1

After Artest

The NBA and the Assault on Blackness

> The real question, how does it feel to be a problem.
> —W.E.B. DuBois, 1903 (Quoted in Jackson 2006, p. 9)

> Ron Artest more than likely will be suspended, but so should Kobe.
> (Resnick 2009)

> Kobe vs. Artest: Proof Artest Will Kill Your Team
> (2009)

> NBA Bad Boy Ron Artest of L.A. Lakers Admits He Had A Problem: Drinking During Games!
> (Douglas 2009)

> Trevor Ariza loses shoe, Ron Artest tosses it into the stands.
> (2009)

Artest, who's trying to put his bad-boy image behind him, said he could simply display his ring in his living room or he could wear it. But I think it'll be more important to give back to something I believe in, which is providing kids with someone to talk to because it's so expensive. I pay for parenting counseling, marriage counseling and anger management, and it's very expensive. This will be for children of all demographics, rich or poor—preferably the rich can pay for their own psychologists—but it'll be a great way to help kids who don't know where they're going in their life at this point. ("Ron Artest Plans" 2010)

© 2012 State University of New York Press, Albany

INTRODUCTION

At first glance, the above headlines point to the fact that Ron Artest's personal history, and especially his association with the Palace Brawl, continues to determine the public narrative assigned to him by the dominant media and broader public discourse. Even those instances of praise and celebratory redemption does so in relationship to his past indiscretions. Despite the banality of his exchange with Kobe and his tossing of another player's shoe off the court (his sportsmanship was questioned by an announcer), and notwithstanding his efforts to admit to a past drinking problem[1] or shed light on the issue of mental health, each in varying degrees have been the read through the lens of the Palace Brawl.

In 2009, Ron Artest admitted to drinking alcohol at halftime while he was a member of the Chicago Bulls. Hoping to teach kids by sharing his past mistakes, Artest's admission, not surprisingly, prompted much media and public debate. Although some people questioned the truthfulness of his admission, others used this moment as an opportunity to speculate about whether Artest was indeed drunk when he entered the stands in 2004. Likewise, his tossing of Trevor Ariza's shoe into the stands, along with his physical and verbal altercations with Kobe Bryant, were given amplified meaning and importance considering his role. In all four instances, Artest's past and his character are used as points of reference.

Often invoking his involvement in the 2004 Palace Brawl, the dominant frame that facilitates his representations is not only constrained by Artest's personal and professional histories, but by the prism of race and blackness. He is consistently imagined as a problem. The nature of these representations point to the ways in which blackness overdetermines not only the meaning of Artest, but of all black NBA players in a post-Brawl context. Post-Artest, blackness is the hegemonic point of reference for both the commentaries and the policy shifts within the NBA, demonstrating that the Palace Brawl changed the racial meaning of the NBA and thus changed the regulatory practices governing the league.

The purpose of *After Artest* is threefold:

1. To examine the changing racial landscape of the NBA following the November 22, 2004, Palace Brawl, which involved Ron Artest, several Detroit Piston fans, and several other Pacer (and Pistons) players.
2. To think about how race (particularly anti-black racism), ideas of colorblindness, and white racial frames colored the conversations and resulting policy shifts within the NBA.
3. To reflect on the broader significance and meaning of a post–Palace Brawl NBA that at one level mirrors hegemonic

© 2012 State University of New York Press, Albany

> notions of/about blackness, and yet at another level functions as a privileged (or exceptional) space for the criminalization (and consumption) of black bodies in the perpetuation and denial of dominant white racial frames.

In fulfilling these three goals, *After Artest* offers a rather simple argument: Highlighting the league's blackness, the Palace Brawl mandated the transformation of NBA policy regarding the governance of black bodies. Negating the two-decade long project of David Stern, the Palace Brawl belied the popular narrative, dominated by the figure of Michael Jordan, in which race within the NBA was seen as insignificant. The Palace Brawl was the culmination of the recoloring of the NBA. It represented a moment when the blackness of the league was irrefutable and thus needed to be managed, controlled, and, if necessary, destroyed. *After Artest* argues that the Palace Brawl served as that "aha moment" in which blackness displaced the racially transcendent signifier of Michael Jordan. This blackness, and its representative threat, were undeniable and, as such, necessitated intervention, termed as an *assault* within this book's title. Not surprisingly, anti-black racist/white racial frames have anchored the debates and policies that have followed Artest; frames based on racial transcendence or colorblindness remain in the background. In this sense, Artest mandated a reversal wherein race/blackness had to be noticed (and controlled/destroyed), leading to public articulations of the white racial frame instead of denials of racial significance. Finally, *After Artest* argues that the debates and struggles over racial meaning within the NBA are not isolated; instead they coexist alongside and are in dialogue with those narratives, ideologies and discursive articulations about the criminal justice system, education, and countless other institutions.

GUIDING FRAMEWORKS

Before further identifying and reflecting on the book's argument and point of entry, it will be useful to highlight three of the guiding frameworks that serve as foundation for my discussion here: (1) new racism; (2) white racial framing; and (3) anti-black racism.

New Racism[2]

In recent years, it has become increasingly popular to describe America's current racial moment as an era of "colorblind racism," "new racism," or even "racism 2.0" (Wise 2009; Duster 2003; Doane, 2003; Eduardo Bonilla-Silva, 2003). The implication here is that although it's often difficult to define and

© 2012 State University of New York Press, Albany

locate in the absence of Klan rallies and Jim Crow signs, race and racism remain defining features of American life. According to Patricia Hill Collins, new racism "reflects a situation of permanence and change" (2004, p. 33). Many of the outcomes and much of the societal inequality of today mirror the circumstances of 1896, 1919, and 1968, yet the cultural practices, institutional organization, political/policy formation, and geographic orientation have all changed. Peter Teo, in an essay analyzing racial discourse within Australian newspapers, identifies new racism as a "form of racism that is much more subtle, covert, and hence insidious" (2000, p. 8). Notwithstanding the vast amount of statistical data illustrating the persistence of racial inequality, new racism is defined by processes wherein "whites explain the apparent contradiction between professed color blindness, and the United States' color-coded inequality" (Bonilla-Silva 2003, p. 2). Embracing a variety of lenses and rhetorical strategies, whites are able to rework America's contemporary racial reality to legitimize notions of colorblindness, freedom, equality, democracy, and America.

