A Critical Discourse Analysis of Black Masculinity in NBA Game Commentary

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KATHERINE L. LAVELLE

*Department of Communication Studies, University of Northern Iowa,
Cedar Falls, Iowa, USA*

*The National Basketball Association (NBA) offers a unique
opportunity to analyze the representation of racial identity,
nationality, and masculinity. While less than 15% of Americans
are Black, nearly three fourths of NBA players are Black. Many
of them are wealthy and recognizable to the general public and
are seen as representatives of Black masculinity. One of the strate-
gies used to promote the NBA is to personalize players in game
commentary that extends beyond narrating the on court action.
This study, part of a larger examination of media representations
of identity in American popular culture, uses critical discourse
analysis to examine how Black masculinity is articulated in
NBA game commentary. This study demonstrates that the NBA is
a place where race, ethnicity, and masculinity, are framed by
the league and networks, not the players. This helps explain how
Black masculinity is understood in American society.*

*KEYTERMS   Black masculinity, National Basketball Association,
sports, television broadcast*

According to Richard Lapchick (2000), 77% of the National Basketball
Association (NBA) players are Black. This statistic alone is noteworthy, given
that the percentage of Black people in the United States is about 13%
("People: United", 2006). Consequently, these players constitute one of the
most high profile concentrations of Black people in the United States.

Basketball players are wealthy, young, and frequently identify with hip hop culture, as evident in their media appearances and commercials, which emphasize a flashy, street ball style of play (Lane, 2007; Leonard, 2006). Although popular press books (Benedict, 2004; Rhoden, 2006) and articles (Burwell, 2004; Whitlock, 2004) have discussed what they label as the "deteriorating" image of the NBA, there has been little discussion about how NBA game commentary represents Black masculinity.

This omission in research can be explored in a communication context because there is data that analyzes how NBA players are represented in media texts (Cole & Andrews, 1996; Leonard, 2006), and game commentary (Fortunato, 2001; Olsen, 1998). Several quantitative studies of race and gender in collegiate basketball tournament games have been conducted (Billings, Halone, & Denham, 2002; Denham, Billings & Halone, 2002; Eastman & Billings, 2001), but they do not discuss the NBA, which has a different racial composition than these other leagues. Game commentary is a rich source of this material because commentators have to fill more than two hours to keep the audience involved in the game. This article, part of a larger project on race, masculinity, and culture in the NBA, addresses two questions on this subject. First, how do game transcripts represent Black masculinity in the NBA? Second, what omissions are made in the descriptions of Black players? Through a critical discourse analysis, this article will examine how Black masculinity is discussed in game transcripts.

MASCULINITY

The term *masculinity* has been examined by various academic disciplines, including critical/cultural studies (Donaldson, 1993; Shugart, 2003), mass media (Gardiner, 2005), and sociology (Kendell, 2000). In his book, *The Men and the Boys,* Robert Connell (2000) explained how masculinity operates in American society: "Masculinities exist impersonally in culture as a subject position in the process of representation, in the structures of language and other symbol systems" (p. 30). Because masculinity is culturally and socially defined, there is no singular way to codify it into a universal definition (Peterson, 2003). Moreover, most broad definitions of masculinity tend to ignore the many varied intersections of gender identity present in men (Shugart, 2001). Thus, it is difficult to define and isolate what characteristics constitute masculinity (Schroeder & Zwick, 2004) and to isolate a definition that accurately reflects how masculinity actually functions in a given society.

Sports embody hegemonic masculinity (Fitzclarence & Hickey, 2001; Kidd, 1987; Whannel, 2002). Consequently, how it is represented in sports influences the ideological structures in a given society. Nicholas Trujillo's (1991) case study of Texas Rangers' pitcher Nolan Ryan illustrates this phenomenon; it argued that representations of athletes are a way to study

how masculinity is promoted in a given society. He isolated five components of hegemonic masculinity: "(1) physical force and control, (2) occupational achievement, (3) familial patriarchy, (4) frontiersmanship, and (5) heterosexuality" (p. 291). Trujillo examined how the representation of Ryan reinforced standards of hegemonic masculinity through analysis of articles that praised Ryan for his uncompromising style and toughness. Ryan was seen as an athlete that the average male baseball fans could admire because his actions and identity fit the expected criteria for hegemonic masculinity (Trujillo, 1991).

