Black Men on the Blacktop: Basketball and the Politics of Race

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Contents

1

The Black Man's Game

Basketball's all we got left.
—Clark*

It was about 5:30 on a summer Saturday afternoon at the park. The day's heat had just begun to ebb, and there were only a few other players out on the courts, certainly not enough for a real game to start-up. As far as outdoor venues go, these courts were in better shape than the courts at some of the city's more neglected parks and recreation centers. During his 2009 campaign, the mayor had promised to transform the city's twenty-six recreation facilities into "activity centers" that provide inner-city youth with meaningful alternatives to street life. Unlike other politicians who often seem to leave their promises on the stump, the mayor kept true to his word. The department of parks and recreation resurfaced the courts, replacing the traditional asphalt with a more professional feeling acrylic surface, and the courts had been outfitted with new baskets, backboards, and paint. The old and damaged single basketball rims had also been replaced, but with double rims to prevent them from breaking or bending from overly enthusiastic dunks. Nobody prefers double rims, because the greater surface area creates more friction and bounce, and the rims require greater accuracy for a shot to go in. Basically, they can make average shooters look bad and bad shooters look worse.

While I waited for other players to show up, I began shooting around to warm up. After about twenty minutes a few others had arrived, but

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*With the exception of academic sources, names used throughout this book have been changed to protect the privacy of individuals interviewed or observed.

none were among the regular ballers who frequented this court, at least not anyone that I knew. Since we still didn't have enough players to run a full-court game, those of us shooting on my end of the court decided to play twenty-one. While some of the rules for twenty-one vary depending on where you are in the country, in essence twenty-one is an every-man-for-himself game in which the objective is to score twenty-one points before your opponents.

Whenever games of full court are about to start, there is a sizing-up process where players casually try to estimate the skill level of others on the court. And the good thing about twenty-one is that this evaluation process can be accomplished fairly quickly. Usually, when sizing up another player, you pay attention to their height, general athleticism, jumping ability, and the overall style of game they play in a one-on-one setting. Basketball is a game of matchups, and this process can be critical to determining a team's success. You try to figure out who on the court might be a slasher, an individual who can drive the ball to the basket; who might be a shooter, someone who can score from mid- and long range consistently; who might be a balanced player capable of doing a little of everything; and who might be a scrub, someone whose skill-level commands little attention as either a teammate or opponent.

The other benefit of twenty-one is that it is a good way to find your shot. In basketball, shooting is largely mechanics, and even professional basketball players have a shoot-around to fine-tune their jumper and "find their stroke" before they begin an actual game. Over the course of our three games of twenty-one, eight additional players arrived, all black. Even though this court had one of the best runs around, rarely did white players venture out to play here. And when a white player did show up, you knew he brought "game." Many of the brothers assembled this afternoon were regular ballers who frequented this court, and it was obvious that the time had come to get the real action underway.

The protocol varies from place to place in determining who gets to play in the first full-court game and how particular teams are chosen. In some places the first ten guys to show up automatically get to play. On other courts, regardless of when players arrive, once it's determined that full-court will be played, players shoot for a spot on a team by making a free throw or three-pointer or are chosen by captains. The selection of captains offers another procedural layer, usually involving some form of shoot-out in which, for example, the first two players to make three-point baskets are chosen as team leaders and take turns selecting which players they want to man their squads.

In this day's contest, the winner of the final twenty-one game was designated as one team captain and the first of the remaining players to hit a three-point shot was designated the second captain. I was neither, but I was picked up fairly early. Teams were quickly chosen and the evening's games of pickup were nearly underway. By this time the temperature had cooled off enough to draw a small crowd of kids and young women, many of whom were there to cheer on a boyfriend or father. A couple of "old heads," whose basketball days were well in their rear view, took the sidelines and would soon begin their ritualistic public discourse, "Back in the day, when I played . . . " seemingly unwilling to move on from their prior status as a baller. Other passersby, drawn to the energy of the court, stood off in the shade to take in the scene.