In this vein, Bonilla-Silva argues that colorblind racism functions as a mechanism for keeping blacks and other minorities "at the bottom of the well" (2003, pp. 2–3). Colorblind racism is subtle, institutional, and composed of "apparently nonracial" practices, yet it enables inequality, segregation, and white privilege to remain intact. For example, whereas Jim Crow segregation was enforced through overtly racist signs, restrictive covenants, and violence, today's practices include landlords not showing units or advertising vacant properties, denying vacancy, and quoting higher prices to minority applicants. The tactics of each era are different, but the results remain the same. Bonilla-Silva describes the shift within racism as follows:

> Yet this new ideology has become a formidable political tool for the maintenance of the racial order. Much as Jim Crow racism served as the glue for defending a brutal and overt system of racial oppression in the pre–Civil Rights era, color-blind racism serves today as the ideological armor for a covert and institutionalized system in the post–Civil Rights era. And the beauty of this new ideology is that it aids the maintenance of white privilege without fanfare, without naming who it subjects and those who it rewards. (2003, p. 3)

As evident here, the prominence of colorblindness and the use of implicitly racial language appear to reflect the newest form of an old system by which white privilege has long been maintained through the ideological/institutional justifications of white supremacy. Similarly, Collins identifies new racism as "the juxtaposition of old and new, in some cases a continuation

© 2012 State University of New York Press, Albany

of long-standing practices of racial rule and, in other cases the development of something original" (Collins 2004, pp. 54–55). Henry Giroux also argues that new racism is not defined by the declining significance of race, but rather its fluidity, its contradictions, its metamorphoses, and by the ubiquity of the denials voiced regarding the importance of race after the civil rights movement. "The importance of race and the enduring fact of racism are relegated to the dustbin of history at a time in American life when the discourses of race and the spectacle of racial representation saturate the dominant media and public life" writes Giroux. "The politics of the color line and representations of race have become far more subtle and complicated than they were in the Jim Crow era (2003, p. 192). More broadly, Giroux defines the specific dimensions of new racism in the following way:

> Unlike the old racism, which defined racial difference in terms of fixed biological categories organized hierarchically, the new racism operates in various guises proclaiming among other things race neutrality, asserting culture as a market of racial difference, or making race as a private matter. Unlike the crude racism with its biological referents and pseudoscientific legitimizations, buttressing its appeal to white racial superiority, the new racism cynically recodes itself within the vocabulary of the civil rights movement. (2003, p. 192)

Amy Elizabeth Ansell similarly focus on the ways in which cultural differences mark and rationalize the existence of inequality:

> It is a form of racism that utilizes themes related to culture and nation as a replacement for the now discredited biological referents of the old racism. It is concerned less with notions of racial superiority in the narrow sense than with the alleged "threat" people of color pose—either because of their mere presence or because of their demand for "special privileges"—to economic, socio-political, and cultural vitality of the dominant (White) society. It is, in short, a new form of racism that operates with the category of "race." It is a new form of exclusionary politics that operates indirectly and in stealth via the rhetorical inclusion of people of color and the sanitized nature of its racist appeal. (1997, pp. 20–21)

Bonilla-Silva identifies four central frames of colorblind racism—abstract liberalism, naturalization, cultural racism, and minimization of racism—which together define the new racist discourse. The two latter frames are particularly useful in understanding contemporary sporting culture and the approach

© 2012 State University of New York Press, Albany

offered in *After Artest*, given that the NBA functions as an important site for the denial of contemporary racism and the demonization and exclusion of racialized bodies through cultural argumentation and discourse. "Cultural racism is a frame that relies on culturally-based arguments," Bonilla-Silva explains (Bonilla-Silva 2003, p. 28). According to Carrington and McDonald, "cultural racism posits that although different ethnic groups or 'races' may not exist in a hierarchical biological relationship, they are nevertheless culturally distinct, each group having their own incompatible lifestyles, customs and ways of seeing the world" (2001, p. 1). Similarly, Spencer concludes, "cultural racism is thus predicated on an understanding of culture as a whole way of life and has implications for racism in sport" (2004, p. 121).

Instead of basing exclusion and inequality on purely biological explanations, dominant racial discourses locate social problems in the cultural deficiencies of the African American community. Rather than circulating evidence of the biological inferiority of black men and women, a common practice in the United States was evident in the exclusion of bodies of color from American sports teams through the first half of the twentieth century. Contemporary (new racist) racial discourse (including the narratives circulating about blackness and the NBA) focuses on cultural and class differences as the predominant narrative to explain persistent inequality. By repeating those narratives that celebrate racial progress and the availability of the American Dream to many African Americans, amid a focus on the black underclass, new racism demonizes and blames those who continue to live in their own nightmares because of personal failures and deficiencies all while denying the importance of race. "The clock has been turned back on racial progress in American, though scarcely anyone seems to notice," argues Michelle Alexander in *New Jim Crow: Mass Incarceration in an Era of Colorblindness*. "All eyes are fixed on people like Barack Obama and Oprah Winfrey, who have defied the odds and risen to power, fame, and fortune" (2010, p. 175). Narratives of success and those exceptional exceptions are used as evidence of a post-racial America.

A second frame, which both dominates contemporary racial discourses and infects our understanding of the representations and media discourse surrounding the NBA, minimizes the continued importance of racism. This minimization of the racism frame "suggests that discrimination is no longer a central factor affecting minorities' life chances" (Bonilla-Silva 2003, p. 29). Teo describes this defining element in a similar fashion, detailing the ways in which the dominant racial discourse generates "discursive strategies that *blame* the victims for their circumstances on their own social, economic, and even cultural disadvantage" (2000, p. 8). Dismissing hate crimes, police brutality, racial profiling, continued inequality and individual prejudice, new racist discourse frequently accuses people of color of using race as a "crutch,"

© 2012 State University of New York Press, Albany

being overly sensitive when it comes to racism, or deploying the "race card" (Bonilla-Silva 2003, p. 29), while they simultaneously deny the existence of racism, instead blaming the cultural deficiencies of people of color for any instance of inequality.