RACE AND SPORTS

Sports reinforces masculinity and binary gender roles (Hartmann, 2003; Messner & Sabo, 1990). As explained by Shugart (2003), "As a team sport with heretofore distinctly masculine connotations, overt objectification of these female athletes would have been blatant and indefensible" (p. 11). On the other hand, race and sports can seem disconnected. Because of how sports promote representations, how an athlete is presented to the public is critical, especially for a person of color (Fortunato, 2001; Whannel, 2002). Carrington (2007) further noted that "this view of sports as free from structural constraints means that sport's role in maintaining and reproducing power relations is underestimated" (p. 4686). Making distinctions about perceived physical differences between Black and White athletes is one of the ways that Black athletes are discussed as different, especially emphasis on certain genetic predispositions (Denham, Billings, & Halone, 2002; Hoberman, 1997, 2003, 2007). Carrington explained how the biological differences are discussed in regards to athletes.

> Black success in certain elite sports is often 'explained' by these alleged natural differences, further reifying the idea of race. This undermines Black athletic excellence by implicitly linking it with an inherent genetic disposition shared by the entire 'Black race' and ignoring the dedication, hard work, and ability of individualized athletes who happen to be racialized as Black. (p. 4689)

For instance, Billings (2004) examined the representation of the "Black" quarterback, a recent phenomenon in the National Football League (NFL). Because the quarterback is historically considered an intellectual position, many Black athletes were discouraged from being quarterbacks (Billings, 2004). This line of thinking comes from construed genetic data. Entine (2000) argued that the athletic ability is determined "genetically" and "culturally" (pp. 337–338). Davis and Harris (1998) provided counter arguments to this line of thinking: "Much of this blatant racial stereotyping has been replaced by stereotyping which is more subtle, elusive and abstract in rhetoric. Many argue that the sport media play a role in disseminating

and maintaining racial stereotypes'' (p. 157). By using racial data, athletes are categorized by their racial relationship, not their actual abilities and training.

An example of this phenomenon used to judge a Black quarterback is a 2003 incident between Donovan McNabb, a high profile African American quarterback for the Philadelphia Eagles, and conservative commentator Rush Limbaugh. Limbaugh argued that McNabb was given special treatment because he was Black. Hartmann (2007) critiqued Limbaugh's approach, "The shortcomings of Limbaugh's colorblind appeal are both manifest and legion from a more critical, sociological perspective. Perhaps most obvious is the fundamental inability of an individualist, race-neutral perspective to grasp and grapple with persistent inequalities of race'' (p. 48). Arguing that race doesn't matter in sports ignores real problems faced by athletes of color, as McDonald (2005) explained,

> The results that amongst a proliferation of circulating radicalized images promoting difference as a commodity, contemporary North American economies of visibility, including those related to sport, too often feature sanitized snapshots that promote 'integration without equality, representation without power, presence without the confirming possibility of emancipation'. (p. 248)

In basketball, race is a critical issue, as Messner (1992) found in his ethnography of athletes. "Black men have put their 'stamp' on the game of basketball. There is considerable pride in the U.S. Black communities in the fact that Black men have come to dominate the higher levels of basketball—and in the expressive styles which they have come to do so'' (p. 154). However, what this style means and how it is expressed is contested. In the NBA, the corporate friendly image was personified by Michael Jordan (McDonald & Andrews, 2001; Whannel, 2000; Whitson, 1998). Jordan's marketing ability was powerful because he presented himself as viable to a White, middle-class American audience as an identifiable representative of the NBA (Carrington, Andrews, Jackson, & Mazur, 2001). One of the reasons that this audience needs to be catered to is because the NBA and its sponsors want these demographics to consume their product (Fortunato, 2001). Targeting an audience means that athletes are carefully tailored to be attractive to that group. Jordan's image is different from current interpretations of the NBA.

Racial issues are more contentious in the NBA than other professional sports because players are more visible (Cole & Andrews, 1996). NBA players do not hide behind protective equipment. There are only 10 players on the court at once, and fans are close to the action (Fortunato, 2001). Consequently, the physical bodies of the players are subject to scrutiny (Hobermann, 2007; Magubane, 2002), not a placement that makes the league

happy. "Blackness has come to embody a pollutant within the NBA that necessitates surveillance and regulation" (Leonard, 2006, p. 160). Kenneth L. Shropshire (2000) provided a specific example of this phenomenon in his analysis of former Golden State forward Latrell Sprewell's choking of his White coach. Although Sprewell was suspended and fined for his actions, Shropshire argued that part of the reason that this incident received so much negative press is because Sprewell's image was threatening to a conservative audience. Sprewell was depicted as an angry Black man who lashed out at a White authority figure, not the fan-friendly image that the league wants to project (Shropshire, 2000).

The NBA is seen as tough, urban, and individualistic because it is defined by its hip hop culture that is normalized through Black identity (Kusz, 2007; Leonard, 2006). First, although Black players are more visible, they have a much smaller area of acceptable behavior compared to White athletes (Boyd, 1997; Connell, 1995). If they break rules, they are more quickly punished or vilified than their White counterparts. Second, once an athlete is successful, that status is not guaranteed. Berry and Smith (2000) explained, "There seems to be a limitation to what Black athletes can get away with. The job of Blacks is to entertain; beyond that, and when they stray too far from "their place," they may be contained by public censure and official sanctioning" (p. 191). This limitation exists because there are racial divisions in America that affect how an athlete is perceived, which are not erased by a successful career.

