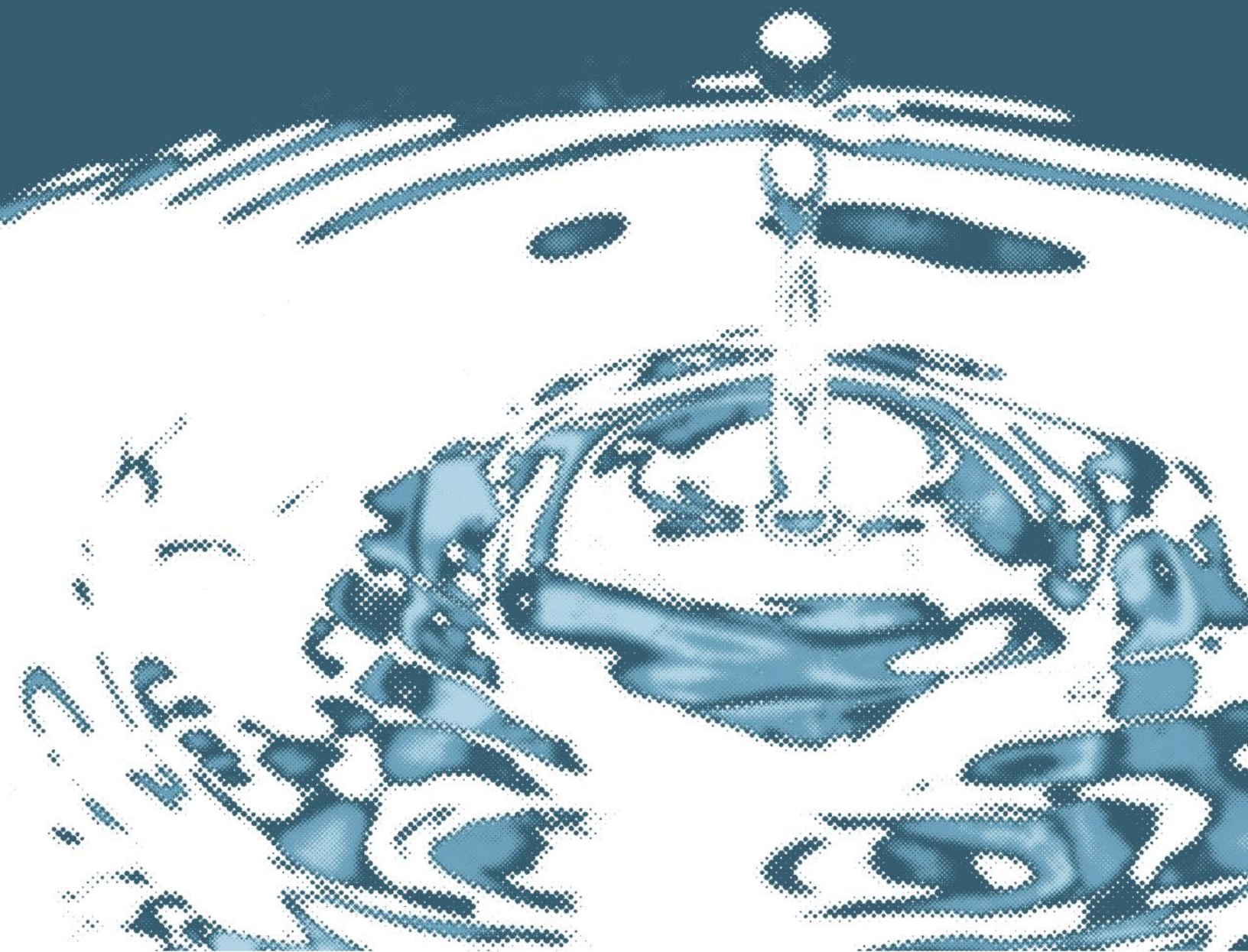


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Racial Ideology and Discourse in the NBA: Ron Artest and the Construction of Black Bodies by White America

Peter Hogarth

The professional sports world embraces much of the classic “American dream” ethos of competition, equal opportunity, family values, heroism, justice, and hard work. It is through pervasive sports media that these ideologies are reinforced and represented through coverage of events and games, as well as spotlight pieces on players and teams. The ideology found in sports radio, newspapers, television, internet discourse and the dominant views of the sports world seems to suggest that racism has been extinct in the sports community since Jackie Robinson broke the colour barrier of professional baseball in 1947. Sport is viewed by many as an equal playing field where the colour of one’s skin does not have any impact on compensation, opportunity or otherwise. This ideology is maintained by a sports media that emphasizes rags-to-riches stories of disadvantaged black players gaining incredible wealth through hard work and dedication while overcoming the dangers of poverty and violence. However, like many marginalized groups in North America, these traits can be elusive to the professional sports community. These meta-narratives ignore the finer racial issues that pervade the sports world, be it “racial stacking”¹ and disparities in opportunity or white dominance of ownership, coaching, and the means of representation.