The realities of new racism are clearly part and parcel of an NBA discourse, even after Artest, so there are certain limitations to thinking about the NBA through this lens given both the centrality of the racial discourse and the continued deployment of historical white racial frames.

White Racial Frame

According to Joe Feagin, "the socially inherited racial frame is a comprehensive orienting structure, a 'tool kit' that whites and others have long used to understand, interpret, and act in social settings" (Feagin 2009, p. 13). This tool kit contains stereotypes, which Picca and Feagin describe as "filters, straining out information inconsistent with the dominant racial frame" (2007, p. 10) and "'big picture' narratives that connect frame elements into historically oriented stories with morals that are especially important to white Americans" (Feagin 2009, p. 13). My efforts here seek to illustrate how, within a post-Artest NBA discourse, these stereotypes and "big picture narratives" literally play out on players' bodies, elucidating how the dominant racial frame guides both the consumption and demonization of black athletes which, in turn, "structures [white] events and performances" (Feagin 2009, p. 12) outside the arena of sports. Joe Feagin describes the white racial frame as a "master frame," "that has routinely defined a way of being, a broad perspective on life" (2009, p. 11; 2009, p. 13; Feagin 2008). Frames encompass a "conceptual and interpretative scheme that shapes and channels assessments of everyday events and encounters with people" (Feagin 2006, p. 26). Focusing on tropes of hard work or ideas of superiority, highlighting narratives that legitimize meritocracy and the prospects of rags-to-riches, dominant racial frames "make powerful use of stereotypes [and] images, provid[ing] the language and interpretations that help structure, normalize, and make sense out of society" (2009, p. 11). Feagin notes further that a dominant white racial frame "not only explains and interprets the everyday world but also implies or offers actions in line with the frame's explanatory perspective" (2006, p. 26). In summary, Feagin describes the interface between dominant white racial frames and the daily/institutional structuring of society in the following way:

> From the beginning the white racial frame has not only rationalized the exploitative structure of racial oppression, but also played a central role in *actually structuring* this society on a daily basis by

© 2012 State University of New York Press, Albany

> providing important understandings, images, narratives, emotions, and operational norms that determine a great array of individual and group actions within all major societal sectors. The dominant white racial frame is active and directing; it is learned at parent's knee, in school, and from the media; and once learned, it both guides and rationalizes discriminatory behavior. (2009, pp. 15–16)

Eduardo Bonilla-Silva also identifies frames as representations used "to explain how the world is or ought to be," in the establishment of racial ideology (Bonilla-Silva 2010, p. 10). Based on and in "hierarchy and domination," the dominant white racial frame function as "building blocks for manufacturing versions of actions, self, and social structures" (Weatherell and Potter quoted in Bonilla-Silva 2010, p. 10). In other words, white frames are "the central component of any dominant racial ideology," establishing the "paths for interpreting information" (Bonilla-Silva 2010, p. 26). They exist "as cul-de-sacs because after people filter issues through them, they explain racial phenomena following a predictable route" (Bonilla-Silva 2003, p. 26). While predictable, they are powerful precisely because they "misrepresent the world," thereby "provid[ing] the intellectual road map used by rulers to navigate the always rocky road of domination" (Bonilla-Silva 2010, p. 26). Both Bonilla-Silva and Feagin see white racial frames as akin to Omi and Wimant's idea of a racial project, described as "simultaneously an interpretation, representation, or explanation of racial dynamics, and an effort to reorganize and redistribute resources along particular racial lines" (1994, p. 56).

Whereas Joe Feagin and Eduardo Bonilla-Silva use the descriptor of white racial frames, Ronald Jackson utilizes the idea of scripts to explain the ways in which black bodies are infused with meaning. "Black bodies were inscribed with a set of meanings, which helped to perpetuate the scripter's racial ideology. Through these scripts, race gradually became its own corporeal politics," he writes. "Mass-mediated culture practices," thus, "redistribute and recycle" a myriad of "racially xenophobic tendencies" that are "scripted [on] the black body" (2006, p. 9). Similarly, Wiegman (1995) focuses on gaze to describe the ways in which whites look at black bodies and their experiences: "Gaze is a specular event, a tool for examining sites of obsessive desire that admit the visibility of difference but remain troubled by it" (Jackson 2006, p. 10). Although the gaze itself can "be impartial or non-obligatory," racial signifiers "evoke feelings, thoughts, perhaps anxieties" (Jackson 2006, p. 10). The gaze and the perquisite frames "suggest that there must be the presence of an Other" (Jackson 2006, p. 10). In this regard, dominant white racial frames or scripts emphasize the Otherness of/in black bodies. Frames, like "stereotypes, are a crude set of mental representations of the world" that "perpetuate a needed sense of difference between 'self' and the 'object,' which

© 2012 State University of New York Press, Albany

becomes the Other" (Gillman 1985, pp. 17–18; Quoted in Andrews 2001c, p. 110). Both in stereotype, and through narrative, blackness as the Other becomes a perpetual threat that requires control, if not annihilation.

I proceed to demonstrate how a white racial frame guided the media and public discourses[3] that arose in response to the Palace Brawl and how, furthermore, long-standing narratives, stereotypes, and frames have infected and affected the NBA. My object here is not to isolate the NBA, to highlight the ways in which stereotypes and dominant racial frames inform a post-Artest NBA narrative, but rather to elucidate the dialectics and exchanges that take place/exist between the racialized and racializing world of the NBA and the broader cultural, social, and political landscape that informs and is informed by the happenings in the NBA. My focus is, thus, to reflect on white racial frames within the NBA that ubiquitously give voice to and are guided by an ideology of anti-blackness. The recognition of the blackness of the NBA and the fallacy of racial transcendence compelled discursive and policy shifts based on/in these frames and an ideology of anti-blackness.