Recent scholarly work has addressed the problems presented by the hip hop image of the league (Hoberman, 2007; Lane, 2007). Hoberman (2007) analyzed the changes in representation of Black athletes. In regards to the NBA, he explained, "The global popularity of the NBA has spread anti-social and dysfunctional images of the African American athlete around the world" (p. 223). He continued, "These images belong to the larger repertory of violent Black male images associated with the globalization of the hip hop subculture" (p. 223). Hoberman discussed a general culture where African American athletes are misrepresented.

Leonard (2006) is more explicit in his criticism of the NBA's conflicted relationship with its hip hop image. His article criticizes the surveillance culture of the league, as evidenced by NBA Commissioner David Stern's 2005 decree on dress code for players. Leonard explained the significance of Stern's actions:

> The NBA sent a clear message about the place of hip hop and those bodies embracing, reflecting, or signifying a ghetto-centric imagination.... The simultaneous commodification and demonization of hip hop and its Black male signifiers within the NBA became visible, illustrating the complex and contradictory place of aesthetics, cultural values, and bodies that are constructed as both fashionable (desirable and cool) and suspect (dangerous). (p. 161)

These statements are not to argue that the problematic nature of the corporate intersection of sports and youth culture is isolated to the NBA. However, the visibility of NBA players makes this issue more important. Unlike American football, NBA players have 82 regular season games. Hoberman (2007) explained the implications of their visibility.

> The problem for this traditionality argument is that the self-styled 'hip hop' athlete is seldom interested in conforming to such norms. The socially constructive effects that Black athletes such as Jackie Robinson could have during the Civil Rights era stand in stark contrast to what the 'hip hop' generation of athletes conveys to its domestic and now global audience. (p. 223)

The culture of the NBA means that questions of masculinity might be explored during game commentary. This article seeks to explore the question: How is Black masculinity talked about during games?

COMMENTARY

As communication scholars, we must examine the implications of discourse. Hallmark (2006) explained, "It is not sport that reflects, constructs, or perpetuates these beliefs, but rather our rhetorical vision of sport. The media, through its presentation of preferred readings, reinforces this rhetorical vision" (p. 167). Sports texts help reinforce stereotypes in a given society (Kassing et al., 2004). Sports commentary is a critical artifact to examine because it is considered more real than other scripted media texts, such as television stories or newspapers (Billings, 2008). Rose and Friedman (1997) argued that commentary is responsible for framing the perception of a given game. Commentary makes the audience part of the experience because the commentators are talking directly to them in real time. Live commentary provides more opportunity for unscripted discussion that might not take place in other media texts that are subject to edits and rewrites (Kassing et al., 2004). Certainly, there is some element of script because there is an army of researchers, producers, and directors, which provide some guidance for commentary discussion as the game unfolds. But the commentators are responsible for narrating the sporting event (Kassing et al., 2004; Olsen, 1998). They sometimes have to talk for 5–10 minutes without commercial interruption during the broadcasts. Consequently, it is seen as more real than a talk show host or television personality dissecting a game after it has occurred (Kassing, et al., 2004; Morris & Nydahl, 1983).

What the commentators say about sports helps reinforce norms and standards about race and masculinity (Billings et al., 2002; Messner, Dunbar, & Hunt, 2000). For race, there are several instances of problematic discourse

involving sports. Hoberman (1997) explained commentators' influence on racial relations.

> Sportswriters and sportscasters, who are the primary interpreters of race relations within the NBA, are also protagonists in these conflicts. Of these two intermediaries, the live sportscaster is the more important representative of managerial power, because he has the power to frame issues and interpret behavior instantly to an enormous audience. (p. 38)

Looking at the live commentary should provide valuable information on how race and masculinity are described during NBA games.

CRITICAL DISCOURSE ANALYSIS

Race and masculinity can be analyzed through critical discourse analysis (CDA) (van Dijk, 1991; 1996). The way that language is used in texts shows the effect of ideology (system of values) in culture (Kress, 1985/2002). Race can be understood as an ideology (Carrington, 2007). In order to see how race is upheld in texts, CDA instruct scholars to examine separate texts together in order to create meaning (Fairclough, 2003; Titscher, Meyer, Wodak, & Vetter, 2000). Looking at multiple texts together shows how a subject is represented by similarities that are found in all texts. Most CDA scholarship is grounded in linguistic work that focuses on the words, not necessarily larger societal implications of those words. Although CDA is often applied to linguistic studies, communication and rhetoric studies have examined how minorities are represented in American media texts using CDA (e.g., Dixon & Linz, 2000; Meyers, 2004. This article uses a close textual analysis of NBA game transcripts examining four different NBA players.