Even though nothing of material value was typically at stake in pickup ball, I always get a bit anxious before the start of a competitive full-court game. Today was certainly no exception. I could feel my heart rate elevating and a little churning in my stomach as we determined our defensive assignments and more informally gauged what respective roles we would play on offense. On the offensive end, I've always been more of an assist and "garbage man," someone who cleans things up through rebounding and either kicking the ball back out to a teammate or putting the ball back up off the rebound for an easy score. In more recent years, as age has nibbled away at my athleticism, I have developed a decent mid-range game—but I still wouldn't consider myself a "shooter" and pose no consistent long-range threat. Therefore, depending on the size of the other team, on offense I'll either play down in "the block" closer to the basket or, because I've always had a fairly good sense of where a missed shot is going to come off the rim, I "crash" in from the perimeter for rebounds. On the defensive end, I like physical play and tend to guard bigger men who present a tougher defensive test for more wiry teammates. There were some fairly big guys on the court this afternoon, so I figured my offensive role in the first game to focus more on mid-range shooting and crashing in for offensive rebounds. Playing in the block with my back to the basket in an attempt to post-up the bigger defenders would be a challenge, and next to having an opposing player slam-dunk over you, there's nothing more embarrassing in basketball than having your shot thrown back at you by a defender.

One of the captains took a shot from the three-point line to determine which team would start on offense. His shot sailed through the rim and splashed through the fresh net, and my team started on defense. We went down early, five to three, but we rallied back and won the first game eleven to nine. The next game began in much the

same way; we fell behind early. But the tenor of this game was different from the first. As they pulled ahead, our opponents began to trash-talk. Their point guard—the guy on their squad who was most trusted to bring the ball up-court because he had the best "handles"—was slowly dribbling the ball between his legs from right-to-left and left-to-right, staring down his defensive matchup and saying to no one and everyone at the same time, "This scrub can't guard me." I was playing defense down in the block, matched up against one of their team's bigger players, who had his back to the basket in a "post-up" position and called out to the point guard "ball, ball" as a public declaration that I wasn't capable of defending him. To communicate to my opponent that I didn't appreciate his disrespect, I hooked him with my elbow and "fronted" him, positioning myself between him and the point guard, daring the point guard to try to get the ball down low. Their jawing at us was clearly intended to demoralize our squad, but it instead proved to be a motivator for us; no one wants to lose to someone or some team that's been talking trash the entire game. Without speaking, we collectively tightened up our defense and began to play more physically and aggressively, and we ended up winning the second game eleven to ten. As a mark of ownership, none of us left the court to cool down, chat with friends, or get water from the nearby fountain until our opponents fully cleared the court.

The third game started differently from the two previous games. We jumped out to an early four-to-zero lead and began playing with a little too much swagger. Basketball is a game of rhythm and runs, and before we knew it, our opponents scored eight unanswered points. Aside from the bewilderment and dismay that comes from being on the receiving end of a run like that, I could tell that my teammates were becoming fatigued. We were giving up wide-open jump shots, had guys not getting back from the offensive end to play defense, and began openly bickering with each other. Instead of focusing on our opponents, we berated each other for poor shot selection—"Fool, pass the goddamned ball!" or lazy defensive play—"Get your ass back on D!" When you start yelling at teammates, it's lights out.

We ended up losing the game eleven to eight on an uncontested layup. By this time, about ten new players had arrived, meaning that we were effectively finished playing for the day as the next game for us wouldn't come for at least an hour. I decided to hang around, watch the next few games, and engage in some superficial chatter with some of the guys who were still waiting for their turn to play. Pickup games can be special because they represent basketball and basketball culture

in their most pure forms. There are no scouts evaluating your skills for the next level. There are no referees interrupting the flow of the game. There are just ten guys competing to win and to be the best on that court and on that day. It's an often ludic escape, a rare space in which one can be temporarily freed from life's worries and life's stressors. I think that's why so many black boys and men play the game: pickup basketball offers them a transitory departure from society's ordinary hierarchy and a rare arena for them to earn a complete stranger's respect, something I suppose we all strive for in life.