Colin King (2004a, 2004b), in his study of English professional soccer, writes about an “offside racism” that demands that black players adhere to stricter codes of conduct and remain silent about discriminatory treatment. George Yancy (2005) describes the white construction of a black identity that is marked as hyper visible and, thus, under constant surveillance and scrutiny from itself and from the narrating white power which remains invisible and inculpable in the process. The works of King and Yancy will be mobilized as theoretical lenses in a discursive analysis of a significant event that recently shocked the sports world.

The so-called “Malice at the Palace,” which occurred during a Detroit Pistons versus Indiana Pacers basketball game in Auburn Hills, Michigan, on December 19, 2004, began in the final minute of the game with Indiana leading 97–82, when Ron Artest, a member of the Indiana Pacers, shoved Detroit Pistons player Ben Wallace after a hard foul. The fight escalated when Artest, who was lying down on the commentators’ desk while his teammates scuffled with Detroit opponents, was struck by a drink thrown



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from the stands. Artest jumped into the stands and began fighting Pistons fans, which prompted other teammates and fans to join in, resulting in a massive brawl between fans and players. Players and fans alike were punched and threw punches, and the game was called with 45 seconds left as the Pacers' players left the auditorium being showered with beverages, popcorn and other projectiles. Several players from both teams received 5–30-game suspensions and some spectators, including Ben Wallace's brother, were charged with assault and banned from the arena, while Ron Artest received an 86-game suspension.

The discourses surrounding the event, and the meanings encoded therein, provide interesting indicators of the ideologies shaping sports media. How is the coverage of black players fighting white fans framed in the context of a predominantly black sport? How does this fit with the existing scholarly discourse regarding racial representation in sports and other media? How is the fan/player relationship in a sport that consists largely of white fans watching black players represented in media discourse? The public discourse that followed this event reveals the incredible differences in the public ideals of the game and reality of the unspoken ideology that surrounds professional basketball. Out of the interplay between the predominantly white audience of the National Basketball Association (NBA) and the overwhelmingly black composition of the league, there seems to emerge deep-seated racist ideologies that manifest themselves in seemingly innocent decisions, league administration and fan discourse. A reading of the sports media texts and dialogue reveals a heightened pressure on black players to conform to the moral and ethical economy of the professional sports leagues. Furthermore, there is a possessive colonizing white gaze that emerges from the discourse that frames the actions of black athletes and demands subservience or “knowing your place.” The possessive colonization of black bodies and the fine line that they tread between the desire and disgust of the fans ostensibly characterizes the representations of black males in North American popular culture and, thus, informs the spectatorial relationship between the white fans of the NBA and its predominantly black athletes.

Ideology shapes the images and stories that are produced for public consumption of media events. Stuart Hall (1990) provides a valuable conceptual base for the examination of such events, as he addresses the ways media, deliberately or tacitly, construct race in a way that reproduces ideologies of racism (p. 8). Ideologies are not made up of isolated or separate concepts, but rather a sum of different elements into a distinctive chain of meaning or understanding (Hall, p. 9). Ideological statements, for instance as voiced by the sports reporter or individuals, are not the product of individual awareness, but rather are influenced by the inescapable framework of the

ideological foundations in which these statements were articulated (Hall, p. 9). Consequently, statements made with no intention of being overtly, or even subtly, racist can support an ideology of racism as they may unknowingly maintain the racist hegemonic framework of the society in which they were created. It is this understanding of the power of ideology that allows for a discursive analysis of the coverage and response to the Ron Artest event and subsequent suspension.

The professional sports world is not exempt from the ideological system of entrenched racial knowledge, and the representation of blacks in sport has suffered as a result. Hall (1990) defines the difference between overt racism and inferential racism, which is the “seemingly normal representations of events relating to race that have premises inscribed into them as a set of unquestionable assumptions” (p. 13). Thus, in examining the representations of events that, ostensibly, have little to do with racial issues, it is important to recognize that the hegemony of racist ideologies has become so self-evident through years of exposure that the dominant ideology is just seen as “normal reality of commonsense” (hooks, 1996, p. 75). It is valuable to concede that overtly racist ideologies and speech are not likely to be uttered or reinforced in popular sports media. Rather, it is this more insidious commonsense racism that manifests itself as accepted truths in sports dialogue.