TEXTS

In order to examine the articulation and description of Black masculinity in NBA games, this study examined transcripts from six Houston Rockets games: Dallas Mavericks (November 13, 2003), Los Angeles Lakers (December 25, 2003), Los Angeles (April 17, 2004), Sacramento Kings (October 14, 2004, and October 16, 2004), and Miami Heat (January 30, 2005). These texts were obtained from a population of 60 videotapes of national game broadcasts and one local television station game (Detroit, MI) from the 2003–2004 and 2004–2005 seasons. This population was chosen for a few reasons. First, it was a period when the NBA was transitioning between the retirement of Michael Jordan and the search for new stars to market the league (Fortunato, 2001). For instance, the 2003 entrance of Lebron James and Carmelo Anthony was heralded as a changing of the guard for the image of the NBA ("Barkley

criticizes," 2003). Second, national team broadcasts are chosen deliberately. The broadcast schedule is based on the popularity of the team (such as the Los Angeles Lakers or the San Antonio Spurs) or its stars (Lebron James and Shaquille O'Neal). Star players are featured on television because they generate interest in the NBA. For example, during James's rookie season, his Cleveland Cavaliers were broadcast on national television 13 times because of the interest surrounding him ("Barkley criticizes", 2003). At the time, the Cavaliers had not competed in the playoffs for several years, and there was little national interest in them. This new interest was so dramatic that commentator and NBA veteran Charles Barkley criticized his own employer, Turner Network Television (TNT), for the number of broadcasts before James had proven his abilities against NBA players ("Barkley criticizes", 2003). Choosing teams from the national broadcast schedule provides for opportunities to learn about the players that the league finds important.

The six games chosen for analysis were selected based on which stars or famous players were featured. Although the Houston Rockets participated in all of the games selected, they were all national broadcasts of games, meaning that the commentators were from ESPN (Entertainment Sports Programming Network), ABC (American Broadcasting Company), and TNT, not local broadcasters who might favor the Rockets. In each of these games, there is discussion of several high-profile NBA players.

For this article, four terms need to be operationalized as a way to place the commentary in context. First, there are three different positions that a player could occupy on the court. A "center" usually plays near the basket. His job is to get rebounds (i.e., retrieve the ball when it is missed), and either score a basket or pass the ball to a teammate heading to the other end of the court. A center is usually tall and potentially possesses some bulk because the position requires physical strength to absorb the shock of players ramming each other and attempting to get to the basket. A *forward* is a player that is also tall and somewhat physical but is more mobile on the court. These players will have more agility and speed than a center, and many of them can successfully shoot from outside of the basket area and potentially be skilled at shooting from the three point line. Finally, there is the position of guard. A *guard* is usually a smaller player. In the NBA, that means this player can range from just under 6' to around 6'4". These players are quick and mobile, they can move through crowds of players. They often "dictate the tempo," which means that they move the ball up the court and are in charge of distributing it to their teammates. There are two types of guards: shooting and point. A shooting guard shoots the ball, a point guard does too, but their primary responsibility is executing the game plan for the coaching staff.

Second, the nationality of the players needs to be defined. Although the researcher recognizes that race, ethnicity, and nationality are complex terms that are contradictory and sometimes difficult to define, as Davis and Harris (1998) and Hoberman (1997) explained, but for the purposes of this article,

nationality and race are examined as concrete concepts. *Black* refers to players who identify as African American or Black and are from the United States. This sample includes 27 players who fit these characteristics. There are players in the league who are African, or of African ancestry from European or South American nations, but they will not be discussed in this analysis. Next, there are White European players in the NBA. Very few White American players were featured in this sample, and certainly not enough who were discussed at length to analyze. White European players are from Western Europe and have ancestry indigenous to their country of origin. Because this essay is about examining Black masculinity in the NBA, a White European player can act as a foil to see if there are attempts to use that player to argue for his position as superior because of his racial or national identity.

Third, the term *star* is operationalized as a player that has one of the following accomplishments: (a) he has been selected for the All-Star team, which is an annual contest between players from the Eastern and Western Conferences; (b) he has appeared in multiple playoff games (with the exception of one player in this study, all of the players analyzed here have reached at least the second round of their conferences' playoff competition); and (c) he has received a league wide award, such as the Most Valuable Player, a scoring title, or anything that recognizes the individual accomplishment of the player over the season and in comparison to his peers.

Fourth, to define a player as famous, that player must have commercial endorsements, or have had success in collegiate basketball. Ideally, players in this study are famous and a star. This sample of games includes four players who meet these criteria: Dirk Nowitzki (White European), Tracy McGrady, Shaquille O'Neal, and Kobe Bryant (Black).

