force. Concluding the letter, STC used a metaphor to entice the new ownership to finish the narrative to save the Crew: “When the book is written about how our entire community rallied to save this team, the final chapter will be about the local Columbus leaders who stepped in and Saved The Crew” (Save The Crew, 2018b, para. 7). The metaphor clearly specifies how the ending to this relocation saga would end, previewing how the future owners would talk about their role in saving the Crew.

## The Ending—SaveDtheCrew

The announcement on October 12, 2018 that a local ownership group had emerged to purchase the team brought about the fulfillment of STC’s constitutive rhetoric. The group was led by Crew team doctor Pete Edwards and his family in conjunction with the Haslam family, owners of the NFL’s Cleveland Browns. Ten days later at the one-year anniversary party for STC, Edwards told the crowd, “We would not be standing here today—or even close to standing here—had you all not been everything that you’ve been. And we cannot thank you enough for that” (Bench, 2018b, para. 3). Ultimately, Edwards continued, speaking for the new ownership group, “We listened. You started a movement that got the attention of the entire league and global soccer community” (Bench, 2018b, para. 4). In the months that followed, legal ownership documents were finalized and new stadium plans were confirmed by city and county governments, while members of STC and the new ownership group were feted at various events celebrating their successful mission. At an event on December 6, 2018 held at Land Grant Brewery, members of STC gathered with local politicians, executives, and the new owners. As Morgan Hughes spoke to the crowd, he imparted the lesson of STC as a constituted community that was able to enact real change: “What this community has proven in the last 416 days is that when the people decide to change the world around them, they can do anything they want, they just gotta[sic] be together when they’re doing it” (Massive Report, 2018). Statements from local politicians confirmed not just their interpellation, but that STC proved that Columbus could stop this relocation by invoking the community in Columbus and around the world to save the Crew. Acknowledgements for this effort poured in. Columbus Partnership CEO Alex Fischer told the crowd,

We are proving that we can do the impossible and make it possible . . . The Save the Crew movement, everybody in this room, this doesn’t happen if there wasn’t a rally on City Hall steps a few days after that tweet [from Grant Wahl] went out, not rallying that this was the city’s fault, but rallying that we as a community could do better, would do better, that we wouldn’t accept this outcome. (Massive Report, 2018)

Later, the heroes of the moment, Dr. Pete Edwards and JW Johnson, a representative from the Haslam family, echoed these sentiments as well. Edwards began his speech by stating, “I really want to tell you without Save The Crew, without the people in Columbus, today wouldn’t have happened,” while Johnson invoked the perspective that relocation was of the Crew was not possible: “When we came into town and heard about this . . . we said this can’t happen” (Massive Report, 2018).

One month later at the official MLS press conference introducing the Haslams, the Edwards, and newly hired Crew front office personnel, the accolades for STC continued. As emcee Taylor Twellman noted to start the event, “Today is a monumental moment, not only in American soccer, but in American sports . . . the city, the state, the national level [of the STC] movement, that collaboration saved a franchise

for a city” (Columbus Crew, 2019a). MLS commissioner Don Garber, who was perceived early on in the relocation process as favoring the interests of Anthony Precourt, recognized that importance of STC in changing the minds of league executives, stated:

the whole Save the Crew movement, you inspired all of us to recognize what the Crew means to this city, what it means to the sport of soccer in America and, clearly, to Major League Soccer. Without it, I don’t believe we would have been able to inspire the Haslams and the Edwards families to join our league and to align the interests of the city, the county, and the partnership to deliver on an incredibly ambitious stadium project. And, frankly, to motivate the league to creatively find a solution to a very, very complicated situation and I want to thank you for that. (Columbus Crew, 2019a)

Alex Fischer called the effort of STC, “probably the greatest show of fan support and accomplishment in the history of professional sports,” while Twellman reiterated that “Today is a day that for the next 20, 30, 40 years, people are going to be talking about your city” (Columbus Crew, 2019a).