When analyzing racial representations in sports, it is important to attest to the highly mediated relationship that exists between player and fan, especially when considering that the players of the NBA are predominantly black while the audience is predominantly white. bell hooks (2007) notes the “liberal belief in a universal subjectivity (we are all just people)” ignores the “primacy of whiteness as a sign informing who they [people] are and what they think” (p. 487). Consequently, it is important to interrogate the media representation of white spectatorship of black athletes, as it is assumed that the world of sports is completely colour blind. This ignores the ideological framework of commonsense racism that influences the NBA spectator. What is at stake is the representation of black men to white America. Thus, it is important to look at some of the theories regarding racial representation and the construction of black bodies in the white imaginary.

The issues concerning the representation and identification of black bodies consists of three primary points: the obsession with a perceived biological endowment, the white gaze’s power in constructing the black identity and, finally, the return of the black body to its owner as something outside of his own power to define.

The period of American slavery saw the reduction of human beings deemed “black” to things. This dehumanization of the slave made him or her into a quantifiable object, able to be traded as a commodity. While the extremities of slavery’s physical abuse are gone, the commodification of black bodies continues, to a certain degree, in the sports world. There is a mystified image of the black athlete through an obsession with his body (King, p. 19). Popular myths reinforce and create fascination with the supposed natural athleticism of the African-American male, who is inherently gifted with muscularity, strength and speed (Andrews, 2001, p. 120). John Edgar Wideman describes this as a contemporary slavery, in which black men have been “caged” within this notion of black masculinity, as these long-standing representations of black masculinity and physicality are built on the animalistic representations of the black male body that have long been the site of white fascination, consumption and fear (Guzzio, 2005, pp. 223–224). Thus, this obsession with the perceived physical advantages of black males, which makes them heroized figures, is the same obsession that pathologizes black bodies and manifests as paranoia and suspicion on the part of the white colonizer (Guzzio, p. 229).

The starkest example of this dichotomy of fear and reverence can be seen in Reagan’s America. Andrews (2001) notes that “the hegemony of the New Right fashioned a network of racially focused affective epidemics, which mobilized white fears and insecurities in the face of what became articulated as the increasingly threatening black presence in America” (p. 116). These mass-media discourses posited African-Americans as naturally deviant, unproductive, irresponsible, uncivilized, and promiscuous, particularly in opposition to preferred white norms (Andrews, p. 117). Ironically, the Reagan era also saw the rise and unparalleled fame and influence of Michael Jordan. As Ronald Reagan observed, Michael Jordan “allows us to believe what we wish to believe: that in this country, have-nots can still become haves; that the American dream is still working” (Andrews, p. 125). Jordan was figured as a suitable role model compared to the “typical” black athlete; he was wholesome, humble, driven and responsible, unlike the “other Others” (Andrews, p. 125). For instance, *Chicago Tribune* sportswriter Bernie Lincicome commented sarcastically that the Bulls had to take Jordan in the NBA draft, “even though he is already famous, has had quality coaching, is not a social disgrace and may likely become the next Julius Erving before the old one is in the Hall of Fame” (Andrews, p. 122). The implication seems to be that unlike the other pathologically criminal or disgraceful blacks, Jordan is not a social disgrace. A distinction of the binaries of black public representation could not be clearer. The black body becomes a site of contestation for the white imaginary, between the threatening criminal and the heroic ball player.

The white fascination with the black body is important, in that the white gaze has come to define and construct representations of African-Americans, thus ascribing a set of cultural values which define a people that have historically had little voice. George Yancy (2005) describes the ways in which the white gaze both constructs and projects the white imaginary of the black body onto black bodies such that that subjectivity becomes a lived reality (p. 216). The body's meaning is fundamentally subjective, but the black body has a meaning fixed upon it through the repetition and reiteration of symbols and signs that support certain norms (Yancy, p. 216). In other words, media representations of blacks portray them as predominantly athletes or deviants, ascribing a meaning to them that is hard to contest without access to the means of representation. The dominant representations are so pervasive that the ability to self-construct a black identity is elusive (Yancy, p. 216).

Yancy (2005) suggests that the construction of identity for the African-American reinforces the hyper-visibility of black and the invisibility of white (p. 219). Whiteness is a diverse signifier which contains a plethora of varying identities, characters and positions under its invisible umbrella, while blackness has been naturalized as a signifier which represents a homogeneous group that is easily classified as essentially deviant and physical. The white gaze is not passive, relying on what Roland Barthes (1978) called a "historical grammar" (p. 22) or the existence of a repository of stereotyped attitudes which form the basis of signification, it applies meaning to the hyper-visible black bodies upon which it gazes, affixing meaning to them in the public arena through the processes of representation. The intermediality of the images of black men in popular culture and the sociohistorical stereotypes that reinforce an ideology of commonsense racism work together to reassert a definition of the black body that is not defined by the people that inhabit those bodies. Consequently, Yancy claims that the internalization of the white gaze "creates doubleness within the psyche of the Black, leading to a destructive process of superfluous self-surveillance and self-interrogation" (p. 219).