ANTI-BLACK RACISM AND THE NBA

Todd Boyd argues that the NBA "remains one of the few places in American society where there is a consistent racial discourse," where race, whether directly or indirectly, is the subject of conversation at all times (Boyd 2000, p. 60). In 1984, David Stern began his tenure as the NBA's commissioner. Even more so than the MLB or the NFL, the NBA had been plagued by criticism that the league was too black, a criticism that didn't simply refer to the demographics of the league, but also the aesthetics, styles, and transparent blackness of its bodies. According to David Stern, "sponsors were flocking out of the NBA because it was perceived as a bunch of high-salaried, drug-sniffing black guys" (Quoted in Hughes 2004, p. 164). At this moment, perceptions of race and anti-black sentiment were leading the NBA down a path of failure. A *Boston Globe* reporter told Stern that "nobody wants to watch ten black guys in short pants running up and down the court" (Quoted in Wynter 2002, p. 99). Boyd describes the situation facing the NBA in the 1970s and early 1980s in the following way: "The league was on one hand becoming increasingly Black, not only in terms of population but in style of play and in its overall aesthetic." He further notes that a "proliferation of cocaine in the NBA" during this period contributed to "the looming cloud of racially based perception that informed the population shift. As far as the public was concerned, these players were criminals and not indulgent artists. . . . Thus, the NBA came to be thought of as simply another example of Black criminality, not unlike those Black criminals represented in other aspects of society across

© 2012 State University of New York Press, Albany

the news media" (Boyd 2003, p. 39). Not surprisingly, Stern's early tenure was marked/characterized/defined by accusations against the players of selfishness, criminality, and drug use; lamentations about the disconnect between fans and players; and an overall contempt for the NBA's product (Hughes 2004; Boyd 2003; Tucker 2003; Denzin 2001; Boyd 2000; Cole and Andrews 1996a). Beyond instituting policy changes, some of which remain in place, that emphasize "managing player behavior" (Hughes 2004, p. 164) and sought to police, discipline, and control hyper–black bodies, the NBA and its marketing partners have long de-emphasized the blackness of the NBA baller. To counteract race-based contempt, Stern and the NBA have focused on deracializing the league, on facilitating colorblindness, which they have considered key to the success of the NBA.[4]

Magic Johnson, Larry Bird, and David Stern's NBA enterprise were able to expand the popularity of the NBA during the 1980s and simultaneously counter the negative associations of drugs, violence, and dysfunction (blackness) so prominent during that era, but Jordan took this to a new level. Reflecting the creativity, style, spontaneity, and sense of individuality (Boyd 2003, pp. 103–104) associated with hip-hop culture specifically and black culture in general, Jordan was able to capitalize on the emerging cultural popularity of hip-hop while still concealing his blackness from fans; he was able to decouple hip-hop and blackness within the white imagination. Jordan provided a blackness of a different color;[5] he provided a racial reassurance and pleasure, which today's players cannot because of their performed racial identities. As noted by David Andrews, "Jordan's carefully scripted televisual adventures on the corporate playground were designed to substantiate an all-American (which in Manning Marable's terms means white) hard bodied identity (Jeffords 1994) which would appeal to the racially sensitive sensibilities of the American mass market" (Andrews 2000, p. 174). Likewise, in his $3,000 suit, with his dominance both on and off the court and his refusal to talk about race or politics, Jordan "allow[ed] 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" (Ken Naughton, quoted in Andrews 2000, p. 175). David Falk, Jordan's agent, linked together his marketing possibilities/success, his overall popularity, and his racial identity in illustrative ways:

> When players of color become stars they are no longer perceived as being of color. The color sort of vanishes. I don't think people look at Michael Jordan anymore and say he's a black superstar. They say he's a superstar. They totally accepted him into the mainstream. Before he got there he might have been African American, but once he arrived, he had such a high level of acceptance that I think that description goes away. (Quoted in Rhoden 2006, p. 204)

© 2012 State University of New York Press, Albany

To understand Falk's construction of Jordan, and the associated narrative frame that guided his position within the cultural landscape, it is important to reflect on the meaning of racial transcendence. As Jordan was "cast as a spectacular talent, midsized, well-spoken, attractive, accessible, old-time values, wholesome, clean, natural, not too goody-two shoes, without a bit of deviltry in him" (Falk quoted in Andrews 2001c, p. 125), his representation was not race neutral but wrapped up in the racial stereotypes and frames associated with whiteness and blackness (Ammons 1997). Read as the embodiment of "personal drive, responsibility, integrity, and success," as opposed to "the stereotypical representations of deviant, promiscuous, and irresponsible black males," Jordan's racially transcendent, colorblind-driven, raceless image was always tied to racial language. He represented the possibility of acceptance by whites (racial transcendence), which meant he was able to "transcend his own race" (Rhoden 2006, p. 204), or better said, the overdetermining and limiting stains of blackness. Yet, the illusion persisted that his success and popularity marked a paradigm shift for the NBA, in the marketing of African American sports stars, and for the nation as a whole, where "you could look at him [and] really not see his color. Like O.J. Simpson, Jordan was racially and politically neutral" (Rhoden 2006, p. 203), at least according to the dominant white racial frame.

