The Construction of Race in Professional Basketball

by

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For nearly eight months out of the year, from November to June, players in the National Basketball Association (NBA) shoot, rebound, and play defense on a prominent stage. Thousands of fans watch them compete in brightly-lit arenas; millions more tune in to see them play on television. They appear in countless commercials and on innumerable billboards, hawking basketball shoes and athletic apparel as well as new models of cell phones. On a nightly basis, players stage dramatized athletic contests, embodying grace, skill, and ingenuity as they compete against each other. But the NBA’s Black players also enact racial meaning through their play and behavior.

In the context of a majority-White society, the NBA is one of the few spaces in which Blackness is the norm. Given this difference, and also given the continuing significance of and tension around racial issues in this society, professional basketball takes on unavoidable racial meaning. The portrayal of Blackness in basketball occurs in the midst of a greater process of racial formation, linking ideas about race with race-based institutional arrangements and social relations. The NBA seeks to present race in ways that are palatable (and even exciting and comforting) to a largely White fan base.\(^1\) But despite the efforts of the league ownership and management structure to control racial meaning in professional basketball, Black players themselves are the primary social actors responsible for the construction of race in the NBA.

The Literature on Basketball

In the last few years, several writers have sought to understand the intersection of race and professional basketball. Todd Boyd writes that basketball is

\(^1\) Though as I will discuss, the division is not so simple as White fan and Black player.
“the most visible stage” where a “lifestyle (Blackness) is played out” (2003, 15). Because it is one of the arenas in which Black men have had the greatest opportunity to express themselves, basketball has become an important space for racial and cultural definition. Most recently, the NBA’s young Black players have affiliated themselves with the norms and behaviors of hip hop culture. But according to Boyd, their portrayals come in the context of performing for a mainly White audience, and subordinate to White team owners and league executives.

As a result, Boyd situates Black basketball players within a tradition of Black artists whose performances are, in his words, “filtered through a White prism:”

Perceptions about Black culture tend to override what the culture might have to say about itself. The mainstream often pigeonholes Black culture, forcing the culture to accommodate whatever perceptions might already be in place as opposed to allowing it to exist on its own terms and give off its own representation (Boyd, 2003, 14).

In Boyd’s analysis, a White-dominated ownership and management structure, along with a predominantly White media, defend mainstream representations. The players themselves act out a Blackness with its roots in what Boyd sees as an un-manipulated Black culture but that is ultimately controlled by the NBA.²

Jeffrey Lane writes with a similar conceptual framework (filtering Black culture through a White prism) about the NBA’s complex relationship to hip hop culture (2007). On the one hand, the NBA has profited immensely from building off already-existing links to associate itself with hip hop. On the other, the league must be careful not to alienate or scare away middle-class White fans with any association to violent and angry Black masculinity. Lane argues that the NBA simultaneously

² The idea of an authentic Black culture removed from the influence of dominant values is itself problematic. However, Boyd’s metaphor of a prism that filters Black culture is still useful in understanding the ways cultural movements that begin within the Black community are altered when produced for a mainstream audience.
peddles and curbs Black authenticity, carefully managing its representations of hip hop. He writes:

The NBA is clearly guilty of having it both ways: it chastises players for looking or acting “too street” while it manipulates and sells their street-bred swagger for all it’s worth and cashes in on the celebration of its players and iconography in mainstream hip-hop (Lane, 2007, xv).

According to Lane, a series of negative and racially coded incidents forced the league to readdress its relationship with hip hop. Most prominent among these was the 2004 brawl in Auburn Hills, Michigan, when Black players from the Pacers charged into the stands and exchanged blows with fans. Though the league continues to profit from its association with hip-hop, it now takes extra care to sanitize these images, avoiding the terrifying archetype of the violent black male gang member who angrily rejects mainstream society.

Though Lane’s analysis is both interesting and insightful, he (like Boyd) denies agency to the players themselves. As young Black males, they “naturally” represent and embody hip hop culture. It is mostly up to the league to negotiate the cost-benefit analysis of its relationship to hip hop, determining how to present race in order to best appeal to fans.

Aaron Baker writes from a slightly different perspective. Rather than examining the league’s attempts to portray race, he analyzes how the racial images presented through basketball support the status quo (2000). Though he is actually writing about basketball movies, I find Baker’s analysis also relevant as a description of the function of the imagery created in professional basketball. He writes that basketball portrays a racial universe that glosses over existing inequalities and argues

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against either governmental or collective action approaches to addressing racial disparities.

Baker says that the world of basketball presents a utopia in which Black players fail or succeed based on how hard they work. This dismisses racial inequality within society as a whole and suggests that the most effective path to success is to “just follow the rules and try harder” while “adher(ing) to the status quo” (Baker 2000, 221). Similarly, Baker argues that basketball provides a space (through, for example, the use of players’ first names) in which fans can relate to players as familiar figures. This suggests that racial disparities can be overcome on a personal level. More radical programs to address structural inequalities, therefore, are seen as unnecessary.

However, as with Boyd and Lane, Baker fails to offer a comprehensive account of how racial meaning is negotiated within professional basketball. Baker may in fact be correct to ignore the agency players have in constructing racial meaning. After all, he was writing about Hollywood movies, in which actors are beholden to a script produced by a major studio. But in extending his analysis (and also in discussing Boyd and Lane) it is important to remember that in order to stay in the league, NBA players are responsible primarily for their play on the court. Though there is little doubt that the league\(^3\) attempts to control their actions and the kinds of racial meaning they enact, players are to a great extent free to behave as they wish. Analyzing the way race is portrayed through the NBA as a contested process, in

\(^3\) Throughout my analysis I will discuss efforts by “the league,” or “the NBA.” Though Black players are certainly a part of the NBA, this is meant to refer to the league management and ownership structure, including (as I will later discuss in more depth) both officials employed by the league as a whole as well as representatives of specific teams. Though using such vague terms to refer to a varied group of social actors may sacrifice a small amount of precision, it allows for analytic clarity. And, indeed, the league office is essentially a marketing and decision-making body for NBA teams, charged with representing the interests of NBA ownership.
which players are important social actors who possess agency, offers new insights into the construction of race in the world of professional basketball.

**The Construction of Race as a Contested Process**

Literature on the production of race within society has described it as an ongoing and often contentious process with important ties to the social structure and social interests. Cornell and Hartmann write that racial identity is formed in a process of negotiation—even competition—between members of the group and those outside of it:

Ethnic groups and identities form in an interaction between assignment—what others say we are—and assertion—who or what we claim to be. This interaction is ongoing. It is, indeed, a “reciprocal fluxion,” and there is nothing absolute about the process or the end product. Ethnic and racial identities and the groups that carry them change over time as the forces that impinge on them change, and as the claims made by both group members and others change as well (1998, 72).

Eduardo Bonilla-Silva argues that a racial ideology first develops as a result of relations of opposition between racial groups, providing rationalization for different treatment. After a society becomes “racialized,” racialization takes on a life of its own, institutionalizing “a set of social relations and practices based on racial distinctions” (Bonilla-Silva 2004, 156). The result in America is a racialized social system “in which economic, political, social, and ideological levels are partially structured by the placement of actors in racial categories” (Bonilla-Silva 2004, 151). Racial ideology “becomes the organizational map that guides the actions of racial actors within society,” (Bonilla-Silva, 2004, 156) not only justifying but also influencing social relations. Importantly, this ideology can be altered through the process of racial contestation.
Omi and Winant write from a similar perspective, conceiving of race as “a concept which signifies and symbolizes social conflicts and interests by referring to different types of human bodies” (1994, 55). For the individual within a racialized social system, race becomes common sense, both explaining social relations and influencing action. But because race symbolizes social conflict, it is in a state of constant transformation through political struggle. For Omi and Winant, racial formation is the net result of many racial projects which take place throughout society. These racial projects “mediate between the discursive or representational means in which race is identified and signified on the one hand, and the institutional and organizational forms in which it is routinized and standardized on the other.” (Omi and Winant, 1994, 60) In other words, racial projects re-form race through simultaneously changing the way it’s represented and the social relations that spring from and are justified by these representations. Within this understanding of race, challenging common sense racial attitudes and therefore attempting to remake racial ideology is an important political tactic towards transforming race-based social relations. According to Omi and Winant:

What distinguishes political opposition today… is its insistence on identifying itself and speaking for itself, its determined demand for the transformation of the social structure, its refusal of the “common sense” understandings which the hegemonic order imposes (Omi and Winant, 1994, 60).

In the following essay I will explore the construction of race within the NBA as an interaction between assignment and assertion. In my analysis, I will follow Hartmann’s characterization of sport as

a ‘contested racial terrain,’ a social site where racial images, ideologies, and inequalities are constructed, transformed, and constantly struggled over rather than a place where they are reconciled or reproduced one way or the other (Hartmann 2000, 230).
Hartmann also writes that because sport has a “privileged and prominent role in American culture,” the meanings created in sport carry great cultural weight. This informs my understanding of why racial contestation in basketball is important. An important element in all of this, of course, is the fact that the NBA is a league of exclusively male players. The racial imagery portrayed in the league is therefore more accurately of Black masculinity than simply Blackness. But as Patricia Hill Collins has written, racial representations are quite often gendered (2005). Within racial common sense, Black men are understood in different ways than Black women. But though the exact expectations and stereotypes may be different for men and women, representations of each gender contribute to beliefs and ideas about Black people in general. The way Black men are portrayed within the NBA, therefore, has important effects on racial ideology pertaining to the Black community as a whole.