Here, the issues of hyper-visibility and invisibility become most important. The double consciousness that Yancy claims exists in the black mind, between outside constructions of black life and actual lived reality, also exists in the media representations of white fans. White reaction to the event exemplified the outspoken denial of race while demarcating the black body as distinctly visible and different, illustrating a double consciousness that combines an historical legacy of racism with a liberal belief in virtuous colour-blind values. This double-consciousness is only publicly revealed in coded signifiers. Judging from the reactions to the Artest incident, many

white commentaries denied the factor of race in the whole affair, rendering it an invisible signifier on the part of their discourse, except for acknowledging that “hip-hop” and “star-athlete egos” were to blame for the conflict. By not acknowledging the overwhelming whiteness of the fans (merely referring to them as fans) and clearly demarcating the qualities of blackness of the players according to popular norms (hip-hop, gangs, selfishness, emotion and anger), the dominant discourse of the event serves to reaffirm the invisibility of whiteness and the glaring visibility of blackness. By reifying the transparency of the white fans in Artest’s conflict, the coverage enabled white basketball fans and white America in general to escape their part in constructing a subjectivity that is fit only for blacks.

It is in the white imaginary and its sociohistorically rooted subjectivity that posits the NBA as a site of potential deep-rooted conflict between desire, disgust, and the repression of both. We have seen how the black body has been constructed as both animal and super-human in the same breath, as homosexual projections of rivalry and desire from a white imaginary that covets the potent and dehumanizing male sexuality that it has created through a legacy of historical representation (Lott, 2006, p. 247). The body is desired for its imagined superior athleticism, physicality, raw power and speed, and also feared for its potential aggression and the latent sexual desires that it conjures in spectator fantasies. Consequently, the media discourse surrounding the Artest event displays a double-consciousness on the part of white NBA fans that demands from black players both superior athletic accomplishments and heightened compliance to the rules of the game and the norms of American society. The double-consciousness asserts that black players are more than welcome to use their animalistic bodies for entertainment purposes, stoking the reserve of highly sexualized images that make up the white imagination of the black body, but must remain servile to these interests and not be overtly threatening or confrontational to the powerful institutions that monitor their performance. Barrett (1997) observed the moral economy that sport and its representations sell throughout North America markets:

The NBA traffics indefatigably in heroism made to conform to the most proprietary standards. Heroism, as it is carefully and lucratively managed by the NBA, as well as US moral and commercial culture, entails a proprietary appeal that, above all, enforces market-driven colonizations of desire (and representation). These colonizations – given their way – would reduce desire in all its material, imaginary, and symbolic manifestations to a narrow set of calculable, idealized civilities and affabilities ultimately resolving

themselves in the heterosexual domestic space ... as an inviolable sanctum. (p. 108)

It is this imperialism of morality which suggests a “neo-colonialism of the black body,” in which the ideologies and histories of racism and colonialism are transmitted onto the black professional athlete’s body by the predominantly white gaze that consumes professional sports. Within the NBA, the sexual desire and fear that maintains the lasting legacy of the hyper-masculine black male results in a set of limits on the expression of black males. This highly performative masculinity, which connotes the beastly, masculine Other, is at the same time trafficked, marketable within a “family values” aesthetic. This reduces it to an acceptable and safe level, much like an amusement park ride. The possessive gaze is affixed to the black public figure, demanding compliance with societal norms above and beyond those expected of white celebrities and athletes. Similar to the black filmmakers studied by hooks (1996), black athletes put under the spotlight of white American scrutiny are expected to adhere to a higher moral code than their white counterparts, for their status is far more tenuous. It is from this perspective that the discursive analysis of the Ron Artest brawl will be situated, recognizing the invisible power of white spectators in shaping the discourses surrounding professional sports, as well as the heightened expectations imposed on the black athletes who become the subjects of these sports narratives.

Through an examination of the discourses drawn by the Artest event, this paper acts as an illustration of Barrett's theory of “sanitary normativity.” Barrett (1997) states that the United States and the NBA subscribe to a sanitized, normative national order; an ideal of American Family values that emphasizes the (white) nuclear family as a precondition for emotional and moral social life and claims a monopoly on ethics, economic life, and public entertainment (p. 109). The predominantly black make-up of the NBA today presents a crisis to the sanitary normativity of the league, as the black bodies of the athletes articulate an otherness that threatens the moral framework within which the NBA operates. However, Barrett (1997) emphasizes that, because race is not a genetic reality, this sanitary normativity is maintained primarily by black players’ social acquiescence to the prohibitions on desire and violent behaviour demanded by the NBA (p. 110). These expectations are clearly articulated by NBA commissioner David Stern; in response to the Artest incident, he states, “the line is drawn, and my guess is that won’t happen again – certainly not by anybody who wants to be associated with our league” (Hall, 2004, ¶ 4). The implication suggests that players must adhere to the prevailing ethos of the league. It is not clear to whom the word “our” refers. One can

certainly infer that black athletes and fans are not included or even considered.