Ballers

In ways that go well beyond a ubiquitous presence on city courts and symbolic domination of the sport, for decades the world of pickup basketball has belonged to black men. It is no understatement to say that black men have defined basketball as we know it today; as Rick Telander said aptly in the introduction to his classic street-ball tome, *Heaven Is a Playground*, "Basketball is *the* black man's game" (Telander 2009, 1). More casual observations might suggest that the game in its outdoor asphalt context is just recreation, shucking and jiving, trash talking, and showboating. Perhaps to many onlookers and passersby of the public parks in and around American urban centers, the dozen or so primarily black men that might be found assembled on the asphalt during any given afternoon game of pickup basketball are engaged in little more than frivolous recreation. Spectators who find the pickup culture unappealing, threatening, and "too street" may feel not unlike early-twentieth-century social critic Thorstein Veblen, who referred to the proliferation of recreational sports as a "transient reversion to the human nature that is normal to the early barbarian culture" and saw passionate involvement in sports as "manifestations of the predatory temperament" rooted in "an archaic spiritual constitution" and markers "of an arrested development of the man's moral nature" (Veblen 1899, 117).

However, and in direct contrast to these narrower understandings of recreational sports, to many of those brothers running up and down urban blacktops, the pickup arena is not just about playing basketball. Rather, it is through this medium of sport, pickup basketball in particular, that these principally young black men, consciously or otherwise, carve a collective identity out of the unforgiving physical and economic landscapes that have come to characterize post-industrial US cities. For a half-century, these landscapes have increasingly told a tale of limited

opportunity and the unfulfilled promises and dying dreams of a stunted civil rights movement. In James Baldwin's words from his essay "Many Thousands Gone," "The story of the Negro in America is the story of America. It is not a very pretty story: the story of a people very rarely is" (Baldwin 1998, 19).

That's what this book is about—an often un-pretty look at black life, and therefore American life, told in part through the lens of basketball. But, this isn't simply a story about basketball any more than Carlin's *Invictus* was a story about rugby, Buford's *Among the Thugs* was a story about soccer, or the documentary film *Hoop Dreams* was a story about high school ball. What it amounts to is a story about race, particularly blackness and especially in the context of how race politics are mediated through sports. By using ethnographic accounts, history and policy, media, and other lenses, race is placed in its curiously US framework; and I also contextualize American anti-black racism as a stain that our country still has yet to fully come to terms with.

Throughout the book, I use *ballers* as shorthand to describe the core group of participants who serve as the central figures of the pickup basketball world at the urban courts I frequented. To many of these ballers, the blacktop functions as a semi-public platform for exhilarative expressions of cultural relevance, black masculinity, and ultimately personhood for people who, because of structural opposition to social and economic inclusion and a history of requisite deference to an unyielding dominant culture, frequently find it difficult to establish a satisfactory identity in other ways. What Evelyn Hu-DeHart wrote two decades ago continues to ring true: "Most American institutions . . . still remain largely impenetrable to the vast majority of those on the wrong side of the color line" (Hu-DeHart 1993, 6). And, perhaps filling some of that void created by disconnect, as Charles P. Pierce wrote of the black man's game, "Basketball's basic appeal is that it offers fellowship, a sense of belonging, a means of drawing strength from something larger than oneself" (Pierce 1996, 59).

Coast to Coast

For legitimate reasons, most considerations of street basketball have focused on the East Coast, specifically New York and Philadelphia, and to a lesser extent, Chicago.[1] Beginning in the waning years of the Great Depression and carrying well into the 1970s, America's iconic East Coast cities were physically, structurally, and demographically

transformed through urban renewal initiatives that created massive "tower" housing projects placed on city "superblocks." Perhaps the most significant policy shaping this transformation was the American Housing Act of 1949, which established a national housing agenda pledging "a decent home for every American family." In carrying out this promise the Housing Act called for "well planned, integrated residential neighborhoods" and included a requirement that housing projects reflect the racial demographics of the areas in which they were constructed. In spite of these provisions, for at least the first twenty years after the Housing Act became law, this integrated neighborhoods requirement "carried no greater legislative momentum than moral intent" and ultimately resulted in "massive displacement of lower-income and minority families" (Martinez 2000, 468).[2]

What does national housing policy have to do with basketball? Well, even though the Housing Act deliberately reshaped the way Americans lived across the nation, its unintended impact on East Coast urban housing and the proliferation of the racialized vertical poverty that came to characterize housing projects in Eastern cities[3] is of particular significance to the evolution of basketball in the United States and the central role that African Americans have come to occupy in the game. As Darcy Frey wrote in his now classic look at basketball dreams in New York's Coney Island housing projects, "The experiment of public housing, which has worked throughout the country to isolate its impoverished and predominantly black tenants from the hearts of their cities, may have succeeded here with even greater efficiency because of Coney Island's utter remoteness" (Frey 2004, 3). The same type of densely packed projects that became hallmark characteristics of larger East Coast cities did not form in the more rural, less densely populated South, where football dominates the sporting landscape, or in the sprawling cities of the American West. Neither region formed the concentration of basketball talent produced from these gritty urban conditions and generated by youth who, as Frey noted, seek "the possibility of transcendence through basketball" (Frey 2004, 5).