Black players are the primary social actors in the process of constructing racial meaning in the NBA. And unlike many of the Black performers who enact race in popular culture, basketball players are not reading from a Hollywood-produced script or writing songs that must be approved by a major record label. During post-game interviews, community appearances, and even when they are on the court, Black players have a good deal of freedom to behave as they wish and say what they want. Though the league attempts to manage their behavior and the kinds of racial images and meaning disseminated through basketball, players have a considerable amount of freedom to contest racial meaning. But theorizing about racial contestation in basketball is made difficult by the fact that NBA players do not represent a homogeneous mass with a single articulated political position. Black players, after all,
can come from any number of social positions, whether poor urban environments as is generally considered the norm, or middle or upper-class families. Irrespective of their backgrounds, players may also articulate any number of positions, and may avoid questions of race altogether. Players are selected to the league based on their ability to play ball, not their ability to properly articulate the demands of their race, demands which themselves do not represent a universal, homogeneous position.

Black basketball players are accidental representatives of the Black community, placed through virtue of their talent on a highly-visible stage on which racial meaning is constructed and enacted. As a sport overwhelmingly associated with the Black community, basketball has a racial undercurrent to begin with, its own racial common sense that reflects racial ideology within society as a whole. The way racial meaning is portrayed through basketball has important consequences for the NBA’s ability to appeal to fans and produce revenue. As a result, the league seeks to construct a particular conception of race and—with the hegemonic support of dominant racial ideology—exerts pressure on players to discourage them from contesting it. To a great extent this has been successful in limiting the number of players who have used their position of prominence to explicitly assert conceptions of race that disagree with the league’s preferred racial meaning. But race is portrayed in basketball—and indeed understood within society—largely in veiled and symbolic terms. Players have therefore also been able to practice racial contestation symbolically, through the exercise of cultural politics.

A full understanding of the processes through which race is constructed in professional basketball requires an investigation of how various symbolic behaviors,
images, and archetypes imply and support different conceptions of race. But an additional and essential element in the analysis of racial meaning in basketball is the fact, to borrow from the work of Patricia Hill Collins on racial imagery, that “the past is ever present” (2005, 53). Though dominant racial ideology has certainly changed, old racial conceptions endure, albeit in slightly altered forms. The historical legacy of the intersection of race and basketball, therefore, has continuing effects on the current situation.

**Basketball: A Sport of the Marginalized**

The history of basketball is a chronicle of changing race relations and ideology. Basketball—once far behind baseball, football, boxing, and even horse racing in terms of exposure and importance—has grown as a cultural force. Interestingly, this rise in prominence has occurred even as Black players have steadily taken over the sport. To no small extent, basketball’s surge in popularity has depended on new forms of race relations that make Black players as subjects of fandom not only permissible but even desirable within mainstream society.

For its entire history, basketball has been a sport of marginalized groups within society. It was invented by James Naismith in 1891 to give students at the Springfield Young Men’s Christian Association (YMCA) an indoor sport during the cold winter months. Basketball took its place within the greater mission of the YMCA to use sports, in the words of Richard Mandell, “as methods for absorbing the idle time of poor city boys and instilling in them the habits of good hygiene, self-discipline, and respect for officials” (Mandell 1984, 188-89).
The efforts of the YMCA were part of what Gorn and Goldstein called the organized play movement, using sports as a means to assimilate and “Americanize” immigrant youth (1993, 175). Though football and baseball were more popular, basketball took hold in poor urban areas with limited space and where youth struggled to afford costly equipment. It is this environment, among the poorest residents of American cities, that has historically produced the best basketball players. In the earlier parts of the century, communities of Eastern European immigrants excelled at the sport. For example, in the quarter century preceding the formation of the leagues that would become the NBA (from 1918 going into the 1940s) the all-Jewish South Philadelphia Hebrew Association team (the SPHAs) were arguably the country’s best team (Entine 2000). Later, as immigrant groups successfully assimilated into American society, they left the urban ghettos—as well as basketball dominance—to Black Americans (Baerwald 1995). The first basketball leagues that sprouted up along the east coast in the early decades of the twentieth century, however, drew mostly from these White immigrant populations, and had few Black players (Thomas 2002, 6).

In this environment, the challenge for Black basketball players was to prove they belonged. In 1910, former boxing champion Jim Jeffries, the “Great White Hope,” came out of retirement to face heavyweight champion Jack Johnson, a Black man. Jeffries’ reason for taking on the fight was simple: to prove the superiority of the White race. He said: “I’m going into this fight for the sole purpose of proving that a White man is better than a Negro” (Remnick 1998, 223). With the ringside
band playing “All Coons Look Alike to Me,” Johnson knocked Jeffries out in a dominating performance (Zirin 2005).

This moment is often noted in sports scholarship as the beginning of a turning point in racist attitudes about Black athletes, as their unquestionable success put the lie to arguments of wholesale White superiority. But Johnson’s victory and an ensuing series of successful Black athletes could not force dominant racial ideology to recognize them as equals in other terms. American history has shown racial ideology to be flexible, able to adjust to changing conditions but retaining many of its basic assumptions. The argument that Blacks couldn’t be as successful at sports as Whites was slowly replaced with equally damaging conceptions that characterized Blacks as physically gifted but intellectually inferior. This conceded their athletic talents while advancing an ideology that denied them success through normal economic pathways (and also explained racial inequalities).

In the first half of the century, however, Black players were still largely excluded from successful teams. One of the exceptions was the Harlem Globetrotters, owned by White businessman Abe Saperstein, who spent much of their time barnstorming around the country playing local assemblages of talent for modest fees. Saperstein’s all-Black squad was capable of dominating its opponents, but his financial success depended less on victories than on the Globetrotters’ ability to appeal to white fans in small Midwestern and Southern towns. The Trotters were so successful they were forced to reject competitive basketball, instead adopting the

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4 Similarly prejudiced arguments about the nature of racial groups were used to explain the success of the also (if not equally) reviled immigrants who succeeded at basketball early on. Paul Gallico, sports editor of the New York Daily News, wrote: “The reason, I suspect, that basketball appeals to the Hebrew, with his Oriental background, is that the game places a premium on an alert, scheming mind, flashy trickiness, artful dodging, and general smart-aleckness” (qtd. in Entine 2000a).
more common stereotypical role of Black performers within American society—the clown. Nelson George writes: “Clowning Black men have always been more popular in this country than stern no-nonsense brothers... The Trotters adopted comedy as good business and an affirmation, no matter how skillfully done, of racist attitudes toward Black males” (2002, 49).

In 1949, the NBA was formed by a merger between the Basketball Association of America and the National Basketball League. Though the league took on its first Black players in 1950, it was not until the 1956-57 season when Bill Russell joined the Boston Celtics as a rookie that the league would have any inkling of the extent to which Black men would come to dominate the game.

Behind Russell’s imposing defense and leadership, the Celtics won eleven of thirteen league championships. In the latter years of his career, he also acted as a player-coach, becoming the first Black coach in the league. Meanwhile, another Black man, 7’1 Wilt Chamberlain, became the league’s most dominant offensive player. But teams still restricted the number of Black players they could sign and put out on the court, including the infamous “three at home, four on the road, and five if you’re down” rule (Downey 1991). The league could not ignore the talent of Black players, but it did limit their on-court exposure.

The ABA and the Black Aesthetic

In 1967, in the midst of the civil rights movement, the American Basketball Association (ABA) was founded by a group of businessmen who hoped that by forming another league they could force a merger with the NBA (George 1992). It
was perhaps a happy accident that a new league destined to change the way basketball was played came in at the same time as the emergence of a “new racial order” (Winant 2001). Either way, both transformations were essential to basketball’s modern racial narrative.

In 1976, the ABA dissolved after less than ten years, its four remaining teams joining with the NBA. But the ABA’s biggest impact on basketball was in spreading what Nelson George called a “Black aesthetic,” popularizing a new style of play that to this day defines the game (1992). To compete with the established league, the ABA presented a flashier product, using a red, white, and blue ball and offering a more exciting style of play. Teams were led by high-scoring and athletic wing players rather than the dominant and relatively immobile big men of the NBA. According to Walt Frazier, a star point guard for the New York Knicks, the ABA emphasized “running and jumping and getting the ball upcourt quickly and then putting on the moves.” (qtd. in George 1992, 181) This style of play, called “playground” or even explicitly “Black” basketball, allowed more room for creativity, originality, and flash than the rigidly structured set offenses that predominated in the NBA at the time.

The ABA also invented the dunk contest, celebrating the most exciting play in the game (and the play most characteristic of the Black aesthetic). The first contest was won by Julius Erving (or Dr. J), then considered the world’s most creative and athletic player. Erving wore a thick Afro, a hairstyle popularized as a political statement within the Black Power movements of the 1960s and the 1970s. The Afro was an important cultural symbol, rejecting years of the taming of naturally kinky
Black hair to achieve a European straightened ideal. The Afro represented pride in one’s racial characteristics, a rejection of standards of beauty that privileged White traits.