David Stern, answering questions about the persistence of a race problem in the NBA, encapsulates the NBA's mission of colorblindness: "By and large the majority of the sport public is colorblind. I do not believe they care if Julius Erving or Carl Lewis or Mark Breland is black. They're great champions, and the people will respond to them, regardless of race" (Quoted in Wynter 2002, p. 99). Taking this a step further, Falk concludes that not only do black NBA stars have the potential to occupy newly racialized/raceless bodies upon securing all-star status, their popularity and that of the NBA game depends upon such a racial transformation. "Celebrities aren't black. People don't look at Michael as being black. They accept that he's different because he is a celebrity" (Quoted in Gates 1998, p. 54). Notwithstanding the efforts of the NBA to obscure or mediate racial difference—to deny or minimize the existence of racism both inside and outside its arenas—race and dominant white racial frames continue to impact the NBA's organization and reception. Whether in terms of the stereotypes that imagine black NBA players as violent, dysfunctional criminals, or the public/media demands for conformity and discipline, the NBA is defined by elements of both the old and the new, of both culturally and racially based arguments concerning social difference. That is, in spite of purported paradigm shifts, the idea of colorblindness, as with the racial landscape after Artest, is guided by the dominant white racial frames and the ideology of anti-blackness.

According to Elizabeth Alexander, the history of American racism has always been defined by practices where black bodies are put on display "for

© 2012 State University of New York Press, Albany

public consumption," whether in the form of "public rapes, beatings, and lynchings" or in "the gladiatorial arenas of basketball and boxing" (1994, p. 92). Similarly, Jonathan Markowitz describes the ways in which the sports media contributes to the widespread criminalization of the black body: "The bodies of African American athletes from a variety of sports have been at the center of a number of mass media spectacles in recent years, most notably involving Mike Tyson and O.J. Simpson, but NBA players have been particularly likely to occupy center stage in American racial discourse" (2006, p. 401). Thus, especially after Artest, the discourse surrounding the NBA—even amid the hyper-commodification and celebrity of a handful of black NBA stars—has worked to circulate and legitimize dominant discourses about pathological and abhorrent black bodies. "Black male bodies are increasingly admired and commodified in rap, hip hop, and certain sports, but at the same time they continue to be used to invoke fear. Black men are both held in contempt and valued as entertainment" (Collins 2005; Leonard 2004), writes Abby Ferber. "Yet this is really nothing new. Black men have been defined as a threat throughout American history while being accepted in roles that serve and entertain White people, where they can ostensibly be controlled and made to appear nonthreatening" (Ferber 2007, p. 12). *After Artest* gives voice to the ways in which the decisions guiding the NBA in the wake of the Palace Brawl, along with the reactions expressed by the media and public, reflected long-standing efforts to control black male bodies.

It is important to understand that the NBA, like sports in general, generates competing images of blackness. On the one hand there are the "'bad boy Black athletes" (Collins 2005, p. 153) who are consistently depicted as "overly physical, out of control, prone to violence, driven by instinct, and hypersexual"—they are "unruly and disrespectful," "inherently dangerous," and "in need of civilizing" (Ferber 2007, p. 20). At the other end of the spectrum are the NBA stars, black athletes, who "are perceived as controlled by White males" (Ferber 2007, p. 20) and are "defined as the 'good Blacks'" (Ferber 2007, p. 20). An awareness of this dialectic between good and bad is crucial for understanding both the role race has played in the NBA historically and within the media and public discourses in wake of the Palace Brawl, illustrating the impetus for regimes of regulation, surveillance, and discipline in a post-Artest moment. The visibility of blackness—and its badness—mandated regulatory transformation. "The negative depiction of bad boys works to reinforce efforts to tame their 'out of control' nature" (Ferber 2007, p. 20). These representations contribute to what Alice Walker dubs a "prison of image, whereby stereotypes function not as errors, but rather forms of social control" (Quoted in Asante 2008, p. 16). Illustrating the ways in which race and racial meaning have functioned within the NBA after Artest, I argue the centrality of racism here, as "a gaze that insists upon the power to make

© 2012 State University of New York Press, Albany

others conform, to perform endlessly in the prison of prior expectation" (Williams 1997, p. 74).

The NBA black body has become a stand-in for a broader discussion about race in American society; in a sense, the black NBA baller has come to embody the essentialized black subject within the white imagination. Discussing the media coverage of Latrell Sprewell's conflict with then coach P.J. Carleisimo, Linda Tucker argues that the media consistently "represented the incident in ways that vilified Sprewell through the use of derogatory images of black men" (2003, p. 401). Moreover, Sarah Banet-Weiser concludes that the "NBA exploits and makes exotic the racist discourse of the Black menace even as it domesticates this cultural figure (1999, p. 406). Predictably, much of the existing literature dealing with race and sports focuses on basketball (Markovitz 2006; Leonard 2006; Hughes 2004; Leonard, 2004; Boyd 2003; Andrews 2001b; Andrews 2001c; Cole 2001; Denzin 2001; Boyd 2000; Banet-Wiser 1999; Boyd 1997, Andrews 1996; Cole and Andrews 1996; Cole 1996; Denzin 1996). For example, Tucker argues that it is not surprising that race/blackness is central to the NBA discourse, and more revealingly, she describes the relationship between the NBA's racialized discourse and broader discussions about race both inside and outside of sporting cultures. "In ways absent from other sports, the Blackness, sexuality, and the physical and emotional vulnerability of the majority of players are stamped on the face of the game of basketball" (2003, p. 313). Similarly, Markovitz, in his discussion of the Kobe Bryant rape case, concludes that "because NBA players are always already at the center of an eroticized and racialized mass-media spectacle, it is not surprising that allegations of sexual misconduct on the part of an NBA superstar should be immediately seized on and scrutinized for larger lessons about celebrity, gender, and racial conflict in American society" (2006, p. 401).