None of this is to suggest that great pickup basketball cannot be found on the West Coast, or that prodigious basketball talents have not arisen from the low-profile less-densely populated sprawl that is Southern California, the largely rural South, and of course the Midwest. Indeed, California's famed Venice Beach has long been a showcase for emerging and established basketball talent, and arguably some of the best pickup games in the country could be found in UCLA's Student Activities Center, on Santa Monica's well-maintained public courts, and

farther south on the oceanside half-courts of Laguna Beach. It is only to point out that much of the scholarly and journalistic attention paid to pickup basketball has focused on eastern cities and neighborhoods where basketball is truly "king" over all other sports.

Therefore, partially in an attempt to fill this scholarly void, it was largely on Southern California's Westside blacktops and a few gyms open to the public—in places like Culver City, Encino, Santa Monica, Westwood, Van Nuys, and West Los Angeles—where this reading's observations were initially and chiefly focused. From a comparative standpoint, I also spent some time exploring basketball subcultures in the urban South. But again, Southern California was the locus of most of this research, and more than others, the courts at Veterans Park in Culver City and Encino Park in the San Fernando Valley served as an ethnographic backdrop for this book. It was also largely Southern California basketball players—principally young black men—who gave life and substance to the observations of everyday existence I describe and discuss throughout these pages.

Based on the years I spent on these Westside courts and elsewhere, playing basketball, talking and hanging out with, interviewing, and visiting the homes of these Southern California ballers, it is my conclusion that much more is at stake for many of these young black men than just the *game*. To some meaningful extent, for these men, whose daily lives involve and are showcased by pickup basketball contests, more central to their everyday basketball court encounters are subtle statements of how they perceive and define themselves as members of a distinct group within a dominant and often nativist American culture that rhetorically suggests inclusiveness but, in practice, frowns upon much beyond symbolic diversity. Ultimately, this book proved not to be a study of basketball per se; it is a study of a particular racial and ethnic American subculture and of one of the methods this subculture's members employ in a long-standing tradition of resisting cultural hegemony.

Culver City

Of all of the places where I played, watched, and talked with and got to know ballers, Culver City best captured the social contradictions characteristic of America's urban centers and the ongoing negotiations of race and class in the United States. Culver City itself is a small incorporated area located about halfway between downtown Los Angeles and the beachside community of Venice. The plans for the economically

"balanced city" were originally drawn up by Harry Culver in 1913, and four years later the area was incorporated as an independent 1.2-square-mile city. Shortly after its incorporation, Los Angeles–based film studios including the movie giant Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer moved to Culver City, forming its early economic base and establishing it as "the heart of screenland." The movie industry was so vital to Culver City's early economic viability that in 1937 the Chamber of Commerce adopted the slogan "Culver City, Where Hollywood Movies Are Made" and one of the board members publicly suggested officially changing the city's name to Hollywood. Ultimately, Los Angeles rejected the name change initiative and formally established legal boundaries for Hollywood.[4] Culver City and Hollywood had a "bury the hatchet" ceremony later that year, and Culver City continued on under its original name. Over the next several decades through a series of forty annexations, Culver City expanded to a 5-square-mile footprint and currently counts 40,000 people among its residents.