In his game, Erving also exemplified an unapologetic Blackness. In direct contradiction to the strict offensive sets preached by NBA traditionalists, Dr. J invented his moves on the fly, driving past opponents to the hoop and then elevating impossibly high, improvising in the air to elude a defender’s helpless arms. As much as grace and talent, Erving projected intimidation. With a nearly unmatched jumping ability, he was often able to hold the ball back, gliding through the air until opponents dropped off. Then he would throw the ball through the rim, dunking literally on top of his helpless defender. In his style, beginning with the Afro and continuing in his play, Erving presented a proud, threatening, and unabashed Black masculinity.

From the 1970s into the modern era, basketball became increasingly identified as a Black sport.\(^5\) Black players unequivocally dominated the NBA, and the Black aesthetic and “playground” style of play had permeated the league. And though a new racial order was emerging that would allow the NBA as a Black sport to find commercial success, White America was not quite ready to embrace the league’s new identity. Though the influx of players from the 1976 ABA merger elevated the quality of play, the NBA experienced a significant decline in ratings and profitability in the late 1970s. Part of this was the fact that the competition with the ABA (and

\(^5\) Though it is interesting to note that there has lately been an influx of International players into the league, many of whom are White. The number and prominence of White Americans in the NBA, however, has continued to diminish, and the league remains 76% Black (Zirin 2007). Going into the 2007-08 season, ESPN.com’s player rankings based on projected statistical production deemed that 25 of the top 30 players (or 83%) in the league were Black. Of the remaining five, none were American-born White players.
subsequent negotiations with players) had raised salaries, cutting into the bottom-line. The league was also hurt by a series of high profile cocaine incidents, which led to characterizations as drug-tainted. These incidents had unavoidable racial implications, and tied in with a greater perception of the NBA as “too Black.”

The often contentious relationship of White fans to Black players is exemplified by the case of Kareem Abdul-Jabbar, the most dominant player of the 1970s and still the NBA record-holder for most points scored in a career. Abdul-Jabbar’s negative relationship with mainstream society had begun in 1968 when he refused to play for the US Olympic team, choosing instead to continue taking classes at UCLA. In his words: “I had no intention of disrupting my education so that a country that was abusing my people could be made to shine for the world” (qtd. in George 1992, 148). Abdul-Jabbar was booed by fans and vilified in the media, and his negative image wasn’t helped when it was revealed after his rookie season that he’d changed his name from Lew Alcindor and converted to Islam. Like the Afro worn by Julius Erving, adopting an Islamic name had links in the popular imagination to Black Power movements. Though Abdul-Jabbar had become a Sunni Muslim rather than joining the Nation of Islam, his conversion developed from an affinity for the outspoken Black leader Malcolm X (George 1992).\(^6\) Abdul-Jabbar’s name change, like his refusal to play in the Olympics, was considered a denunciation of mainstream, White society.

In addition, it didn’t help Abdul-Jabbar’s popularity with White fans that he rejected their expectations of Black performers. Not only would he not clown around

\(^6\) Malcolm X had been the primary spokesperson for the Nation of Islam, an American Black separatist group. After journeying to Mecca, however, he had become a Sunni Muslim. After returning to the US he was still outspoken about racial politics until the time of his assassination.
in the model of the Globetrotters, Abdul-Jabbar refused to so much as crack a smile. His serious, businesslike bearing (combined with the Islamic name and imposing size) conveyed a threatening image to a largely White audience who wanted their performers to seem to be enjoying themselves. Boyd writes that Abdul-Jabbar was not there to entertain, he was there to dominate on the basketball court, and that performance was in no way intended to appease a White fan base that had grown accustomed to Blacks catering to them and their sense of entertainment... Kareem was no Uncle Tom. He was instead a no-nonsense Black man who refused to give the fans a little extra by smiling, preening, and outwardly celebrating. He was representative of the politically embittered Black man (2003, 50).

The 1980 NBA finals, matching Abdul-Jabbar’s Los Angeles Lakers with Erving’s Philadelphia 76ers, were judged by CBS to be of such little interest to mainstream America that they were televised on tape-delay at 11:30 PM after having been broadcast in primetime in previous years (Lane 2007, 132).

**Race Relations in the Post-Civil Rights Era**

The Civil Rights movement of the 1960s made significant gains, most tangibly the 1964 Civil Rights Act that banned discrimination on the basis of “race, color, religion, or national origin” (Winant 1997). But the fact that overt racial discrimination was illegal did not mean that economic inequalities had been eliminated. Nor did it mean that deep-seated racial ideas of the kind that led to the description of the NBA as “too Black” had disappeared overnight. Nonetheless, the Civil Rights movement was part of profound shift, what Winant calls a “transformation in the global logic of race,” and that forced a reassessment of racial ideology:

The anxieties caused by the upsurge and containment of the struggle against racism, in short, precipitated widespread political crises and realignments across much of the political spectrum, for people of every ideological and racial ‘hue,’ so to speak. A crisis over white
identity, anxiety over the meaning of whiteness, was widespread and much debated. It is no surprise, then, that reevaluation of the meaning of whiteness emerged as part of a fierce effort to come up with a post-civil rights era concept of race (Winant 2001).

Different racial projects—linking racial representations with the racial organization of social structures—emerged in this attempt to reconceive of race and Whiteness. Among these, Winant argues that the New Right has become hegemonic, dominating mainstream and political racial ideology (Winant 1998). But though the racial project of the New Right maintains and reproduces racial inequalities, it has not necessarily (at least avowedly) been at odds with the rhetoric of the civil rights movement. In fact, much of the power of the New Right racial project is that it has been able to “reinterpret some of the 1960s movements’ most cherished demands in a conservative and individualistic discourse focused on formal equality” (Winant 1997).

In an unabashedly racist society, the civil rights movement demanded, in the words of Dr. King, that people be judged by “the content of their character, not the color of their skin” (Winant 1997). In the wake of 1960s racial struggle the New Right appropriated this vision, embracing a color-blind ideology that passed over the continuing force and significance of race. Color-blindness became, rather than an indictment of racist attitudes, a way to denounce any statement or social policy that raised race as a salient issue.

Charles Gallagher writes that the color-blind ideology gives comfort to White Americans, allowing them to reject the unpleasant reality that the color of their skin gives them an advantage over other racial groups:

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\text{Color blindness has emerged as America’s newest racial mythology because it provides a level-playing-field narrative that allows whites to inhabit a psychological space that is free of racial tension... Within this universe where racial differences are almost meaningless, whites are able to claim that their privileged social position relative to racial minorities reflects individual achievement rather than the fruits of white supremacy (2004, 583).}
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But even as it avowedly rejects racial difference, the New Right racial project utilizes and constructs racial common sense to explain socioeconomic disparities between races. Collins writes that overt racism based on an ideology of biological differences has been replaced by a new racism utilizing “cultural explanations for economic success and poverty” (2005, 41). These new forms of racism claim color-blindness while at the same time embracing common sense assumptions about groups and individuals, formed to a great extent through images in popular culture. According to Collins: “The new racism relies more heavily on the manipulation of ideas within mass media. These new techniques present hegemonic ideologies that claim that racism is over. They work to obscure that racism does exist, and they undercut antiracist protest” (2005, 54). The world of professional basketball, which on a near-daily basis presents ideas about race to a wide audience, therefore takes on added importance in producing, sustaining, and even challenging the ideas that justify the new racism.

Racial ideology formed in this way influences attitudes about both Whites and Blacks. Because they are based on cultural and not biological arguments, however, these racial ideologies are slightly less absolute. Collins writes that lower-class Whites are often seen as culturally Black, while symbols of the Black middle class (like Bill Cosby) are thought of as culturally White (2005). This does not mean that symbolic Whiteness always corresponds with wealth, or Blackness with poverty. Many of the NBA’s young Black players exemplify what are thought of as Black cultural traits while making millions of dollars a year. But in general terms, Whiteness is correlated with traits and values associated with success in Capitalist
society (Winant 1997). And Blackness is defined in opposition. As I will discuss later, these attitudes even permeate racialized conceptions of basketball playing style.

Dominant racial ideology defines Blackness in terms of its failure to achieve the norms and values of White, middle-class society. As a result, it blames Black culture and the Black community for race-based socioeconomic disparities. Omi and Winant write that ethnicity theory (an element of the New Right racial project) compares the Black community to European immigrant groups who came to America in the early twentieth century (1994, 12). Though originally impoverished, these groups erased their economic disadvantages as they successfully assimilated into American society. In this analysis, all Black Americans must do to eliminate economic inequalities is assimilate into the mainstream. It is therefore their group norms and shared culture that is holding them back (Omi and Winant, 1994). This “blame the victim” approach has been reflected in culture of poverty arguments that suggest that individuals in poor communities are socialized into values and behaviors that function to maintain their poverty (e.g. Lewis 1966). For example, the 1965 Moynihan Report, commissioned by President Kennedy and influential in shaping policy around public aid to Black communities, wrote that the Black family constituted a “tangle of pathology… capable of perpetuating itself without assistance from the white world” (qtd. in Watkins 1998, 218-219). In the 1980s, the Reagan administration combined the ideology of the New Right Racial Project with significant policy changes. thinly veiled racial archetypes (which persist to this day) cast the poor as “unproductive and parasitic ‘welfare queens’ and ‘career criminals’

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who ‘don’t want to work,’” and justified widespread reductions in public aid programs (Winant 1997).