THE NBA BEYOND ARTEST

After Artest pushes the discussion of race and the NBA beyond the press box, beyond what happens in the arenas, and even beyond commodification and consumption, toward a consideration of the dialectics that exist between the NBA/its discourse and an ongoing history of racialized violence. Much of the literature focuses almost exclusively on the ways in which dominant racial frames, stereotypes, and representations of black men impact media coverage and fan reception. Specifically, the majority of the literature focusing on race or blackness in the NBA examines how racial ideologies impact the representation and reception of particular black NBA players, such as Michael Jordan (Andrews 2001a; Andrews 2001b; Andrews 2001c; Andrews 2000d; Andrews

© 2012 State University of New York Press, Albany

2000; Cole 2001), Allen Iverson (Boyd 2003; Platt 2003), Latrell Sprewell (Shropshire 2000; Boyd 2000b), Kobe Bryant (Mipuri 2011; Markovitz 2006; Leonard 2004), LeBron James (Guerrero 2011), nd countless other players. Likewise, the literature, with some exceptions (e.g., Guerrero 2011; Mipuri 2011; Cole 2001; King and Springwood 2001; McDonald 2001; Andrews 2000) tends to focus on how broader racial ideologies have infected the basketball court, in terms of its cultural, aesthetic, and social development. Although there have been a number of monographs and edited collections dedicated to examining issues of race and the experiences of African Americans within the NBA, these works mainly focus on (1) the historical contributions made by African Americans to the evolution of basketball and the NBA; or (2) the racial tensions and constructions of blackness evident both in the media and fan reactions to a myriad of events, including Latrell Sprewell choking his coach and the 1999 lockout.

To a certain extent, the existing literature has dealt with race and blackness while ignoring the larger implications of white racial framing within an NBA discourse. For example, Todd Boyd, with *Young Black Rich and Famous: The Rise of the NBA, The Hip Hop Invasion and the Transformation of American Culture* explores the ways in which African Americans, through hip-hop culture, have transformed the NBA. Arguing that this cultural shift has not been easy or without conflict or resistance, Boyd provides an important historical treatment of the evolution of the NBA's aesthetics and cultural significance. Likewise, Boyd's and Kenneth L. Shropshire's edited collection, *Basketball Jones: America Above the Rim*, brings together essays by a number of scholars who reflect on the cultural significance and meaning of the American basketball culture, a space defined by and saturated with black bodies and cultural styles. "While baseball remains the key vessel of sports nostalgia and tradition, it is basketball that currently saturates popular culture and permeates our national identity" (Boyd and Shropshire 2000, p. 5). Reflecting on the importance of the NBA beyond wins and losses, Boyd and Shropshire conclude that, "Basketball assumes a larger place than either [football and baseball] in the lexicon of popular culture throughout the world. This may not be the New World Order that Bush was referring to, but when you consider that a sport once dismissed as a black man's sport has come to represent America worldwide, then it is obvious that, if nothing else, the old order has been replaced" (Boyd and Shropshire 2000, p. 11). Like Boyd and Shropshire, much of the other literature focuses on the cultural impact of basketball culture and both the meaning and tensions that arise from the blackness associated with contemporary basketball. For example, Wertham (2005) and Platt (2002) both focus on the transformation of the game of basketball and the ways in which shifts within the NBA often impact the broader culture.

© 2012 State University of New York Press, Albany

Much of the literature has focused on how the cultural shifts outside the NBA (specifically hip-hop) have transformed the league in terms of its cultural and racial meaning, its aesthetics and on-the-court play, and its overall significance within the American and transnational cultures. Others, like Brooks (2009), May (2008), McLaughlin (2008), Smith (2007), and McNutt (2002), highlight the ways in which basketball intersects with identity formation, personal aspirations, community development, and cultural practices. These works highlight the impact of the popularity of basketball on a spectrum of communities, particularly black youth, theorizing about not only the cultural impact but also the political, social, and economic imprint.

These themes certainly play a role in *After Artest*, but the focus here is less on the interface between broader cultural happenings and the transformation of the NBA and more on the connections between the NBA discourse and the broader discourse of anti-black racism. Instead of focusing solely on the court, this monograph attempts to examine the ways in which racial ideologies, dominant white racial frames, and racializing culture wars infect not only the discursive field surrounding the NBA, but also the dialectic between the NBA arena and society at large.

So, whereas much of the literature focuses on how the NBA has transformed American culture or the black community, this text looks at how American culture, in the form of racial ideologies and dominant white racial frames, has constrained and contained the NBA and, in particular, its black bodies. Highlighting the shared structure, values, and ideologies of nations and sporting culture, Gamel Abdel-Shehid, in *Who Da Man? Black Masculinities and Sporting Culture*s, illustrates the importance of looking to sports in an effort to understand the larger processes associated with social difference, social structures, and race-based repression. Discussing "both nations and sporting cultures," Abdel-Shehid argues that "Social difference haunts these institutions, given that [it] . . . often threatens to undo the cohesion of nations and sporting cultures at every turn" (2005, p. 3). As such, he concludes that,

> Both structures, by virtue of their overdetermining and repressive demand for sameness, are troubled or "haunted" by the reality and complexity of social difference. As such, nations and sporting cultures by and large act as repressive or normalizing structures that, by virtue of an inability to tolerate discord, constantly attempt to produce conformity and sameness, and disavow difference and inequality.
>
> The repressive nature of sporting cultures and nationalism result in the need for social difference to be constantly managed. Those marked as "different" are encouraged or rather expected to,

© 2012 State University of New York Press, Albany

> assimilate, or fit into the existing frameworks of team or nation. (2005, pp. 3–4)

After Artest takes a similar approach, highlighting the shared discursive and ideological qualities of the NBA and larger national narratives, emphasizing how the NBA and its surrounding discourse does a lot of the racializing, disciplining, and punishing purportedly needed to mediate social difference. I emphasize how, in the wake of the Palace Brawl, a moment that highlighted social and cultural differences, which are simultaneously feared and commodified, the NBA undertook a series of policy shifts and rhetorical campaigns that attempted to mediate these potentially harmful differences through demands for assimilation, disciplinarity, and conformity. This book is not simply an examination of the policy shifts by which the NBA sought to mediate these differences, it is also an examination of the important role the sports media (a partner of the NBA) played in this process. However, as in the work of Abdel-Shehid—along with that of Andrews, Cole, King, and others—the discussion is not limited to the state of conditions in the NBA after Artest, but also considers how the NBA's efforts to mediate/erase social difference, to demand conformity through calls for disciplinarity and surveillance, both impact and reflect larger discussions/formations about race and nation. In other words, I use this cultural moment to examine the post-Artest discourse, which includes the structure of the NBA and the surrounding media discourse, to reflect on the "new racism" the culture wars, and oft-employed racial frames and narratives regarding black criminality, the American Dream, and post–civil rights America.