In contrast to the surrounding area as a whole, Culver City is significantly whiter and conspicuously less Latino than the city enveloping it. In 2000, for example, Culver City was nearly 60 percent white while the city of Los Angeles was only 47 percent white. During the same period, Culver City's Latino population was only 24 percent in a metropolitan area that boasted a 47 percent Latino population overall. By 2010 the percentage of white residents in Culver City slightly increased as the percentage of Latinos declined slightly, even though the overall representation of Latinos in Los Angeles increased over this ten-year-period. While the black population in Culver City in 2000 was roughly consistent with the city of Los Angeles (12 percent, compared to 11 percent, respectively), the black population in Culver City dropped to 9.5 percent by 2010, a proportional decline greater than that experienced by Los Angeles as a whole. This conspicuous population imbalance was the outcome of a decades-long gentrification trend in Culver City and other similar incorporated areas in greater Los Angeles. Actually, as I began writing this book, Culver City had recently launched the early phases of a "revitalization program" targeted at renovating its downtown area. This project was an apparent success with, by 2012, Roger Vincent of the *Los Angeles Times* reporting that the city had established a "reputation as a pedestrian-friendly destination with upscale restaurants, gastropubs and a thriving art scene" all less than a decade old.

Veterans Park—the location of the most active basketball courts and pickup games in Culver City—is a 1.5-acre park that is surrounded on

three sides by middle-class, disproportionately nonminority neighbor-
hoods. The park itself was originally named Exposition Park, when the
land was first acquired by the city in 1938. However, due to the post–
World War II housing boom fueled largely by programs established
under the National Housing Act of 1934[5] and the 1944 Veterans Admin-
istration (VA) home loan program, construction began on smaller single-
family homes in neighborhoods throughout Los Angeles. In particular,
veterans returning from World War II benefited from these programs,
especially the low-interest zero-down-payment home loans, and drove
the era's housing explosion and the creation of new suburbs. For exam-
ple, in 1945 VA mortgages accounted for only 7.5 percent of all sales
for the 325,000 newly constructed homes built in that year. But these
VA-backed mortgages accounted for a whopping 40.5 percent of the 1
million new builds sold the following year, and 42.8 percent of the more
than 1.25 million new homes sold only two years later at the peak of the
postwar housing boom.[6] As a likely homage to the US troops returning
home and their noticeable presence among the area's new home owners,
a veterans memorial building was devoted at the park's east end, and the
park was renamed Veterans Park in 1949.

Located at the western end of the park on Coombs Avenue just
south of Culver Boulevard are Veterans Park's two side-by-side asphalt
basketball courts. Clockwise, from north to south, the courts are bor-
dered by two tennis courts, a baseball diamond, and a softball diamond.
Counterclockwise, to the west and to the south of Veterans Park is Cul-
ver City's Park West neighborhood, a "low-density single-family"
zoned area featuring attractive, mostly two and three bedroom, post–
World War II bungalows. These homes were constructed for modest-
income working-class families and the aforementioned veterans. But
that demographic changed in the latter decades of the twentieth century,
and even at the height of the great recession triggered by the 2009 real
estate lending crisis, homes for sale in the Park West neighborhood
started in the mid-$500,000 range and soared to well over $1 million.

At most parks and recreational facilities where pickup basketball
games may be found, if there is more than one basketball court there
typically is a preferred court where the more competitive games with
higher-skilled participants play. For example, at Los Angeles's famed
Venice Beach basketball courts, three north-south courts radiate from
the boardwalk toward the Pacific Ocean. In the many times I played at
Venice or just stopped by to watch the games, the court nearest the
boardwalk with the highest degree of visibility for the often showboat-
ing players always featured the highest level of play, and the skill level

of players would generally decrease as the courts moved farther from the gaze of passersby. A newer "stadium-sized" court adjacent to the original courts was more recently added to Venice Beach's offerings to host tournament and league games.

Back in Culver City, at Veterans Park, the premier court is a regulation (94 feet in length) court situated nearest the tennis courts. The adjacent court is slightly shorter than regulation, but still long and wide enough to run four-on-four full-court games or to play half-court games of two-on-two or three-on-three. In spite of this second court's typical availability, regular players at Veterans would almost never play on this court. In fact, while waiting for their game to come up on the premier court, which could easily take an hour or more on crowded days, ballers would not even warm up or shoot around on the secondary court. Instead, they would practice their jump shots, layups, and dunks on the premier court as the action transitioned to the opposite end. Often times, this ritual would result in arguments as one of the players warming up or one of their balls would still be on the court when a stolen ball or fast break quickly brought the action back toward the court's other end.