**Bird and Magic: The Racial Conflict that Revitalized the League**

The 1980s also saw the NBA experience a resurgence that catapulted professional basketball into unheard of popularity. This development is commonly attributed to two players who joined the NBA for the 1979-80 season—Magic Johnson and Larry Bird. But the importance of their rivalry and the reasons it captivated the nation transcended the battles they waged on the court. Under the Reagan administration—with dominant racial theory avowing color-blindness while using cultural explanations of racial difference to justify welfare reform—the contests between the “Great White Hope” Larry Bird and the Black leader of “Showtime” basketball Magic Johnson enacted racial common sense and provided a symbolic outlet for racial struggles taking place within the society as a whole.

As the NBA’s number one draft pick in 1979, Magic Johnson joined a Los Angeles Lakers team that already featured the stern and dominating Abdul-Jabbar. Johnson was 6’9 but played point guard with an uncanny ability to create opportunities for teammates. Not only did he complement Abdul-Jabbar’s inside dominance, however, he also provided a more acceptable face of the franchise. Johnson was known for his smile on the court, evincing a genuine enjoyment of his ability to play basketball for an audience, regardless of its race. Johnson was a figure in the mold of Bill Cosby, an example of a Black man who was embraced by the

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7 Recall that this nickname (used, for example, in McCallum 1992) was also used to cast Jim Jeffries in the role of White savior.
White community because of his non-threatening (and culturally middle-class) behavior. Just as The Cosby Show was the highest rated television program of the 1980s, Magic Johnson became, along with Larry Bird, the NBA’s biggest star (Boyd 2003, 52). Each offered evidence in support of the color-blind ideology, proving that Blacks could be perfectly successful in America—so long as they adopted White, middle-class values.

In a seeming contradiction to the Magic’s image, the Lakers became one of the teams that has historically been most linked with the Black aesthetic. They played “Showtime” basketball, characterized by slick passing and tricky dribbling that often led to finishes above the rim. But with Johnson as the public face of the team, their “Black” style of play, exciting to begin with, was acceptable for a mainstream audience.

Johnson’s great rival for basketball supremacy was another transcendent talent, the league’s “Great White Hope” Larry Bird. Bird’s effective outside shooting and so-called “intelligent” play were to “White” basketball what Magic’s behind the back dribbling and no-look passes were to the “Black” style of play. Bird was also known as a blue-collar man, the self-proclaimed “Hick from French Lick” (Indiana). His image as a White, working-class, lunch-bucket type player was a welcome addition to a league that by his rookie year in 1979 was 70% Black (Lane 2007, 114). In addition to Bird, Danny Ainge and Kevin McHale gave the Celtics three White starters, a rarity in the league at the time. And with a mostly-White bench throughout

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8 Abdul-Jabbar was also a major contributor, but the league wisely marketed Johnson instead and fans and history have embraced him as the Lakers’ biggest star.
9 Though, as I will discuss later, cultural explanations for their Black style of play still reflected and reproduced cultural explanations for the new racism.
the eighties, the Celtics would often put five White players on the court at once (Lane 2007, 135).

From 1980 to 1988, the Celtics and Lakers dominated the league, winning three and five NBA titles respectively. Boyd writes that in the midst of the conservative Reagan era, the Celtics-Lakers rivalry was cast in racialized terms, symbolically expressing racial tension that was swept under the rug:

While Reagan made it increasingly difficult to speak out on the continued injustices fostered by racism in America, basketball became a very visible stage where the racial politics of the time were being continually played out in the open... Magic and Bird were simply vessels who helped bring society’s confrontational attitudes about race out into the open, while making them somewhat more palatable because the issues were being presented through basketball (2004, 46-47).

Television ratings soared for the symbolic racial battles between the Celtics and the Lakers. And though the Lakers were the “Black” team, an identity that is often stigmatized, the unthreatening Blackness they represented with Magic Johnson at the helm allowed them to be quite popular in mainstream America (outside of Celtics fans, of course). But though White fans cheered for the “Black” basketball of the Lakers and continue to admire the “Black” style of play, the racial categories assigned to the teams from Boston and Los Angeles were far from neutral, corresponding to conceptions of Whiteness and Blackness that are integral to the New Right racial project.

**Basketball Style as Constructing Racial Common Sense**

The way basketball style of play is conceived of in racialized terms is the most visible manifestation of the racial current that underlies the game of basketball. The expectations and representations of White and Black players are common sense for
anyone who follows the game. In the popular imagination, basketball is the game of the Black man. Black male bodies appear made to play the game: long, lean, muscular, and athletic, they jump high in the air, gracefully twisting to get off a shot or grab a rebound. White players are considered more awkward. They are thought of plodding and ground-bound—though capable of being effective players, the game does not seem to come so easily to them. When White players succeed, therefore, it is through hard work and smart basketball—the ability to precisely execute complicated plays and outthink more athletic opponents. Black players, on the other hand, are perceived as winning through their athletic gifts, as well as creativity and flair.

Interestingly, these categories do have some foundation in reality—there are real empirical (but by no means absolute) differences in basketball style between White and Black players, and the entry of Black players into the league and subsequent dominance of the Black aesthetic did truly change the game. This may be explained by the differences in the settings in which players develop their playing style, which often correspond with racial differences.10 Pete Axthelm, in a study of pick-up and professional basketball in New York City, writes that games take on a different meaning in inner city Black neighborhoods (1970). For good players, basketball becomes an important means of achieving respect—particularly in a

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10 In another perspective, Gena Caponi-Tberi argued that dating back to athletic contests in Africa, running and jumping were important parts of Black culture, and Black players therefore took more naturally to an up-and-down, fast break style of basketball (Caponi-Tberi 2002). In a highly controversial book, Jon Entine pointed to genetic differences, citing evidence that Blacks of West African descent have a higher preponderance of fast-twitch muscle fibers, which allow them to run faster and jump higher (Entine 2000b). On the other end of the spectrum, Kareem Abdul-Jabbar wrote that different basketball styles reflect different life chances: “Just as white college basketball was patterned and regimented like the lives awaiting its players, the Black schoolyard game demanded all the flash, guile, and individual reckless brilliance each man would need in the world facing him” (qtd. in George 1992, 76).
society in which mainstream success is often denied to Black urban youth. Respect comes not only from winning, but also from the ability to make the play that stands out, that the crowd and fellow players will remember. A greater percentage of Black players are likely to have developed their skills in such a setting, while White youth from higher income communities are more likely to have played in structured basketball programs from an early age. The result may be that while White players learn fundamentals under the supervision of coaches, young Black players are left to their own devices, free to experiment and innovate (and also imitate the flashy plays of NBA stars).

The way players are represented in racial terms, however, goes far beyond actual difference and reflects racial ideology off of the court. Though there may be some empirical basis for arguing White and Black players tend to have a different style of play, the associated value judgments have little empirical basis. There is no evidence to suggest that White players work harder, for example, and there is likely as much intelligence involved in the ability to drive to the rim through calculating how to fake out a defender than there is in the ability to set a good screen. Furthermore, the Celtics-Lakers rivalry is a good example of how the expectations implied by basketball racial common sense often create their own reality. Though the Celtics certainly represented many aspects of the White game and the Lakers did play “Showtime” basketball, the reality of the distinction between Boston and Los Angeles was not so clear-cut. Led by the passing of Magic Johnson, the Lakers scored through playing unselfish (even intelligent) team basketball. Larry Bird himself was a flashy showman and one of the league’s most notorious trash-talkers (Lane 2007,
Many Black players in today’s NBA—Tim Duncan, the “Big Fundamental” comes to mind—play a “White” style, and Jason “White Chocolate” Williams’ nickname celebrates his ability as a White man to play “Black” basketball. But the very fact of Williams’ nickname—and that the Lakers’ and Celtics’ play was represented in terms of fixed racialized categories despite a more complicated reality—suggests that these racially-based stylistic categories are widely accepted. A 1989 study done by Derrick Z. Jackson of the Boston Globe analyzed the way television commentators spoke about White and Black players in professional football and college basketball. He found that Black athletes were overwhelmingly talked about in terms of physical attributes—“running, leaping, size, strength and quickness”—while Whites were discussed in terms of their brain power—“intelligence, leadership, and motivation” (Jackson 1989).11

Real differences in basketball style are part of what has allowed the representations of White players as smart hard-working role players and Blacks as physically talented but flashy and unintelligent players to become common sense within the world of basketball. But these conceptions were created and endure in large part because they agree with dominant racial ideology within society as a whole. Though members of the Black community have undoubtedly enjoyed more basketball success than Whites, racial common sense dictates that they succeed based on physical “gifts” and natural ability—traits that will not get them very far within the Capitalist working world. White players, on the other hand, succeed through hard

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11 In the college basketball games analyzed, 77% of the comments about Black players had to do with brawn and 63% of the comments about White players were about brains. In football, 67% of the comments about Black players were about brawn, while 77% of the comments made about Whites related to brains. (Jackson 1989)
work and “smart” basketball, the ability to properly execute a plan. These are among the capabilities commonly associated with Whiteness within the New Right racial project.