ANALYSIS OF GAMES

Dirk Nowitzki

There are few White stars or famous players in the NBA, especially during this time frame. According to the *2004 Racial and Gender Report Card*, 22% of NBA players were White, but the slight increase was from the influx of international players in the NBA, not American-born White players (Lapchick, 2005, May 4). One of the international players, 7-foot German Dirk Nowitzki, was in his fifth season in the NBA during the 2003–2004 season. Nowitzki is from a Bavarian city in Western Germany, where he lived until he was drafted at the age of 20. In the spring of 2003, he led his team to the Western Conference Finals but lost to eventual champions, the San Antonio Spurs (Broussard, 2003). At this point in his career, Nowitzki had made the All Star team twice ("Dirk Nowitzki Bio", n.d.) but did not have major U.S. product endorsements and did not intend to accept any (Ballard, 2007). Nowitzki explained, "Exposure also plays a role . . . if one doesn't shoot soda or shoe ads then

one can't appear during the commercial breaks of *Monday Night Football*." He continues, "'I'm not trying to make a brand out of myself,' says Nowitzki. 'I love to play, and I love the sport, but I don't play it to gain popularity'" (para. 33). Nowitzki was/is a star within the NBA, but not necessarily considered famous to outsiders. He plays power forward, but at the time, Dallas' coach Don Nelson often used him as a center with a smaller line up on the floor.

In the Dallas vs. Houston game, Nowitzki did not get much attention. Commentator Steve Kerr remarked that Nowitzki is "amazing" and "can shoot from anywhere on the court" (Pitino, 2003, para. 9). His height, 6'11", was mentioned several times, and he was complimented for "using his size" (para. 9). Kerr argued, "it's really pick your poison with Nowitzki, because if he's too big for Jimmy Jackson, and they decide to put Kelvin Cato on him, then he's too quick for Kelvin Cato, and it's familiar for who Dallas plays against, it's almost an impossible match up there" (para. 11). There was little discussion of much else—it seemed like a very impersonal broadcast. Nowitzki had 23 points and 5 rebounds in his 38 minutes of playing time (out of 48), and tied with Jim Jackson for the most points in the game ("Houston Rockets," 2003). There was no discussion of his German heritage or his well-publicized friendship with teammate, Canadian Steve Nash.

In this game, the opportunity was not taken to position him or Nash as possible "White hopes" for the viewing audience (Hartmann, 2007). Instead, a few isolated comments are provided about each player. At one point, Nash was called a "John Stockton type of point guard" (Pitino, 2003, para. 7), referencing the longtime Utah Jazz point guard from Spokane, Washington, who is thought to embody the ideals of White Masculinity (Hoberman, 1997).

Mutua (2006) argued that Black masculinity is often characterized as inferior to White masculinity. Nowitzki is talked about as being competitive against two Black players, Jim Jackson and Kelvin Cato, but the discussion focused on Nowitzki's talent, as opposed to his opponents being inferior. For instance, Jim Jackson was described as a "pretty good defender" (Pitino, 2003, para. 9), in relationship to Nowitzki. In contrast, Black player Kelvin Cato was discussed as "not too comfortable guarding the perimeter. He's a natural center; he's been taught all of his life to cover the basket. It's a tough matchup for him tonight to go out to the perimeter and guard these Dallas Mavericks" (para. 55). In the case of Cato versus Nowitzki, Nowitzki was discussed as the superior player, but Cato and Jackson are not considered at the same talent level as Nowitzki. So, even though there was discussion of a White player as superior to Black players, it was not a true comparison because they are not equal in terms of talent or recognition.

Tracy McGrady

In the 2004–2005 season, recent Houston Rockets acquisition Tracy McGrady was featured in three games in this sample. Floridian McGrady entered the

NBA after graduating from high school and at this point in his career, McGrady had won two league-wide scoring titles and been a member of four All-Star teams (Deveney, 2007). As of 2010, he has not advanced beyond the first round of the playoffs with any of his teams in his 13-year NBA career. He was the first NBA player to own a jet, in part financed by the $7 million a year he made in endorsements deals with PepsiCo and Adidas (Greenfeld, 2005). McGrady's lifestyle suggests a "code-switching" in the NBA (Brown, 2005), meaning that he could function in both hip hop culture and more traditional definitions of wealth. Owning a private jet is a sign of wealth in corporate America, as evidenced by the 2009 testimony of American auto manufacturers, whose arrival to ask for money from Congress was criticized since they initially arrived in private jets (Morris, 2009). One of the ways that McGrady functions in both cultures is through his involvement in endorsing his own shoe line. In fact, McGrady used his trip to China to promote it (Pearl, 2004, October 14). Developing his own personal style is a critical part of hip hop culture and endorsing shoes enhances that cultural identity (Boyd, 2003). It is common for players to get shoe deals, and basketball sneakers are often worn by hip hop artists and young people who engage in hip hop culture.