In this sense, this monograph builds on the tradition of critical sports scholars (Gamal Abdel-Shehid, David Andrews, C.L. Cole, Susan Birrell, Mary McDonald, C. Richard King) and other scholars interested in race and popular culture (Mark Anthony Neal, Patricia Hill Collins, S. Craig Watkins, Herman Gray) who have illustrated the usefulness of the examination of sporting cultures (and other cultural projects) as a "vehicle for developing progressive understandings of the *broader* social, economic, political, and technological concerns that frame contemporary culture" (Andrews 2001b, p. xv). Writing about Michael Jordan and describing the collection of essays that appear in *Michael Jordan, Inc.: Corporate Sport, Media Culture, and Late Modern America*, Andrews argues for scholarship that "makes sense of a celebrated figure, whose public existence graphically exteriorizes a late capitalist order defined by the convergence of corporate and media interests" (2001b, p. xv). This collection explored the cultural, political, economic, racial, and social landscapes through an examination of Michael Jordan.

In fact, much of this segment of the literature focuses on the ways in which particular NBA figures have been used as ideological tools for the ben-

© 2012 State University of New York Press, Albany

efit of larger national narratives. NBA stars, and sports stars of color in general, are commodified as evidence of a race neutral or post-racial America wherein all Americans have the same opportunities to succeed and be accepted (Andrews 2001a; Andrews and Jackson 2001; Cole and Andrews 2001; Denzin 2001; King and Springwood 2001). The success of black athletes, and the supposed adoration America feels for black NBA stars, is posited as evidence for racial progress and colorblindness (McDonald and Andrews 2001, p. 26). Mary McDonald and David L. Andrews—writing about Michael Jordan in the context of the New Right and the rise of Reagan conservativism during the 1980s and early 1990s—conclude that not only was Jordan "portrayed as the moral obverse of the masses of African Americans vilified by the New Right for allegedly lacking the (new) right stuff" (2001, p. 26), but that his success was seen/employed as evidence that all Americans can potentially secure the American Dream, that achievement in the U.S. is fundamentally merit-based, and that America has transcended the stains of racism and attained a state wherein everyone has an equal chance to succeed in life. "Jordan is thus aligned with other African Americans stars of this era such as Bill Cosby, Whoopi Goldberg, and Oprah Winfrey whose high-profile success stories further condemned the struggling African American masses for lacking . . . personal resolution" write McDonald and Andrews. "Reaganism's doctrine of rugged individualism and color-blind bigotry, was all that was required to achieve in American society" (2001, p. 27). Such discursive practice remains prominent today, as contemporary athletes (e.g., LeBron James, Dwight Howard, Dwyane Wade, Kobe Bryant), like Jordan, not exist as floating signifiers of the American Dream, the opportunity available to those who follow the right path, but also as symbols of a post-racial America. These *black* athletes are not just accepted—they are celebrated and praised. They function as "the moral obverse" of those NBA stars who are condemned, vilified, and policed both inside and outside of sports. Under such racial binaries, the condemnation of Allen Iverson, Ron Artest, Rasheed Wallace, and Carmelo Anthony is not and cannot be racial, given the love and praise with which black athletes are lavished by society and the media; rather, the criticism directed toward these athletes has been prompted/elicited by their own cultural and moral failings.

The importance of these works rests with their ability to highlight the broader significance of the discursive articulations and representational offerings within the world of basketball/sports and interface between the narratives and media representation surrounding the NBA and larger political narratives about post-racialness, the American Dream, the Protestant work ethnic, and meritocracy. Similarly, C.L. Cole, using the term "American Jordan" as a strategic device for emphasizing Jordan's "position as a 'representative character' of America's political culture," highlights the ways in which

© 2012 State University of New York Press, Albany

the culture of the NBA and representations of Jordan interfaced with 1980s racial politics, particularly those processes that have imagined the "Criminal-BlackMan" (Russell 1998, p. 3) as a perpetual threat to the nation.

Understanding Jordan's position in the national culture, and the implications of his being embodied in the fantasies and anxieties that dominated America in the 1980s and 1990s, requires that we consider "how the multiple desires and pleasures mobilized through identification with Michael Jordan are deeply implicated in racially coded deviance and its affective solicitations, especially the 'revenge' underlying the contemporary 'will to punish'" (Cole 2001a, p. 71).

My task here is thus to examine "the *broader* social, economic, political, and technological concerns that frame contemporary culture" subsequent to the Palace Brawl. The NBA, as evident both in the representations/experiences of a number of players—including Michael Jordan, Kobe Bryant, Ron Artest, and countless others—and the occurrence of several incidents, functions as a "cultural product 'constituted with and constituted of a larger context of relations'" (Grossberg 1997, p. 57) characteristic of the American condition at the turn of the century" (Andrews 2001b, p. xv). Like the works of Andrews and Cole, this book heeds the call and adopts the methodological approach articulated by Susan Birrell and Mary G. McDonald, who defined "the methodology of 'reading' sport" as "finding the cultural meanings that circulate within narratives of particular incidents or celebrities" (Birrell and McDonald 2000, p. 11). Noting the importance of examining "the ways that sexuality, race, gender, and class privileges" operates within sporting cultures, Birrell and McDonald highlight the potential utility of critical sport intervention: "Reading sport critically can be used as a methodology for uncovering, foregrounding, and producing counternarratives, that is alternative accounts of particular events and celebrities that have been decentered, obscured, and dismissed by hegemonic forces" (p. 11). Elsewhere, Birrell and McDonald (1999) describe this methodological and theoretical approach to sporting cultures in the following way:

> [It provides] vantage points from which to observe, critique, and intervene in the complex and contradictory interactions of the power lines of ability, age, race, class, nationality, gender, and sexuality. [It] provides interventions into the dynamics of power, revealing what might have been obscured, while placing events and celebrities within their particular historical and political contexts. (Quoted in Andrews 2000b, pp. xv–xvi)

In this vein, this book represents an effort to look not only at how the Palace Brawl ushered in a new era within the NBA given its elucidation of the

© 2012 State University of New York Press, Albany

league's blackness, but how hegemonic constructions of blackness have overdetermined the interpretations of and reactions to this fight, as is evident in the post-brawl commentaries and the NBA's subsequent policy shifts. The task of this book is to use a post-Artest NBA discourse to understand the manner in which blackness is imagined and framed within and beyond the NBA. *After Artest* accepts the methodological challenge articulated by Birrell and McDonald, but rather than exclusively offering a counternarrative for the Palace Brawl, the age debate, and the NBA's imposed dress code, this monograph provides a broader counternarrative centering on race and power in the era after Artest.