Interestingly, “Black” basketball style is often (and more politically correctly) referred to as “playground” ball. The idea behind this is that the “Black” style is cultivated in inner-city schoolyards, where flair is often given greater weight than winning and individuals play without clearly delineated roles, set plays, or coaches. The stereotypical Black basketball player is wildly talented but resists the directives of his coach and struggles or refuses to execute a precisely planned play. These values (and indeed the whole culture of Black basketball) are seen as being nurtured and developed in Black urban neighborhoods. These are the same communities, of course, in which a broader culture of poverty is said to reign and lead to shared group norms that function to hold individuals back from mainstream economic success.

Racialized conceptions of basketball style reflect broader common sense racial conceptions that explain and justify economic inequalities across racial lines. In enacting this racial meaning, basketball style of play also reproduces it. But, as within the process of racial construction in basketball as a whole, players have not simply and unquestioningly participated in acting out this meaning.

After losing to the Celtics in Game 7 of the 1987 Eastern Conference Finals, Isiah Thomas and Dennis Rodman of the Detroit Pistons drew national coverage (and condemnation) for their statement that Larry Bird was overrated because he was White (Lane 2007, 142). They were quickly denounced as simply bitter that Bird and the Celtics had beaten them. But in later interviews, Thomas backed off his attack on
Bird while defending his assertion that race influenced how players were thought of.

Thomas, a great player in his own right, said:

What I was referring to was not so much Larry Bird, but the perpetuation of stereotypes about blacks. When Bird makes a great play, it’s due to his thinking, and his work habits. It’s all planned out by him. It’s not the case for blacks. All we do is run and jump. We never practice or give a thought to how we play. It’s like I came dribbling out of my mother’s womb. You hear it on television, you see it in the papers. I remember watching the N.C.A.A. finals between Syracuse and Indiana. I listened to Billy Packer (a White television announcer), who I like, and who I think likes me, and he said when Indiana was sending in Garrett and Smart, “Well, here come the athletes into the game.” The word “athletes.” I think that that’s an unconscious statement concerning race. I don’t like it. Magic and Michael Jordan and me, we’re playing on God-given talent, like we’re animals—lions, and tigers who run around wild in a jungle, while Larry’s success is due to intelligence and hard work. Blacks have been fighting that stereotype about playing on pure instinct for so long, and basically it still exists - regardless of whether people want to believe it or not. (Berkow 1987).

Thomas was wrong when he said originally that Bird would be “just another good player” (Kornheiser 1987) if he were Black. But in challenging the effect of his race on the way his play was conceived of, Thomas spoke from experience. And though some sports columnists only focused on his dismissal of Bird’s abilities, many treated his comments seriously. As a result, sports pages in the days following Thomas’ comments saw a more honest and public treatment of race (often challenging the color-blind ideology) than was appearing in any other section of the paper (e.g. Berkow 1987, Kornheiser 1987, Madden 1987).

The way basketball style of play reflects and reproduces racial ideology complicates the understanding of the construction of race in basketball as an interaction between assignment and assertion. I have criticized the literature on race and basketball for a conceptual framework that treats the league as the only agent in the process. Recognizing that players are the primary social actors who enact racial meaning and therefore have agency to challenge the league adds another layer of understanding. But players who assert their own conceptions of racial meaning struggle not only with the NBA; they must also confront dominant hegemonic
conceptions of race. Isiah Thomas responded specifically to broadcasters and sportswriters who perpetuated stereotypes about Black athletes. But his controversial statement also attacked widespread and damaging attitudes within society as a whole. The NBA profited from its ability to cast the Celtics-Lakers rivalry as a racial battle. But the racial coding of style in basketball was not a device invented by the league to sell tickets; it rather reflects common-sense beliefs about Black men that have arisen from centuries of exploitation.

This is not to say the NBA is blameless in the process, however. In reflecting dominant racial ideology, the world of professional basketball also reproduces it. Under the new racism and within the New Right racial project, the league is an important cultural space for the construction of racial meaning. And though the league may not have a particular stake in the continuing organization of society as supported by dominant racial ideology, its portrayal of race is an important factor in its ability to appeal to fans.

Much of the literature on race and basketball has focused on the NBA’s attempt to sell a game dominated by Black players to a mostly White and upper- to middle-class fan base. In this analysis, the NBA’s portrayal of race has been dealt with in two ways: as an attempt to obscure racial differences and reconcile the discomfort that attends them within American society; and in terms of the excitement and appeal of racially tinged oppositional images (Baker 2000, Boyd 2003, Lane 2007). The insights these approaches have uncovered have been considerable, explaining the seeming contradictions in the NBA’s racial representations with the complex relationship that White middle-class America has with Black masculinity.
But without reliable quantitative studies on the racial and class makeup of the NBA’s fan-base, it is difficult to determine to whom exactly the league is attempting to appeal.

**NBA Fans: A Tale of Two Audiences**

Complicating the question is the fact that simply analyzing the demographic characteristics of its fans is not enough to understand to whom the league must appeal. While creating overall interest is certainly important for the NBA and its franchises from a business perspective, its primary goal is not necessarily to please fans but to make money. The focus on the upper to middle class makes sense given the high cost of tickets to an NBA game. According to Team Marketing Report, the price of an average single game ticket for the 2007-08 season is $48.83, a steep price for someone of limited economic means, especially considering NBA teams are trying to sell roughly 20,000 tickets for each of 41 regular season home games. And racial disparities in income within our society certainly indicate that White Americans are much better able to afford these prices.

But the NBA’s profit margins are accounted for by television contracts and sponsorship deals as well as ticket sales. Fans who can’t afford to (or simply don’t) buy expensive tickets to see games in person are also therefore very important to the financial wellbeing of the league. Higher television ratings and interest in the NBA gives the league as well as individual teams leverage in negotiating lucrative contracts.

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12 Every team also has seats available for $10 or less, but selling the more expensive seats is much more important to team revenue than unloading those in the “nosebleed” sections.
13 The 2006 Census, measuring household income for the year 2005, found that Black households averaged $30,134 a year while White households averaged $48,977. (from http://www.census.gov/)
Though the NBA is generally reluctant to share its accounting information, a report by Forbes magazine on league revenue sources for the 2003-04 season shows that the league draws 46% of its revenue from media deals (television contracts) and sponsorships.

Table 1: Sources of NBA revenue for the 2003-04 season


<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Source</th>
<th>Dollars (in millions)</th>
<th>Percentage of total revenue</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Media</td>
<td>1,133</td>
<td>37</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tickets</td>
<td>784</td>
<td>26</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Premium Seating</td>
<td>496</td>
<td>18</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Concessions and non-NBA events</td>
<td>354</td>
<td>12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sponsorships</td>
<td>267</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Television (even cable) is highly accessible across class lines within the United States. The audience that drives this portion of the NBA’s profit, therefore, can be of any race or socioeconomic background. Similarly, most of the companies that negotiate sponsorships with the NBA are targeting a wide range of people. In fact, because of the importance of basketball to the Black community as well as the visibility of Blacks within the sport, I would speculate that Black Americans are disproportionately highly represented among the NBA’s broader audience.

But as I’ve argued, the NBA is also dependent on a higher-income audience that accounts for the 26% of the NBA’s revenue that comes from ticket sales and, particularly, the 18% from premium seating. This premium seating consists mostly of a small number of luxury suites, most of which cost in excess of $100,000 for a season. These suites target companies who can write them off as a business expense, and use them to woo clients or reward employees. This nearly one-fifth of the NBA’s
revenue, therefore, depends on the perception of the league as a business-friendly environment.

The history of the Indiana Pacers over the last few years provides a case study of how some of these dynamics play out in the way teams market themselves. Focusing on an individual team complicates my analysis; the actions of specific teams, however, are an important part of the construction of race in basketball. Though I will often discuss racial projects as conducted by “the league,” the actual actors within this process can be both executives working for individual teams as well as the NBA league office (which represents the interests of all teams). And though I’ve written about the revenue of the league as a whole, these dynamics vary among individual teams. According to the Forbes report, the majority (62%) of the revenue generated by the NBA from media deals in the 2003-04 season came from national television contracts with ESPN/ABC and TNT. The money from these deals was split evenly among the teams. But the remaining 38% comes from deals each individual team negotiates with local television stations or networks. Like ticket sales, this money stays with the local team (and varies widely depending on the market and the team’s popularity).

Because of this, the Pacers, like every team, have both a stake and an important role in how they present themselves. Before the 2007-08 season, team management unveiled a new marketing strategy, focusing not on Indiana’s players but on its coach, Jim O’Brien, a middle-aged White man. According to an article in the Indianapolis Business Journal:
O’Brien was chosen as the primary spokesman for the early part of the campaign, Hirschauer\textsuperscript{14} said, because research showed the older, corporate audience that buys season tickets finds him credible. Part of the shift, Hirschauer said, is because many Pacers fans in this “conservative market” don’t identify with the “hip-hop” culture some in the NBA have cultivated in recent years (Schoettle 2007).