   In this sample of games, McGrady had been recently traded to the Houston Rockets. He was traded in the 2004 off-season from Orlando, and the circumstances of this move are discussed in the games. In the case of his move from Orlando to Houston, Commentator Mike Breen explained, "Orlando knew that they had to trade Tracy McGrady because he has said that he would not re-sign with them. Orlando was put in a tough spot" (Pearl, 2004, October 14, para. 109). Breen explained the significance of the change, "Last year he did not have fun very much, and let it be known. But he has enjoyed so far playing with Yao Ming," (para. 107). The complaining NBA player was considered a negative stereotype of contemporary players (Boyd, 2003). McGrady forced a trade to be on a better team. Part of the reason that McGrady was happy was the efforts made by his new teammates. Commentator Bill Walton explained, "That was Tracy McGrady's comments too, yesterday in media day. He said that he had never been to a training camp where everyone was in such tip top form physically" (Pearl, 2004, October 14, para. 189). Walton continued to compliment McGrady in the Beijing game. "Tracy McGrady is going to find himself with at best, one guy guarding him at a time. What a new experience for him" (Pearl, 2004, October 16, para. 105). These sets of comments support the notion that although McGrady in some ways fits previous stereotypes that NBA players aren't grateful (Boyd, 2003; Lane, 2007), on the other hand, it does suggest that McGrady is capable of putting himself in a position that is advantageous for him, as opposed to being 100% controlled by his team owner.

   McGrady was differentiated by the discussion of his personality. Tracy McGrady was referred to as having "a high IQ and the athletic ability" (Pearl, 2005, January 30, para.132) during the Miami game. In addition to having a

good balance as a player, McGrady is not afraid to express his emotions. As Mike Breen noted in the Beijing Game (Pearl, October 16, 2004), "Tracy McGrady in fact hugged Carroll Dawson after they saw the Great Wall of China, he was so taken aback by all of that. He said, 'Thank you, thank you, for bringing me to Houston and now for bringing me to China.' It was a very emotional moment for him" (para. 57). McGrady's relationship with management suggests a relationship of peers or family, not a cold, calculated business relationship between an owner and a player. Although some account for NBA players and owners having an antagonistic relationship (Leonard, 2006), this anecdote suggests that McGrady feels comfortable with the Rockets ownership.

McGrady is featured in three of the six games in this sample, and a theme that is absent in the discussion of McGrady is his playoff failures. As described by Orlando General Manager John Weisbrod in his decision to trade McGrady in 2005, "a superstar is defined by wins, by making players around him better" (Greenfeld, 2005, p. 53). It seems that McGrady's lack of playoff success is not a topic for discussion. Although he fits the star criteria and is successful individually, he is not as successful as other players like the other three players in this study. Despite the attention and contextual support presented to McGrady, this does not appear to be an issue. Instead, Mike Breen summarized McGrady's individual accomplishments:

> Tracy McGrady, who led the league in scoring the last two years, got off to a slow start as a player. After his first year, he wondered if he would stay in the league, but has obviously gotten better and better, but he did not have a lot of scoring help in Orlando. One thing that Jeff VanGundy loves about is that not only is he an excellent passer, but he is a willing passer. (Pearl, 2004, October 14, para. 35)

Here, despite failings to meet the competitive expectations placed on a player in his situation, McGrady is considered successful in the NBA.

Shaquille O'Neal

Shaquille O'Neal, "Shaq", is one of the most famous and brightest stars of contemporary basketball. O'Neal, who plays center, was raised by a military family and was a successful college player at Louisiana State University. During the time frame of this sample, he was considered one of the most dominant players in the NBA. At this point in his career, he had three championship rings with the Los Angeles Lakers, 3 Finals MVP Awards, 13 All-Star appearances, and had been named one of the 50 greatest NBA Players of All Time ("Shaquille O'Neal Bio", n.d.). He had several commercial endorsements, including Nestle Crunch and Icy Hot ("Shaquille O'Neal Bio", n.d.). He is involved with hip hop music and films, starring in the movie *Kazaam*.

In these games, O'Neal is characterized as physical and dominating, but also as comic relief.