Everyday Resistance

In direct response to the persistent structural inequalities experienced by underrepresented populations, African Americans have historically formed and continue to construct structures of opposition and resistance. Accordingly, in their capacity to push back against social and political oppression, I situate present-day black Americans in a place not entirely different from that of slave and peasant classes currently or in history. This isn't to suggest that the existing status of black Americans is literally akin to the condition of chattel that established the foundation for the African in the Americas. However, as I briefly outline in a moment, the measurable equality gap between black Americans and Americans of other racial and ethnic groups, particularly white Americans, speaks to pervasive inequalities undeniably rooted in the US "original sin" of slavery and carried forward through a full century of postemancipation formally racialized caste. As can be seen in numerous accounts of Maroon,[7] slave, and peasant resistance, members of oppositional subcultures routinely utilize some of the same instruments traditionally used in their repression (e.g. religion, music, language, and sport) as tools in their quest to carve out spaces of cultural identity.

In this book I explore one of these oppositional realities and examine historical ways in which sport has been manipulated by both participants and organizers as an accessible vehicle to challenge political and social institutions. By taking into account the intrinsic needs, aspirations, and intentions of localized resistant behavior, I seek to explore the potential of sport—using pickup basketball as a specific example—to produce and reproduce structures of resistance. In the specific case of black US athletes, I look at some of the ways sport has been used as a vehicle for black people—as *New York Sun* editor Charles Dana xenophobically cautioned his readers in 1895—to "rise against white supremacy" (Rhoden 2006, 1). I also bring in the socialization process of pickup basketball in the United States and the extent to which it too has become a medium of black national identity formation and resistance for principally African American male youth.

The emphasis on pickup basketball to the exclusion of the more formally organized forms of basketball that can be observed at the youth league, collegiate, and professional basketball levels is deliberate. In my experience, greater structure, organization, and supervision—markers of which include the presence of officials, coaches, league rules, and similar constraints on individualism—tend to inhibit the expressive aspects of the sport. Discussing this distinction in his book *Black Gods of the Asphalt*, former Yale University basketball standout Onaje Woodbine (2016, 5) wrote, "Yale basketball contrasted sharply with the expressive culture of Boston street basketball. Yale basketball felt more corporate."

Along these same lines, as she was contemplating not returning to her college basketball team for her junior year, Ice Lady—one of a handful of female ballers I had the fortune of getting to know while working on this book—captured this difference between recreational forms of basketball and the more competitive college game in the following way:

> I'm just honestly tired of it. I'm tired of the "be here, now, at this time." There's no freedom, there's no life to it. My passion isn't as into it. And it's kind of hard when you do something and you're not as passionate as you used to be. . . . It's just changed so much. Because it got so serious. Then you meet asshole coaches and you meet punk-ass teammates. It changed. . . . Basketball went from fun to business.

Certainly, more subdued and relatively mild expressionism does exist in these more formal arenas, but the freedom afforded by the pickup court has greater potential to serve as a theater where hyper-expressions of self and masculinity are accepted and often encouraged. Unlike on the refined hardwood, on the raw blacktop there exists a level

of comfort and liberty from formal societal constraints that give African American youth the opportunity to express what James C. Scott (1992) called *the intermediate transcript*. This acted text exposes, in a way that is not entirely transparent but also not entirely hidden, ordinarily suppressed aspects of black male identity and sheds a sliver of light on what black male participants actually think about dominant social institutions and their status in American society. Touching upon this theme, Woodbine (2016, 4) shared, "On the blacktop, we also learned a street style, a way of moving our bodies, an attitude toward life that fostered resilience amid the hardships of the ghetto."

In this particular study of blacktop basketball and black life in America, I try not to delve too deeply into the social conditions that have led up to the present-day inequalities experienced by African Americans. Based on the brief sketch given in this chapter and in subsequent discussions, I consider the following four statements to be accepted: first, blacks in America have historically, and continue to have, less social, political, and economic power than most other members of society. Second, this inequality is directly linked to a history of overt and, more contemporarily, masked institutional racism and discrimination. Third, black Americans are largely aware of this unequal existence. And finally, as Campbell (1988, 10) wrote, "Under ordinary circumstances, human beings will not tolerate their own subordination, and given a chance, they will resist in one way or another."