This demand for acquiescence can manifest itself in many ways. For instance, in “Race and Cultural Identity: Playing the Game inside Football,” Colin King (2004b) details a range of common stereotypes about black cultural identity and professional sport in Britain. Perceived as “deviant” within many public institutions, black boys are forced to make sport a central life interest as well as a primary form of identity. Thus sport becomes a mechanism through which authorities can elicit good behavior from black men (p. 20). To synthesize Barrett and King, black men and families violate sanitary norms, and it is through their participation in sports – playing by rules, respecting authority – that they can be allowed into the sanitized mainstream of moral (white) society. The demand for compliance with the mainstream values of commercial American advertising is implicit in the message that players get from many of the rules that are implicitly directed at black players.

Black players are denied the capacity to shape the culture of the professional sports industry, but it is made clear that their compliance is rewarded by privileges not afforded African-Americans who do not play professional sports (King, 2004b, p. 25). In response to the perceived threats of black masculinity to the “cultural logic” of the NBA (Barrett, 1997, p. 109), the league has implemented some rules placing limits on the wardrobes of their players. I suggest that these rules were meant to target black players and limit their impact on the culture of the NBA. The dress code forces players to don dress suits and slacks, and forbids visible large chains, boots, and jeans. Essentially, this rule has targeted the wardrobe most popular with the league’s young, black players. As Stephen Jackson, who plays for the Indiana Pacers and was one of the men suspended in the Artest event, put it,

I have no problem dressing up ... because I know I’m a nice-looking guy. But as far as chains, I definitely feel that’s a racial statement. Almost 100 percent of the guys in the league who are young and black wear big chains. So I definitely don’t agree with that at all. (ESPN.com, October 19, 2005)

The targeting of the fashion choices of black athletes strikes to the heart of the discourse surrounding the Ron Artest suspension. The league targeted the overtly “urban and rap” characteristics of many of the NBA’s players because they are deemed offensive to the sanitary norms that the NBA is trying to sell to white audiences.

This ruling adheres to the commonsense racism (Hall, 1990) that permeates the professional sports world. As a strategy to uncover hidden racism, King (2004b) recommends looking at “the experiences of black men in relation to the actions of white men and how they construct black players and expect them to behave” (p. 26). The covert racism of the dress code can be interpreted as the racist projection of white hegemonic ideals onto black players. For example, Lakers head coach Phil Jackson commented on the dress code ruling, “The players have been dressing in prison garb the last five or six years. All the stuff that goes on, it’s like gangster, thuggery stuff. It’s time. It’s been time to do that” (ESPN.com, October 19, 2005). This statement is emblematic of what George Yancy (2005) refers to as the “constraining of the oppressed to certain approved modes of visibility” (p. 217). In other words, it neutralizes the presence of black males by setting rules that attempt to limit their expressions and maintain sanitary normativity. These discourses, articulated through the media, identify black males as a problem through negative signifiers which are used to represent the essential black subject while never overtly denoting race. King (2004b) details the similarities found in British professional football with an example of a soccer team manager suggesting that a black player cut off his dreadlocks as they are perceived as a threat to the professional standards of the organization (p. 28). This, along with the dress code changes, form what King calls an “offside form” of racism that may be unconscious to the actor, but nevertheless impinges upon the cultural identities of black players (p. 28). The ideology of “offside racism” or commonsense racism is supported in the discourses that accompanied Ron Artest’s suspension.

The most glaringly racist example of the post-brawl reactions came from nationally syndicated radio talk-show host Rush Limbaugh, who stated emphatically that:

This is hip-hop culture on parade. This is gang behavior on parade minus the guns. That’s the culture that the NBA has become. So if anybody will be honest with you about it in the NBA, and a very few will have the courage to, because saying what I just said is going to be tagged as racist, but I, my friends, am fearless, when it comes to this because the truth will out, and that’s what’s happening here, and part and parcel of this gang culture, this hip-hop culture, is: “I’m not going to tolerate being dissed. I’m not going to be disrespected,” and “disrespected” is now so broad that it includes somebody looking at you the wrong way. (Media Matters for America, November 23, 2004)

Limbaugh's comments underscore the perception that views anything identifiably black (in this case, a fashion sense) as inherently threatening. Painting with a broad brush, Limbaugh indicts rap culture (black culture) and Detroit (an 85 percent non-white city), recommending that Detroit be named "New Fallujah." The event is therefore being framed in a manner that serves to support racist assumptions. While hoping to deflect criticisms by admitting that his remarks would be labeled as racist, Limbaugh produces an argument that, without ever explicitly saying "black," constructs African-Americans as a problem. Ignoring the facts that the fight was ostensibly instigated by a white fan not a black player, the brawl occurred in the Auburn Hills suburb not Detroit, and nowhere in any of the footage of the fight was there anything that could be somehow linked to hip-hop or gang culture (other than the presence of black bodies), Limbaugh cast the event as pertaining only to urban, poor, young, black men. This bias is especially glaring when one watches the footage of rowdy, middle-aged white fans able to afford court-side seats, throwing drinks and landing punches (Clair, 2004).