O'Neal's physical size and abilities are recognized in all games in the sample. During the 2003 Christmas Day game, commentator Al Michaels suggested that the regulation basketball is too small for O'Neal. Basketball players in general tend to be taller than average. The average American man between 20 to 39 years of age is 5'10" (McDowell, Fryar, Ogden, & Flegal, 2008), whereas the average professional basketball player is 6'7" ("2004–2005 NBA Player," 2010). However, O'Neal appears to be in his own size category, as the commentators provide several examples. Al Michaels says that he "distorts the game" (Pearl, 2003, December 25, para. 49). Mike Tireco elaborated, quoting Houston Rockets Coach Jeff VanGundy, who said that O'Neal "distorts every game he plays in. He distorts the defense, he gets guys into foul trouble, there's a lot of separation between him and the next guy" (para. 47). Doc Rivers argued that, "You might be 4 or 5 inches taller than Shaq, but if you are not 40 or 50 pounds heavier than Shaq, it's not going to matter" (para. 32). Rivers continued to describe the significance of O'Neal's size. "If you want to find out what it's like to be Shaq, go out to the backyard, grab a golf ball or a tennis ball, and try to make free throws. You might make 7 out of 10, but your percentage is going to be terrible" (para. 65). Not only is O'Neal big, but also he is "unstoppable" (Pearl, 2004, April 17, para. 96) in the playoff game. Also, he was described as playing "with a different pace, rhythm, and intensity at a greater level than anyone in the game" (para. 87). O'Neal is so strong that he has caused serious injury to another player. During the January 2005 Miami game, he broke Houston Rocket Bobby Sura's finger. Hubie Brown described the injury as, "It's like you and I going outside and punching the building" (Pearl, 2005, January 30, para. 234). These comments help support the idea that Black athletes are seen as menacing and purely physical on the court (Markovitz, 2006). The focus on the physicality of Black men has been a commonly used stereotype for generations (Davis & Harris, 1998).

However, these comments about O'Neal as overly physical are undercut with the discussion of him as playful. During the Christmas game, the commentators laughed at O'Neal's size and antics on the court. For instance, Al Michaels decided that the best way to practice against O'Neal at home is to "build a robot" (Pearl, 2003, December 25, para. 53) as the only way to defend against him. During the Miami game, it was reported that he has taught the Chinese journalists following around Yao Ming how to say, "What up, brother?" (Pearl, 2005, January 30, para. 157) in English. In the Christmas game, O'Neal was shown with his family, wishing America Merry Christmas. O'Neal took his youngest child and yells "Karate Baby." There appears to be no middle ground for O'Neal. On the one hand, he is presented as a tough figure that injures opponents; on the other, he is presented as an object of amusement. O'Neal was not presented as a complex figure in games.

Kobe Bryant

O'Neal's teammate for eight years, Kobe Bryant, appears in two of the games in the sample. Bryant, a guard, went directly from his suburban Philadelphia high school to the NBA in 1996. He spent some of his youth in Italy, while his father played basketball professionally. During the time frame of these games, Bryant was a three-time NBA champion, with numerous league awards such as three All-NBA team and six All-Star appearances ("Kobe Bryant Bio," n.d.). He had high profile commercial endorsements from companies such as Nike, Coca Cola, and McDonalds', but in the wake of the rape charges filed in the summer of 2003, those companies dropped these contracts (Oates & Polumbaum, 2004).

From the summer of 2003 to the fall of 2004, Bryant dealt with sexual assault charges, a national news story. Bryant commuted between court appearances in Colorado and games with the Lakers, while attempting to maintain his NBA career (Leonard, 2004). Despite the intense interest in the media about Bryant, there are a few references to the trial during the games. The Christmas game featured a pre-taped halftime interview with Bryant. This nationally televised game on ABC was an opportunity for a national audience to observe Bryant. During the third quarter, Al Michaels and Doc Rivers discussed the effect that the trial had on Bryant:

> Al Michaels: It's not a sympathy play, but at a physiological level, it is interesting how Bryant, as he goes through a criminal action, which is about intense as it can be, and able to come out on the court and play at such a level.
>
> Doc Rivers: But this is probably a sanctuary for him, this is what he's most used to doing, and is most comfortable doing. This is where he probably can relax is when he's on the basketball floor. (Pearl, 2003, December 25, para. 140–141)

While this quote mentioned his legal problems, it was the only direct reference of this highly publicized court activity. He was interviewed in a pre-taped discussion during halftime with Jim Grey on ESPN/ABC, where Bryant characterized Colorado as a "nightmare" (para. 103), but there is no more specific discussion about what Colorado means. In the game, Doc Rivers praised Bryant's on-court abilities, but referenced his "off-court stuff" (para. 187) and referred to "what he's been going through," (para. 187) but didn't provide any more specific information here. In fact, there is more attention paid during this game to a visit that Bryant had with his wife Vanessa and daughter at halftime. Unlike the Dallas game a month earlier, where Eddie Griffin's criminal activity was specifically discussed, these commentators take no opportunity to criticize Bryant.