THIS BOOK

Examining the "social and cultural antagonisms" (Watkins 1998, p. 22) of the NBA and its surrounding media discourse – along with the "specific motifs" (Watkins 1998, p. 22), racial tropes, and rhetorical devices that have been employed within the discourse—this monograph focuses on the ideological field of the NBA. According to Watkins, "the ideological field—defined here as the terrain where ideas, signs, representations, and other symbolic materials circulate and inform public discourses about the social world—functions as a battleground for the clash between competing political players and their views of the world" (Watkins 1998, p. 26).

At the core of this project is a desire to look at the ways in which racial meaning ("common sense") has affected NBA policy and media engagement after Artest. Precisely, I am concerned with describing a post-Artest NBA racial landscape, highlighting the cultural and policy shifts that came about as the blackness of the league became increasingly evident (and troubling) in wake of the Palace Brawl; moreover, I am concerned with exploring the dialects that exist between the white racial frames and narratives that are commonplace within the NBA and the larger structures, discourses, and cultural debates that color and are colored by what is happening in the NBA.

After Artest builds on the tradition of critical discourse analysis,[6] which looks "beyond the description of [the] discourse to an explanation of how and why particular discourses are produced (Teo 2000, p. 11). My analysis of race and the NBA not only includes an examination of how the discourse guides or "reflects social processes and structures," but also how it "affirms, consolidates, and in this way reproduces existing social structures" (Teo 2000, p. 11). *After Artest*, looks at how the racialized and racializing common sense of the current moment guides and infects the post-brawl discourse. Yet, at the same, my focus is on how the racialized and racializing common sense generated by

© 2012 State University of New York Press, Albany

the NBA (the discourse) "sustains and reinforces dominant social structures and relations"—how it contributes to hegemony.

While examining the shifting racial landscape that follows the Palace Brawl, *After Artest* also analyzes how the NBA and the media/popular discourse function as racial spectacle. "Th[is] spectacle is not a collection of images; rather it is a social relationship that is mediated by images." It is "both the outcome and the goal of the dominant model of production" (Guy Debord quoted in Abdel-Shehid 2005, p. 8). According to Douglas Kellner, "spectacles are those phenomena of media, culture, and society that embody the society's basic values." They "serve to enculturate individuals into this way of life and dramatize the society's conflicts and models of conflict resolution" (Quoted in King and Springwood 2001, p. 11). *After Artest* concerns itself with "those spectacles" that contain and are defined by interrelated images and commodities "that transform" a post-brawl NBA "into a broader field of public culture where race is quite literally practice as an allegory play and performance" (King and Springwood 2001, p. 11). Through the consideration of critical discourse analysis and racial spectacle, I provide a textual reading of a series of commentaries about the NBA and the debates and policy shifts that occurred after Artest, not simply as a methodological attempt to examine the ideological field of the NBA, but in order to access the broader issues and themes surrounding anti-black racism, both within and beyond America's basketball arenas. Reflecting on the Palace Brawl (chapter 2), the debates concerning straight out of high school NBA players (chapter 3) and the NBA dress code (chapter 4) within a larger cultural, racial, ideological and discursive context (Collins 2004; Gray 2004; Neal 2005), this work specifically examines the racial text of a post-Artest NBA landscape and its broader context. This monograph provides a space for analyzing the meaning, context, and nature of contemporary racism, utilizing the NBA, which—despite the number and popularity of its black players and the financial perks it provides to once poor inner-city children[7]—is rife with discourses and relations reflective of contemporary anti-black racism. Unlike the work of my distinguished peers, this monograph does not limit the discussion to the basketball world, but offers a bridge between and across discourses and institutions.

After Artest examines the centrality of race after Artest within the NBA. The Palace Brawl put the illusion of racial transcendance to rest, mandating an assault on blackness. Arguing that the culture and policies of the NBA in wake of the Palace Brawl have been defined by demonization, surveillance, and a systematic assault on blackness, *After Artest* highlights league efforts and media narratives that have simultaneously pathologized blackness and deracialized the players in the minds' of fans. While examining the tropes, narratives, rhetorical devices, and representational offerings since "the Malice at the Palace," *After Artest* does not focus exclusively on race and basketball

© 2012 State University of New York Press, Albany

but also looks at the interface between the white racial framing/anti-blackness that guides the NBA and broader historic and contemporary racial meanings, practices, and discourses. In other words, as basketball is more than a game, the policies, representations, and narratives articulated through and about the NBA (and its black players) have a larger place, meaning, and significance in our society. This effort is to highlight the dialects here, elucidating that after Artest the NBA has changed and in doing so these changes have contributed to, and are reflective of, broader social, racial, and political forces. As such, it does not just look at how stereotypes "mold media coverage and popular appreciation" (King and Springwood 2001, p. 11) of the NBA, it argues that the spectacle of the NBA—the racialized and racializing common sense articulated through the NBA—"dramatizes our conflicts, celebrates our values, and projects our deepest hopes and fears" (Kellner quoted in King and Springwood 2001, p. 11), all while contributing to a racial hegemony that exists inside and outside America's arenas.

© 2012 State University of New York Press, Albany