From Limbaugh's reading of the events, though an extreme example, we can identify the ideologies of white invisibility and black hyper-visibility at play in the way sports and public life are represented in North America. Narratives such as these allow sports media and fans to absolve themselves of their part in constructing what Yancy (2005) calls a "racial regional ontology," in which the invisible white is unable to experience the racial dualism that it has created (p. 221). Constructing the problem as completely racial without explicitly saying as much serves to convince whites of their "natural superiority," further defining whites as invisible and marking blacks as hyper visible (Yancy, p. 221). In this process, a naturalized vision of the invisible white and the visible problematic black is created, which consequently reifies the image of blacks as an alienated other. The problem of the hyper-visibility of black athletes is supported by a family friend of Ron Artest's when questioned shortly after the incident:

What is reflected here is we're seeing manifestation of how we're really thought of in white America. How white males view black athletes – how dare this man think he can walk away to make a rap album? They go to these games to insult people. The depth of the insults is ridiculous. Everyone [in the league] has been told to accept this on a nightly basis. And there is no price on dignity. (Wise & Jenkins, 2004, Intensity vs. Desperation section, ¶ 8)

This perspective of the incident, presented by an urban black voice, counters the interpretations of the "voiceful" dominant views (de B'beri, 2006), such

as Limbaugh's. The hyper-visibility of black athletes enacts a reproduction of narratives positing the black body's subjectivity as a lived reality (Yancy, p. 216). In other words, the white imaginary has constructed a reality in which racism cannot exist in the sports world, because "some of their favourite players are black" or fans cheer for whoever is getting the job done on the court or on the field. However, there appears to be an insidious element at play here that, whether unconscious or merely unspoken, identifies black players as different from white players. An indicator of this can be found in scouting reports that almost uniformly describe black players by their physical attributes and "tendency to take plays off," while describing white players by their mental abilities and work ethic (Woodward, 2002). It appears that in the sports world direct actions of racism are not the major problem, but rather it is all those beliefs, behaviors, practices and processes that contribute directly or indirectly in the racialization of certain groups (Long, 2004).

This double-consciousness, articulated in sports media discourses, clearly demarcates a problem with black players, families, and communities through covert racial signifiers. It is indicative of the complicated interplay that goes on in the NBA between the nature of black representation in America and the task of selling a league that is primarily African-American to white American fans. This paradoxical relationship exists in the disparity between popular images of black masculinity, between that of the dangerous criminal and the lionized professional basketball player. Kobena Mercer (1994) articulates the problem:

on the front page headlines black males become highly visible as a threat to white society, as muggers, rapists, terrorists and guerilla: their bodies become the image of a savage and unstoppable capacity for destruction and violence. But turn to the back pages, the sports pages, and the black man's body is heroized and lionized; any hint of antagonism is contained by the paternalistic infantilization of [black men] to the status of national mascots and adopted pets – they're OK because they are "our boys." (pp. 178–179)

It is evident that the representations of black males in the media are primarily either extremely positive – as in athletics – or extremely negative – as in the reporting of violent crime. However, in the case of Ron Artest's fight and subsequent suspension these two areas have been merged, confronting basketball fans with a synthesis of the two most popular images of black males in American society, athlete and criminal. This synthesis has a history of drawing big headlines, as in the cases of O.J. Simpson, Ben Johnson, and

Ray Lewis.² Additionally problematic is the colonization of these young black men by sports media that are eager to satisfy public desires for images of hyper-masculinity and aggression (Lott, 2006).

The conceptions of black Americans that reside in the white imaginary collided in the Ron Artest incident. Basketball stars, a group of black players selected for their athletic skills and ability to follow rules, crossed the line between spectator and spectacle. The sanitary norms had been violated; consequently, public discourse reverted to popular representations of blacks as thugs, criminals and malcontents. It is here that we see the rise of the view of white fans and white America that these black athletes violated the unspoken rules of conduct in which white America states, “We have allowed you into our realm, you are rich, and you should be grateful and keep your mouth shut.” The black body is both policed and celebrated by the white gaze (Gray, 1995, p. 401).