The effective constitutive rhetoric on the part of STC not only moved a national and international community to support the cause, it recruited local investors willing to spend hundreds of millions of dollars to purchase the club and fund a new stadium development. The STC movement also convinced that community—and those investors—that the Crew simply could not be moved from Columbus and oriented new owners to proclaim their position as “stewards” of the team in a joint statement announcing the purchase. In December at the event at Land Grant Brewery, JW Johnson said, “We [Pete Edwards] look at each other that we don’t own the team, we’re just stewards of the team. The team is owned by everybody in this room and in this community.” In January at the official unveiling, Dee Haslam, matriarch of the family and owner of the club, stated, “We are just keepers of the team and we are stewards of the organization. We don’t feel like we own the team, it belongs to the community” (Columbus Crew, 2019b). Pete Edwards echoed those comments in various media appearances, declaring, “We’re really not owners, we’re stewards. The team belongs to the city [and] the fans” (Hudak, 2019, para. 8). The STC movement laid the framework for these talking points, rooting the team to Columbus by outlining plans for government partnerships, business partnerships, stadium development, and attendance and promising the keys to this information to the heroes who would ultimately finish the narrative.

It is worth considering the uniqueness of this particular multi-faceted rhetorical effort, for as previously noted by Charland (1987), “not all constitutive rhetorics succeed” (p. 141). The effort to stop team relocation by invoking constitutive rhetoric requires fans to be uniquely unified, especially across the league in support of each other. Without distinctly organized supporter groups for teams in the NBA, MLB, and NFL, it may be hard to envision how such a unified front could be interpellated. The efforts of STC, which took place over 1 year, also required time.

Football fans in Baltimore still remember how the Colts left for Indianapolis in the middle of the night, leaving the mayor in tears to face the press the next day. The movement in Columbus stirred local government officials to act, but time was needed to situate a local ownership group and finesse a deal that would satisfy both Anthony Precourt and MLS. The implementation of constitutive rhetoric also required a series of unopposable mantras that could be spread quickly across multiple fronts, ensuring that their messages would be visible across the league, across sports, across the country, and internationally. This distribution implemented both official media channels and used social media to disseminate the STC mantras regularly and in multimedia formats. The STC movement also had a unique historical narrative to rely on that invoked both local and national pride among soccer fans. We might expect other movements to arise if teams like the Green Bay Packers or Boston Red Sox were threatened with relocation, as it happened with the Cleveland Browns, but the uniqueness of the powerful myth employed by STC rallied a more inclusive interpellated audience. Finally, for STC to ultimately succeed in their goal, the constitutive rhetoric they deployed required powerful and wealthy individuals to collaborate.

Even if the movement had not succeeded, and it took a full year for success to arrive, it would still have been noteworthy to identify the ways in which STC argued for their team to stay. It would also be appropriate to consider how these individuals, rather than languish in the helplessness of their situation, organized, resisted, and communicated their story to a wide audience. It would also be significant to recognize how the efforts of STC elevated the myth of Columbus to the foremost position in American men's soccer. Because they did succeed, however, their work also serves as an exemplar of the mythic power inherent in the values of midwestern hard work and local community—"everything American" as Hejduk claimed—working together to resist the dehumanizing profit-maximization of modern capitalism. Considering this ideological conflict, within the broader political and cultural spheres beset by divisive issues that may render the individual powerless, there is solace in seeing proof, as Hughes concluded, "that when the people decide to change the world . . . they can do anything they want" (Massive Report, 2018). The lessons of STC, then, extend to a wide range of communication praxis, including social movements, political organizing, and non-profit campaigns. For any of the numerous conflicts that situate the powerless against the powerful, for any of the battles that seem impossible at worst and unlikely at best, the work of STC is prescient.

On Wednesday, June 26, 2019, the Columbus Crew officially dedicated a new mini soccer pitch on the grounds of Eakin Elementary. The field, complete with lighting, is slated for community use and after-school programs as part of the Crew SC Foundation's efforts to provide safe, accessible playing areas for children and adults in Columbus. In bold letters painted along the sideline of the new field is a line that reads, "Dedicated to Save The Crew." When the new downtown stadium for the Columbus Crew is opened in the summer of 2021, the story of Save The Crew will

likely be incorporated, immortalizing the efforts of a unique movement. In both places, there will be permanent proof of the power of myth, identity, and action.


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### ORCID iD

Stephen P. Andon  <https://orcid.org/0000-0001-5001-7175>

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