To explain the campaign, the article cited “a string of highly public player indiscretions over the last year, decreasing attendance since the brawl in Detroit three seasons ago, and a financial loss that industry sources estimated at more than $10 million each of the last two years” (Schoettle 2007). The brawl in Detroit during the 2004-05 season, in which Black Pacers players fought Detroit fans, forced the league to change its relationship with hip hop culture (Lane 2007). It also derailed the Pacers’ championship hopes. Considered a major contender at the time of the fight, the Pacers lost in the playoffs with one of their best players, Ron Artest, suspended for the whole year for fighting with fans. The next year the Pacers traded Artest, who’d won the Defensive Player of the Year award in his last full season, for Peja Stojakovic, a White small forward coming off a series of injuries who would last only part of a year with the team.

Artest’s role in the brawl had made rooting for him a problem for the Pacers’ “older corporate audience” (Schoettle 2007). The fact that Artest, a young, angry, and very large Black man from the Queensbridge projects, actually waded into the crowd to punch fans in expensive seats brought the implied violent threat of impoverished Black urban youth close to home. But while Artest was roundly criticized and the Pacers quickly washed their hands of him, a different audience embraced him. For the year after the brawl, Artest had the number 22 top-selling

\textsuperscript{14} Tom Hirschauer is the president of Publicis Indianapolis, the ad agency that designed the campaign.
jersey in the NBA, the first time he’d made the list (http://sports.espn.go.com/nba/news/story?id=2258757).

Because of their financial dependence on ticket revenue—particularly expensive season tickets and luxury boxes—NBA teams must indeed cope with the problem of selling a mostly Black game to a mainly White, upper- to middle-class audience. But they also have a different broader audience that accounts for just as much revenue and is harder to generalize about. What may trouble the holders of season tickets and luxury suites (the name Artest on the back of a jersey) may serve as a status marker to an entirely different community, increasing the league’s popularity and television ratings. The NBA cannot do without the fans who are wealthy enough to buy expensive tickets. But while it must avoid alienating these fans, the league also profits from images that attract a different audience, including those who identify with rebellion.

This is not to say that there is a firm and fixed divide between the two audiences or in the portrayals of racial meaning that may attract or offend each of them. The league’s broader audience includes anyone within American society who likes basketball. It does not draw solely or even mainly from those on the margins or those who appreciate resistance and opposition. Similarly, the ticket buying audience, though possessing financial means, is not necessarily made up of the guardians of the status quo, or those who are threatened by uncensored portrayals of racial difference. In fact, even with the assumption of the NBA’s middle-class fan base, the literature on basketball has discussed the ways in which the league has allied itself with rebellious images from hip hop culture (Lane 2007). The point, when trying to
understand the ways the NBA seeks to present race, is that while the league cannot do
without its well-heeled fans it is also attempting to appeal to a different audience with
a great diversity of viewpoints and social positions. This may be a part of the
explanation for the complexity of the ways the NBA has handled race.

The Fantasy World of the NBA; Racial Tension as a Driving Force for Profit

The dominance of the color-blind ideology notwithstanding, questions of race
continue to be a source of discomfort within American society. And race becomes an
unavoidable issue for a league that is 76% Black yet depends on the support of an
affluent and mainly-White ticket buying audience. As I’ve written, the color-blind
ideology is an important element in White Americans’ attempts to negotiate a new
meaning of race in the post-Civil Rights era. Unsurprisingly, the NBA to a large
extent attempts to manage its racial representations in a way that avoids challenging
White fans’ avowed color-blindness. It seeks to construct a fantasy world of race
relations which obscures racial difference and reinforces dominant conceptions. This
is important to the league in two ways. First, it prevents the league’s White fans from
feeling uncomfortable rooting for Black players. But second, through allowing fans
to reconcile with the young Black man through supporting him on the court, the
league also profits from their potential discomfort around racial issues.

Aaron Baker, drawing on Richard Dyer’s work on utopian representations in
popular culture, argues that the world of basketball presents a utopia in which hard
work is the only factor in whether players fail or succeed (2000). As a microcosm of
society, this glosses over existing racial and structural inequalities that may
significantly restrain opportunities for particular social groups. It also posits that for anyone, the most effective path to success is playing within the rules, working hard while not undermining the status quo. In Baker’s words:

The conservatism of utopian entertainment comes from how it offers representations of a better life, if we just follow the rules and try harder. In other words, not only does such utopian entertainment avoid suggesting specific ways to change the current social reality, but it promises us happiness if we adhere to the status quo (2000, 221).

In some sense, Baker’s argument that basketball success is based only on hard work contradicts the racial categories of style that cast Whites as hard workers and Blacks as naturally gifted. In fact, basketball common sense indicates that hard work is not the only factor in a player’s success—it helps to be Black. But basketball does present a world in which one’s playing ability (as determined by some combination of natural talent and hard work) is what is important. The fact that Black men are seen as advantaged even follows the New Right’s critique of welfare and affirmative action programs, which supposedly create a society in which Blacks have an edge. Though this ideology breeds somewhat antagonistic attitudes toward Blacks, the significance of the color-blind ideology to the self-definition of White Americans also causes them to seek to relate to Black men in a different way—a way in which they may not be able to in their normal daily lives.

Recent studies have found that housing segregation persists in the United States, with even middle-class Blacks channeled away from White middle-class neighborhoods (Logan et. al 2004). Most Whites live apart from Black Americans, shop at different stores, and send their children to schools with few to no Black students. The color-blind ideology dictates that racial differences have been dispelled. But many White Americans are exposed to Black Americans only through the media,
which saturates the airwaves and cable wires with negative images of Black criminals. As a result, young Black men have been constructed as, in the words of rapper Chuck D, “public enemy number one,” the boogeyman of White America.

This fear of Black men challenges White Americans’ self-identified color-blindness. Cultural arguments such as ethnicity theory are used to explain the poverty of the Black community, and may also explain some of the violence. But it is true nonetheless that the fear of Black males based solely on the fact that they are Black males undermines the color-blind ideology. For White Americans (particularly of the privileged classes) who generally don’t have contact with the Black community, NBA fan-hood functions psychologically as a way of reconciling with the young Black male, rejecting this fear, and therefore reaffirming both their colorblindness and their own social position. The NBA offers images of massive Black men, clearly capable of physical violence and culturally constructed as terrifying. But the NBA portrays them as charitable, fun-loving, and embodying middle-class values.

One of the ways the league does this is through the “NBA Cares” program, avowedly a “social responsibility initiative” designed to encourage community service from teams and players (http://www.nba.com/nba_cares/). In fact, though no doubt community service gets done, its main purpose seems to be to provide ample opportunity for NBA film crews to get footage of players volunteering. This footage is then made into commercials which air during games and show players cleaning up parks, building playgrounds, and reading to young children. With “NBA Cares” the league is to some extent—like many businesses—simply investing in its image with the community. But in the league’s portrayal of its Black players as unthreatening
Cosby-figures, this takes on racial significance as well. In a similar vein, television broadcasters and special segments often discuss the players’ lives and personalities during televised games. Most often, players are portrayed as family men, religious devotees, or, returning to the still acceptable racial representations of the Harlem Globetrotters, as jokesters.\textsuperscript{15}

The NBA, however, depends largely on players to enact this racial meaning. Though the league may run countless “NBA Cares” ads during games, and though announcers can go blue in the face telling charming personal anecdotes about Black players, one controversial and well thought out statement by an Isiah Thomas (or even a fit of anger by a Ron Artest) does a good deal of damage to the NBA’s fantasy world of a raceless utopia. It is therefore important for the league to restrain its players’ ability and motivation to speak out on racial issues.

The Slanted Playing Field in the Struggle for Racial Meaning

I’ve described the construction of race in the NBA as a struggle between assignment by the league and assertion by players. But this battle for racial meaning does not take place on a level playing field. Dominant racial ideology, in its various incarnations throughout time, dictates the terms of the struggle for racial meaning. In general, the league has sought to uphold dominant racial meaning to comfort its fan base, while players, insofar as they’ve resisted, have gone against hegemonic conceptions of race. The advantage for the racial ideology preferred by the league is not only that it agrees with the most popularly held beliefs. Dominant conceptions of

\textsuperscript{15} These portrayals extend to White as well as Black players. However, they all fit within an overall project of portraying the NBA—a Black cultural sphere—as acceptable and unthreatening to mainstream America.
race (such as the color-blind ideology of the New Right racial project) are powerful in part because of their ability to cast themselves as apolitical descriptions of the way things are. The NBA is therefore able to portray its racial representations as natural and neutral. Conversely, players’ contestations are recognized as political and criticized as such. Sports occupy a unique and privileged place within American society. They are thought to represent not only egalitarian utopias, but also a sphere divorced from politics. The prevailing ethic that sports are apolitical underlies most of the ways through which players are discouraged from challenging the league’s racial representations.