Instead, there was more attention on Bryant's on court performance. For instance, how much Bryant involved his teammates in games was a thematic

element. As Mike Breen explained, "Of course it started with that game against Sacramento where Kobe was accused of not shooting deliberately, that he was trying to make a point because his teammates said that he was shooting too much" (Pearl, 2004, April 17, para. 55). Bryant's ball distribution was frequently referenced. It seemed that he was playing both aggressively and passively in the same game, instead of at the expectations of a star level the entire time, a perception that Kusz (2007) referenced as "hyper-individualistic, and greedy images of Black masculinity" (p. 167). However, Bryant was excused of responsibility for this behavior and was compared to teammate O'Neal, when Bill Walton commented that "when he has the ball by himself, but he can be even more dominant if he gives the ball to his teammates" (para. 30). Bryant was encouraged to be more of a team player, than a dominating figure on the court.

The absence of discussion means a couple of things. First, Bryant's trial and the way it was dissected in the public enhanced the negative image that some of the public has about the NBA (Leonard, 2004). The idea of a Black man accused of rape, who happens to be one of the most popular players in the league, did not help promote the league. Also, Bryant's troubles with his teammates (an issue that would compound in the years afterwards) seemed like an odd dramatic element considering that he was facing possible jail time. Bryant was under heavy media scrutiny that year, but the effects of it are not discussed in the game, other than as a note of sympathy about his situation. Based on the literature (Brown, 2005), this incident provided the perfect opportunity for the commentators to add to the negative stereotypes about African American players, but the opportunity is not taken.

CONCLUSIONS AND IMPLICATIONS

This study examines Black masculinity in NBA game commentary, a topic covered in sports scholarship at the collegiate level (Billings et al., 2002; Denham, Billings, & Halone, 2002; Eastman & Billings, 2001). This study, as did these previous studies, demonstrates that game commentary is a rich source of discussion about race, ethnicity, and gender. This discussion of NBA players can influence how Black masculinity is understood.

Based on the commentators' discussion of Dirk Nowitzki, Tracy McGrady, Kobe Bryant, and Shaquille O'Neal, it is difficult, as Schroeder and Zwick (2004) suggested, to definitely characterize how Black masculinity was represented in game commentary. Perhaps what is not discussed is what is most revealing.

First, hip hop culture was not discussed in detail during the games. There are a couple of isolated examples, but it was not discussed as a continuing story in multiple games. A couple of star players in this sample provide opportunities to have this thematic discussion to occur. First,

Shaquille O'Neal is characterized as physically dominant on the court, which fits into the "dangerous" stereotype about Black athletes (Leonard, 2006). But the commentators clearly made a distinction of how different he is from other players. If O'Neal is representative, as opposed to atypical, this discussion would be frequently repeated. Second, Kobe Bryant had pending sexual assault charges during these games. There is no development about its implications on him or the league, even though he is featured in two of the games. Commentators did share a story that personifies the myth of the troubled athlete (Berry & Smith, 2000) during the Dallas game. They described the legal problems facing role player Eddie Griffin. But this story was only briefly mentioned, and the commentators did not frame the NBA as a hip hop league, that is often the case in scholarly literature (Boyd, 2003; Leonard, 2006).

This difference could have several explanations, including the fact that NBA commentators had a vested interest in maintaining the positive image of star players. In the case of Bryant, if he were alienated for his personal life, he would not be cooperative with NBA marketing efforts. Instead, it shows how the league avoids the negative images of players. As explained by Leonard (2006) in his analysis of the 2005 dress code, "The NBA age limit not only functions as a gatekeeper, as a means to minimize the infiltration of the 'dark side of hip hop' (literally) while appeasing critics of the league and placating NBA fans, but also represents an effort to put Black male bodies and styles under surveillance and control" (p. 171). This gatekeeper function is present in this sample of games, when the hip hop framing is not used.

There needs to be a shift in the research to study the relationship between the physical body and success in the NBA. From these transcripts, it seems that the commentators are fascinated with the athletic power of players, not just off the court image. The NBA is a sport and lucrative industry in the United States. But it also has an effect on Black masculinity and cultural identity. This study demonstrates that the NBA is a place where race, ethnicity, and nationality are framed by the league and networks, not the players. This is turn contributes to how Black masculinity is articulated in everyday language. Sports have a powerful effect on the audience because it is presented as mere entertainment, not necessarily a site to interrogate rhetorical depictions of players (Daddario & Wigley, 2007; Halone, 2008; Hansen, 1999).

This article contributes to a conversation about the importance of linguistic representations of athletes. Further research should be conducted in the area of game commentary in specific sports. The NBA is considered a microcosm of Black people who not only compose the majority of the racial/ethnic identity of the league, but also have power, wealth, and fame, something that is harder for them to access outside of athletics (Boyd, 2003). If it is considered a truthful representation of what happens in games, then it must be examined as a text that promotes credible interpretations of identity. A continued effort to research the interactions between American culture and

the descriptions of players helps explain how Black masculinity is shaped in American society.

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