This assertion was supported by many of the responses to the “NBA fight night.” An article by Roy Pickering (2004), entitled “Ron Artest starts brawl – David Stern finishes it,” opines that “Ron Artest was able to enjoy all the perks of being young, rich, and famous. To maintain them, he needed only to play the game and keep his pampered fists to himself. This proved too difficult a task for him.” Implicit in this statement is the suggestion that young, black athletes are given millions of dollars to play a game and should be grateful to the league for allowing them to use their genetic athletic “gifts” to earn a quality of life that they could not otherwise expect to obtain (King, 2004b, p. 19).

Shortly after the incident, former professional basketball player and current TV host, Charles Barkley, himself a black man, said, “[NBA players] have to understand the racial undercurrent in the NBA. The fans look at this stuff as black millionaires acting stupid” (Dix, 2007, ¶ 12). This statement rearticulates many of the negative media reactions to the brawl at the Palace; black athletes are expected to grin and bear it. “Learning to take it,” as coaches will tell players, means learning to accept the abuse that is part of the sport, be it jokes, taunts or otherwise (Long, 2004, p. 416). These attitudes manifest themselves in demands that the minority group conform to majority practices, as perceived differences are used to justify racist actions on the part of the majority (Long, p. 417). This can be seen in decisions regarding the NBA dress code, or the banning of bandanas in professional football. Black players are taught that they must comply with these prevailing norms, and in doing so they are rewarded with the passage into the privileged realm of professional sport (King, 2004b, p. 25). Consequently, black players must accept the abuses and disparities in the world of sport or be labeled as

trouble, or as having a “chip on his shoulder” (King, p. 27). This label is often used to describe black players by coaches, management and the media, constructing their behavior as developing from a lack of character, motivation and so forth, while downplaying the power imbalances that disadvantage black players and keep them voiceless and discontented. Conversely, these same qualities in whites, such as intensity or stubbornness, are demonstrated as traits indicative of success (King, 2004a, p. 24). Here, the dynamics of the white power gaze reveal themselves.

The NBA profits from the performances of black men, while simultaneously trying to limit the cultural impact that they can have on the game and the public. As previously indicated in regards to dress code regulations, commissioner David Stern and the ruling body of the NBA demand marketability or, at the very least, silence from their players (Guzzio, 2005, p. 228). Spectatorship becomes a complex site where race and prejudice are mapped onto a stage that is difficult to articulate in terms of stark racist binaries. Thus, media coverage becomes a complex arena for racial discourse, enacting the double consciousness of desire and disgust that characterizes the portrayals of black males in sports media discourses. The rhetoric of the media, speaking on behalf of fans, is that these “overpriced prima donnas” ought to shrug off physical abuse from fans because they are paid handsomely to do so. This presents a host of problematic issues that must be unpacked. The aforementioned white obsession with the black body further complicates the fan-athlete relationship in that the marketing of these incredibly tall, muscular and athletic black bodies comes to symbolize the exotic Other, and has enslaved the African-American athlete in a “silent melodrama” (Guzzio, p. 228). This white gaze towards the exotic, black body promotes negative attitudes about urban African-Americans, reduces black men to statistics: height, weight, vertical jump, crime, unemployment, welfare, drug use (Guzzio, p. 229). The mystification of the black male in public representations is manifested in the harsh contradictions of desire and disgust in American sports discourse.

Within desire and disgust, the floating signifier of the black body can be affixed as the situation dictates. In the case of Michael Jordan, he was recognized as the American Dream personified; a black man who, through sheer will, determination, perseverance and hard work, became a nationally revered celebrity and role model – the embodiment of American work ethic and meritocracy (Andrews, 2001, p. 125). However, the pendulum can swing the other way, as is evidenced by the nameless black faces that grace newspapers and televisions as suspects or perpetrators of crimes. This can also be the case for basketball personalities. In the wake of the brawl and suspension, Ron Artest was labeled a discipline problem and “too emotional.”

Media coverage agreed that it was only a matter of time before he erupted, as one article deemed him a “ticking time bomb” (Whitaker, 2004). The same intensity that garnered him the defensive MVP the season before was now seen as uncontrollable and a danger to the league. The discourse of professional basketball articulates an environment that seems to demand more from black players, in terms of character, performance, talent and work ethic, than it does of white players. The acquiescence of black players is required for them to be accepted into the normative culture of the NBA.

The complex dualities of desire and disgust that characterize underlying philosophies of black athlete representations can be attributed to an ideological framework that circumscribes the roles and narratives of the perceived African-American community. Professional basketball becomes “both a celebration of African-American culture and a sign that white America still equates African-Americans primarily with athletic ability” (Guzzio, 2005, p. 223). The ubiquitous “hoops dreams” narrative can be seen as a reinforcement of ideas relating to black physical prowess and mental inferiority (Guzzio, p. 225). In addition, the narrative of young black men playing basketball to “make it out of the ghetto” as their only option to escape poverty, creates pejorative representations of black intelligence. This further restricts the image of black players to that of urban, poor and potentially violent – saved from a life of slinging dope by their abilities to shoot hoops. Furthermore, it can foster a climate of entitlement on the part of white fans which assumes that playing basketball is the only skill that these men have, therefore they must endure whatever abuses come with it.