The process begins, however, long before players make it to the NBA. William C. Rhoden calls the system that trains and delivers young athletes to college and professional sports the “Conveyor Belt” (2006). This begins with widespread organized youth leagues, and then picks out the better players for more competitive teams and eventually showcase games in front of scouts. But the Belt is not just a means to develop the abilities of young athletes. The adults who run it—whether coaches and scouts at various levels or employees of sponsoring organizations such as shoe companies—also instill the values and attitudes demanded of athletes in the public eye. Rhoden writes:

The Belt is... designed to dull any racial consciousness and eliminate communal instincts. Instead, the Belt cultivates a culture of racial know-nothingism. Indeed, the act of “processing” athletes along the Conveyor Belt involves a significant and often subtle element of “deprogramming” potential troublemakers—black athletes who might be tempted to think of themselves, or their situations, in racial terms... On the Conveyor Belt, young athletes quickly learn that easy passage through a white-controlled system is contingent upon not “rocking the boat,” not being a “troublemaker,” and making those in positions of power feel comfortable with the athletes’ blackness (Rhoden 2006, 178).

From an early age, therefore, promising Black athletes are taught that political or racial statements have no place in sports; indeed, that being politically outspoken
will jeopardize one’s career. Once they make it to the league players have agents to remind them that controversial statements may hurt their image, making them less attractive as players and also potentially cutting them off from lucrative sponsorship deals. The sports media also reinforces the ethic that sports should be apolitical (while, of course, generally ignoring the extent to which basketball reinforces dominant ideology). ESPN radio, for example, offers a “Just Shut Up” award that often “rewards” players for controversial statements. And sports columnists are quick to jump on players who overstep their bounds through talking about more than simply how to defend a pick-and-roll.

In 2003, Rasheed Wallace, a talented power forward then with the Portland Trailblazers, challenged the NBA’s raceless utopia and attacked the league for its desire to have players it can manipulate. The response to Wallace’s comments gives an idea of what outspoken players can expect. In the story, which ran on the front page of the Oregonian and received national attention, Wallace criticized the NBA’s “white establishment:”

I ain't no dumb-ass nigger out here. I'm not like a whole bunch of these young boys out here who get caught up and captivated into the league. No. I see behind the lines. I see behind the false screens. I know what this business is all about. I know the commissioner of this league makes more than three-quarters of the players in this league. There's a whole lot of crunching numbers that, quote-unquote, me as an athlete and me as an NBA player should know. In my opinion, they just want to draft niggers who are dumb and dumber—straight out of high school. That's why they're drafting all these high school cats, because they come into the league and they don't know no better. They don't know no better, and they don't know the real business, and they don't see behind the charade. They look at black athletes like we're dumb-ass niggers. It's as if we're just going to shut up, sign for the money and do what they tell us (Arnold 2002).

Wallace was ripped by national media, talk radio, and the league office, criticized for his language and ridiculed for the notion that a player making $17 million a year could be exploited. In a search of the Boston Globe, Washington Post,
New York Times, Hartford Courant, Los Angeles Times, and Wall Street Journal, I found only a single article (by Rhoden of the “Conveyor Belt” metaphor) that treated Wallace’s comments with any sympathy or engaged with them as a serious criticism (Rhoden 2003). Serena Roberts of the New York Times ridiculed Wallace for his implication that race might still be an issue: “Inside Rasheed Wallace's percolating head, there must be a frayed Post-It note tacked to his senses as a reminder of a time when he was discarded, denigrated or treated as third-class mail because of his color.” Dave Kindred of the LA Times was more blunt, calling Wallace’s comments evidence of an “epidemic of dumb.” NBA commissioner David Stern released a statement saying:

Mr. Wallace's hateful diatribe was ignorant and offensive to all N.B.A. players. I refuse to enhance his heightened sense of deprivation by publicly debating with him. Since Mr. Wallace did not direct his comments at any particular individuals other than me, I think it best to leave it to the Trail Blazers' organization -- and its players and fans -- to determine the attitudes by which they wish to be defined (Broussard 2003).

To borrow from Wallace, Stern was setting up another false screen. In fact, the NBA does not leave it up to its players to determine the attitudes by which they wish to be defined. And when one of them challenges this, they are told, essentially, to shut up—they have already signed for the $17 million dollars, and have nothing to complain about. Certainly, Wallace’s use of the word “nigger” introduced another factor. It allowed Stern to use words like “hateful,” “ignorant,” and “offensive” while completely dismissing Wallace’s main point. When Rasheed Wallace apologized for offending people (under compulsion, I would assume, from the league), he expressed regret for “using street language to express my opinion because everyone has focused on these few comments when I said other things” (Broussard 2003).
It’s tempting to criticize Wallace for using the n-word when it made (or, perhaps, allowed) his critics to pass over his greater message. But the n-word is more than, as Stern called it, hateful language. The word is no longer simply a racial slur and is now used commonly within the Black community, associated particularly with hip hop (or in Wallace’s terms, street) culture. In using it, he was identifying with “the streets”—his cultural roots within the poor Black community. The word also retains some of its racist disrespectful undertones, symbolically in line with Wallace’s criticism of how the league treats players. The content of the statement criticized the league’s infantilization of Black players, and his language reinforced the gaps between players and the NBA power structure. Moreover, the implication of his apology—that his language was commonplace and inoffensive on the street—also reinforced difference that the NBA attempts to gloss over.

In at least one way, Wallace turned out to be wrong. The league negotiated a new Collective Bargaining Agreement that, beginning with the 2006 NBA Draft, prevented teams from selecting high school players. But Wallace’s comments were astute in other ways. The league does value players who uncritically enact its desired racial meaning. And when players refuse to do so, the league joins the media in attacking them, silencing the transgressor and offering a cautionary example for anyone else who might challenge the league’s preferred racial meaning.

Other players have suffered even more backlash for being politically outspoken. Craig Hodges achieved national notoriety when, on a 1992 visit to the White House with the NBA Champion Chicago Bulls, he wore a dashiki and delivered a hand-written note criticizing the Bush administration’s treatment of the

16 Wallace was raised in inner-city Philadelphia.
poor Black community. Later that summer, Hodges, the three-time defending champion of the NBA 3-point shooting contest, was released by the Bulls. No other team even gave him a tryout. In 1996, Hodges filed a lawsuit alleging the NBA had blacklisted him for his public “Afro-centrism” and political outspokenness (Bondy 1996). Mahmoud Abdul-Rauf also drew the league’s attention in 1996 when he refused to stand for the national anthem, calling the flag a “symbol of oppression, of tyranny” (Diamos 1996). He was suspended indefinitely before agreeing to stand facing downward while reciting Islamic prayers.

Though Craig Hodges, Mahmoud Abdul-Rauf, Rasheed Wallace, and Isiah Thomas are not the only players who have made explicit oppositional statements, examples do not abound. Various social forces—from the dominant racial ideology to the league’s influence to the ethic that sports are apolitical—combine to muzzle most players. It is also possible that Black players, having earned the financial success that is denied to so many other Black men, simply have little interest in challenging the status quo. But in addition to explicit statements of resistance, players have contested dominant racial ideology through the exercise of cultural politics.

Cultural Politics and the Complexity of the Hip Hop Question

In the 1970s Julius Erving and Kareem Abdul-Jabbar both expressed allegiance to Black Power movements through wearing an Afro or adopting an Islamic name and a stern countenance. Each act was tinged with racial symbolism, and challenged dominant racial conceptions. More recently Black players have
affiliated themselves with hip hop culture, which also presents itself in opposition to dominant ideology. In analyzing the cultural politics of hip hop in basketball, I draw on Robin D.G. Kelley’s discussion of a “hidden transcript” constructed by oppressed groups, “a dissident political culture that manifests itself in daily conversations, folklore, jokes, songs, and other cultural practices” (1994, 8). He writes that “particularly for African American urban working-class youth,” cultural politics have the capacity to “contest dominant meanings ascribed to their experiences” (180).

While cultural politics may contest dominant meanings, it is important to interrogate to what extent they represent real resistance.17 Though the public portrayal of hip hop cultural behaviors is an important means through which players have challenged the NBA’s preferred portrayal of race, the league has also profited from its association with hip hop culture. The history of Blackness in popular culture tells us that what may begin as a symbol of resistance is often co-opted and defanged, made unthreatening and often produced for mass consumption. Julius Erving’s Afro, for example, was a symbol of defiance toward White mainstream culture in the context of 1970s Black Power movements. During the Detroit Pistons’ 2004 NBA championship run, however, White fans in expensive seats held up signs that said “Fear the ‘Fro” and even wore Afro wigs in honor of the hairstyle of the team’s center, Ben Wallace. The Afro had lost much of its oppositional meaning, becoming re-

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17 In this section I grapple with the idea of whether hip hop cultural politics can be seen as oppositional given the extent to which the NBA has embraced hip hop culture. I do not specifically address the question of whether cultural rebellion ever really represents resistance or ultimately a form of accommodation. That is an argument for another time. Suffice it to say, in the case of players’ identification with hip hop culture, that cultural politics do challenge the way the NBA seeks to portray race.
signified as simply a distinctive cut. In similar terms, the relationship of the mainstream to hip hop culture has changed since hip hop sprouted from urban ghettos.