Thus, popular representations construct the black man as object of worship for his physical skills, or as object of fear and loathing for his violent behavior. The black body is mythologically endowed and demarcated as pathologically criminal. Consequently, this dispositive of black representation creates a hegemonic environment of subtle and offside racism (King, 2004a) in which complex and contrasting elements of racial discourse reside. The white population will accept, even adore, African-Americans, but only if they do not explicitly assert their blackness (Andrews, 2001, p. 128). This is what makes the issue of race infinitely complex in the realm of sports. Because there are so many African-Americans playing professional sports, many fans, players and others associated with the leagues cannot imagine that racism exists on the courts and fields of play – just “good character guys” and “bad character guys.” Thus, the racial undertones of the Artest event, as well as similar controversies, are ignored in favour of less confrontational themes, meanwhile the invisibility of white power remains unchallenged.

The crux of this covert racism towards black players lies in the

transparent nature of white power. White power and control are invisible to the white power-holders, who demand that black players change to accommodate the existing (white) culture. Afraid that changes to sport culture will result in a shift in power within the sports world, those in control ensure that African-American players alter their own behaviour in order to fit seamlessly within existing frameworks and practices. This points implicitly to the establishment of a power over black players that ensures that they do not question their marginal status or the institutions in which they work (King, 2004a, p. 97). Carl Dix (2007), the national spokesperson for the Revolutionary Communist Party of America, identifies the disparities between the perceived gall of black players to supersede the boundaries of their roles as players and the actual power of the white league administrators, coaches and executives:

This was a theme that came up often in discussion of the brawl – fan resentment of wealthy Black athletes who lack the proper gratitude or humility for their situation. A number of newspaper articles even noted the growing number of NBA stars [who] wear their hair in cornrows as something that contributes to this resentment ... there is a large gap between the fans and NBA players. But there's an even larger gap between the economic status of the fans and that of the almost all white NBA owners. Yet the media, sports or otherwise, doesn't work to whip up the kind of resentment against them that its pumping up in relation to Black players. (¶ 12)

Dix reveals the discursive power of maintaining this racist ideology. The white powers that enforced the suspension on Artest and the other players are seen as representing the interests of the fans, despite their extreme wealth. However, the lower-earning NBA players were seen as automatically disconnected from these same fans, due to their relative wealth. This clearly demarcates the invisibility of whites in the relations of power in professional sports. Rather than challenge fan agreement with NBA owners, the media identify the hyper-visible black athletes as the ones who are alienated from fans. The players, not the owners, are perceived as earning too much money, and as having forgotten where they came from. Consequently, the unseen, invisible white power that dominates the NBA and other professional sports act to maintain the values of American sanitary normativity.

The Ron Artest brawl brings to light a plethora of discourses that reveals the racist ideology that shapes the league and its marketing of black players. The complicated relations between white league administrators, the

predominantly white fan base, and the predominantly black players, mark the NBA as a site inherently rife with conflicting discourses. By examining the Ron Artest brawl and subsequent conversations, it becomes clear that NBA media coverage is marked by a possessive gaze, which colonizes the black bodies of NBA players. In doing so, the professional black athlete is inscribed with dominant representations of African-Americans. Thus, the black NBA player becomes the site of the dueling myths of African-American male representation – criminal and hero – and is denied the means to construct his own identity in the public forum as his voice is suffocated by dominant narratives. The ideology of the NBA reinforces the invisibility and power of white men in their regulation of the highly visible black athletes, further embodying an abusive set of moral and ethical guidelines that deny black players any influence over the game and sports culture in which they participate.

Because the NBA is a league that markets the hip, highly visible blackness of its star players, the racism which is foundational to its media representations is often overlooked. However, it is clear that a framework of unconscious racism is at play in the relationships between the league officials and players, as well as those between the players and the fans. Therefore, there must be greater opportunities for the black players that comprise the majority of the NBA to affect the culture, history and dynamics of the NBA, as well a broader representation of the diverse identities that inhabit the NBA court, thus, redefining the traditional roles and images of black athletes and black Americans.

Notes

1. Racial stacking refers to the highly documented phenomena in sports of using black players as “work horses” for their physical prowess while denying them the opportunity to make meaningful contributions to the game; be it in a leadership role, coaching, managerial or ownership capacities. See Abdel-Shehid (2005).
2. O.J. Simpson is a former professional football runningback who was accused of the murder of his wife, Ben Johnson was a gold-medal sprinter who tested positive for steroids, and Ray Lewis is a professional football linebacker who was accused of accessory to murder in a night-club stabbing.

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