Hip hop was invented in the South Bronx in the late 1970s, and nurtured among the poor Black community. By the early 1990s, it had gained national visibility and crossover popularity and was largely taken over by major record labels. This altered the music in important ways, making it formulaic and greatly limiting its potential as a cultural space for the expression of political messages. But even though hip hop is produced by major record labels and marketed to a mainstream audience, it maintains its identity as a Black culture fundamentally in opposition to the mainstream. The modes of dress, speech, and behavior that are associated with hip hop are impossible to understand divorced from their sociopolitical context—their origin and proliferation within inner-city ghettos, areas with low rates of employment, a high incidence of crime, and whose blight is often overlooked by mainstream society (Wacquant 1994).

Hip hop style reflects this orientation. The style of sagging pants originated with an allegiance to the prison population; prisoners weren’t allowed belts and their pants therefore hung low. To sag, therefore, is symbolically to embrace the normally stigmatized criminal identity and reject mainstream laws, values, and norms. Kelley writes that images in the media associate hip hop style with “criminality, violence and (indirectly) police repression.” This popularizes hip hop style among young men “who reinterpret these images as acts of rebellion or outright racist terror.” Identifying with hip hop culture is therefore an adoption of an “outlaw status,” chosen even though it may subject one to police harassment (1994, 205).

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18 In my discussion of hip hop I am greatly indebted to Chang 2005 and Watkins 2005
Importantly, the roots of this outlaw status are in the social and economic disenfranchisement of impoverished Black youth. The Black basketball player who makes it big, of course, is no longer economically disenfranchised. But one of the major demands of hip hop culture is that its adherents “keep it real,” refusing to alter their values and behaviors just because they’ve made it big or to appease mainstream standards (Boyd 2003, 156). In continuing to identify with an outlaw culture, Black players reject the NBA’s creation of a raceless utopia. They maintain their allegiance to a culture of marginalized groups, refusing to allow themselves to be tokenized, held up as evidence that Blacks can assimilate into middle-class White America.

But while these aspects of hip hop culture challenge the league’s preferred racial portrayal, the NBA has also made extensive use of hip hop to market itself. According to Lane, the NBA “went hip hop” in the 1990s, using hip-hop styles and cultural symbols to make its product edgier and more appealing:

In the hip-hop infused 1990s, cheerleaders became “city dancers,” grooving and gyrating to hip-pop in sassy fly girl outfits. Rap music blared from arena speakers during warm-ups, breaks in play, and even (unspeakably to some) select moments of game action… Uniform designs, team logos, and colors became louder, bigger, brighter, and glossier, mirroring the cut and hues of hip-hop clothing and the shine and gleam of gold rope chains and diamond-covered accessories. The NBA began licensing hip-hop-themed products, most famously video games like NBA Jam and its sequels and spinoffs. The NBA Web site assembled downloadable highlight reels of in-your-face dunks and other manhood-dissing moves (2004, 41).

The league, however, was forced to readdress its relationship with hip hop following a series of public eyesores with racial implications in 2004. Most notable among these was the brawl between the Pistons and Pacers, which saw local

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19 Though Black players may still be treated differently based on their race. The story of Celtics rookie Dee Brown, ordered onto the ground at gunpoint by police because he fit the description of a bank robber, is but one instance in which an NBA player has been painfully reminded that his wealth doesn’t exempt him from race-based harassment and discrimination.

20 Though, it should be noted, an important value in hip hop culture is also the classic Capitalist mandate to make a lot of money.
television news broadcasts dominated by images of the Pacers’ Black players charging into the stands and punching White fans. Additionally, in the summer of 2004 Jeff Benedict published *Out of Bounds: Inside the NBA’s Culture of Rape, Violence, and Crime*. The book presented evidence that 40% of NBA players had criminal records, highlighting violence (particularly against women) and drug convictions, both of which are associated in the popular imagination with hip-hop culture (Benedict 2004).

The NBA went into damage-control mode, backing off from its association with hip hop. To reconnect with conservative America the league hired Matthew Dowd, a former GOP strategist fresh from working as a campaign adviser to George Bush’s 2004 reelection campaign (Lane 2007, 75). In the new collective bargaining agreement that began in the summer of 2005, owners negotiated a new dress code forcing players to wear business casual for all team and league functions. The new dress code explicitly banned oversized jeans, sunglasses indoors, baseball caps, do-rags, chains, and pendants—all markers of hip hop culture (Lane 2007, 79).

To some extent, the league’s treatment of hip hop may be explained by its different audiences. Though hip hop expresses oppositional values, it has become a highly popular mainstream musical genre. While the NBA’s potential renters of luxury suites may be less drawn in by hip hop imagery and music, the league’s broader audience—particularly younger fans—are likely to enjoy it. But because the NBA must avoid offending its well-heeled fans it faces different challenges from the record labels and clothing designers who market hip hop cultural products to a more
specific audience that identifies with or at least appreciates an outlaw status. The NBA must carefully manage the hip hop images it portrays, treating hip hop as, in Lane’s words, “an embraced but contained culture” (2007, 45). Or, in more blunt and slightly less academic fashion: “the NBA’s appropriated version of hip-hop was corny and watered down” (Lane 2007, 41).

The cultural politics of hip hop developed as a hidden transcript contesting dominant meanings. Hip hop culture rejects mainstream values and authority and embraces an outlaw status. Hip hop’s oppositional elements, however, have been challenged by the absorption of hip hop culture into the mainstream. Importantly, and particularly in the case of the NBA, it has not been absorbed and accepted wholly as is. The NBA has attempted to sanitize and contain hip hop images to avoid offending its middle- to upper-class audience. But, as in representations of Blackness as a whole, players are the primary social actors who enact the meaning of hip hop culture. Players who “keep it real” act out the defiance of hip hop culture that the league avoids. The literature has focused on the NBA’s use and transformation of hip hop (Boyd 2003, Lane 2007). But the meaning and identity of hip hop as portrayed through the NBA has, like race as a whole, been a contested subject. Though the league has now successfully controlled the way players dress for team functions, hip hop culture is much more than oversized jeans with a do-rag and a chain. Through the way they talk, act, and carry themselves (for example, Rasheed Wallace’s use of “street language”), many players express their allegiance to hip hop’s outlaw status.

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21 Although I do not mean to say that record labels and clothing designers do not also seek to represent hip hop imagery in a particular way. To paraphrase Boyd’s analysis of a prism through which Black culture is filtered, they also give hip hop a particular meaning. Because of the difference audience they are attempting to appeal to, however, they can usually afford to be less conservative than the NBA.
And though hip hop products are consumed in great numbers by the White community, it is still an undeniably Black cultural movement. Insofar as players contest dominant meanings through affiliating themselves with hip hop culture, therefore, they emphasize a conception of Blackness that is in opposition to dominant culture.

Importantly, hip hop’s outlaw status—scary and perhaps incomprehensible to the NBA’s well-heeled fans—asserts the fact that young Black men have a very different experience in America than most Whites. Because of their race, and because of the conditions in which they live, they relate differently to the law and mainstream institutions like the police. The cultural politics of hip hop, therefore, assert the continuing significance of race, and debunk the color-blind ideology.

**Conclusion**

The way race is conceived of in American society has important consequences for political, economic, and social relations. Racial ideology and the social relations that spring from it have always been a contested terrain, from the days of slavery to the movements of the 1960s to the current post-Civil Rights era. Though Black Americans have certainly made gains, racial ideology that continues to support inequality has proven remarkably flexible. The New Right racial project has now become dominant, stressing the color-blind ideology while utilizing cultural arguments to justify ongoing inequalities. In the modern racial climate, popular culture is an important arena for the reproduction of the racial common sense that supports these cultural arguments. Professional basketball, as one of the few spaces
in which Blackness is the norm, takes on particular importance in disseminating, on a nightly basis, a series of ideas about Black men.

To a large extent, these ideas reflect and reproduce the dominant ideology of the New Right racial project. Racial common sense, after all, influences the way that Black men are perceived, whether playing basketball or walking down the street. And the NBA also seeks to reinforce dominant ideology to avoid alienating affluent fans. Even further, the league has been able to profit from the discomfort that attends racial issues by allowing fans who claim color-blindness but are largely isolated from Black Americans the illusion of a connection with Black players.

It is these Black players themselves, however, who are the primary social actors in the construction of race in the NBA. Much as the league seeks to control their behavior, and much as they are taught that sports are apolitical and race is no longer an issue in American society, players are largely free to act as they wish. Isiah Thomas criticized the deep-seated racial undercurrent that underlies the game and leads to different attitudes and expectations towards White and Black players—attitudes that caused him to be treated unfairly (and with racist undertones) in the media. Rasheed Wallace spoke out against the ways the league sought to exploit and control the behavior of its Black players. Players who express cultural politics beyond the elements of hip hop the NBA deems unthreatening respond to the mandate to “keep it real,” and reaffirm their allegiance to a community that has been marginalized as part of the racialization of American society.

In all of these examples, players challenge dominant racial ideology, dispelling the color-blind myth that is integral to the New Right racial project. It
would be naïve to overemphasize the role that the racial meaning portrayed in the NBA has played in supporting racial projects that recognize the continuing significance of race and seek to create a society that is truly color-blind (or, at least, in which race doesn’t correlate with inequality). But at the very least, the world of professional basketball represents a unique space for Black players to assert their own conceptions of racial meaning, whether through explicit statements or cultural resistance.
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