Twenty-First-Century Black

Focusing on this first understanding for a moment, socially, economically, and politically, American society continues to operate in ways that are openly hostile toward black people. In contrast to the increasingly popular "postracial" and "level playing field" narratives, virtually all data indicate that race still plays an essential role in determining life outcomes and that the playing field remains anything but level. Certainly, there has been improvement since the days of Jim Crow. But study after study of actual and perceived racial inequality continues to uphold John Howard Griffin's conclusion from his impermanent pre–civil rights journey into blackness titled *Black Like Me*. Writing about the plight of African American men, Griffin (1961, 48) bluntly announced, "His day-to-day living is a reminder of his inferior status."

More recent examples of these perceptional disparities were evident through reactions to the acquittal of George Zimmerman in the

death of unarmed teenager Trayvon Martin, and through responses to separate grand jury refusals to indict white police officers for the killings of unarmed black men Michael Brown and Eric Garner. In a July 2013 poll conducted by the Pew Research Center, 86 percent of black adults polled indicated dissatisfaction with the Zimmerman verdict while only 30 percent of whites expressed dissatisfaction.[8] Similarly, in a *Washington Post*–ABC News poll following the non-prosecution decisions in the Brown and Garner killings, a majority of white respondents indicated that blacks and other minorities receive equal treatment as whites in the criminal justice system, whereas nearly 90 percent of black respondents indicated the opposite. Similar disparities were found in questions asking whether officers have good relationships with the community, whether officers are adequately trained to avoid the use of excessive force, and whether officers are held accountable for misconduct.

At the turn of the century W. E. B. DuBois wrote that the black man in America was conscious of his impotence and skeptical of the desire of dominant social institutions to ensure true racial equality in America. Accordingly, "the Negro of today," DuBois wrote, "faces no enviable dilemma" (DuBois 1903, 123). Again, the status of black America is substantially and undeniably different today than it was during the time of DuBois's reflections. Nonetheless, it would be an insult to contemporary African Americans to assume they are not aware of ongoing and ubiquitous institutional and social inequalities that still befall them in contemporary society and the extent to which, across many key measures, conditions have not considerably changed for them since DuBois's time and, even more conspicuously, since the dawn of formal equality ushered in during the civil rights era (ca. 1954–1968).

The disparate criminal justice outcomes that have recently been thrust into our national conversation on race provide just one snapshot of continued inequalities. In certain categories of criminal law violation, for instance those linked to America's "war on drugs," the black arrest rate has tripled over the past thirty years and grown at a rate greater than that for any other racial group (Snyder, 2011). As my colleague Erik Fritsvold and I concluded in our book *Dorm Room Dealers: Drugs and the Privileges of Race and Class*:

> Perhaps the most widely commented upon and ethically problematic outcome of the war on drugs has been the disproportionate negative impact these policies have had on poor and minority communities, particularly African Americans. . . . This is despite the fact that drug-user data suggest that racial and ethnic groups in the United States tend to have

rates of drug use close to their representation in the US population. . . . Clearly then, poor and minority populations along with the other "low hanging fruit" upon whom the drug war primarily has been focused have faced disproportionate consequences for their participation in illegal drug activities. (Mohamed and Fritsvold 2009, 3–4)

In response to these enduring disparities, many of the recreational pastimes taken up by black male youth—in the present case, pickup basketball—serve to foster intensified intragroup solidarity and galvanize black consciousness, often at the expense of promoting intergroup harmony. Put a bit more plainly, many of the leisure time and organized activities available to or embraced by young black men do a great job of connecting them with other black folks, yet do little to address the systemic problems of racial conflict in the United States or otherwise connect them to the rest of society.[9] Therefore, intergroup contact, particularly more informal encounters where the threat of official sanctions is lessened, provides an opportunity for black men to establish, again in the words of Griffin, "proof of manhood for people who could prove it no other way" (Griffin 1961, 23).

This phenomenon isn't unique to African Americans, of course. The sport of capoeira in Brazil was historically used by members of subordinated groups to articulate more significant sentiments of grievance and frustration. Similarly, Latin American soccer has long underscored the power of sport to articulate conflict, amplify contested social and political spaces, and serve as a forum for resistance. As Joshua Nadel summarized in his excellent analysis of soccer's prominence in Latin America, "Soccer clubs and stadiums acted as spaces where Latin American societies could grapple with the complexities of nationhood, citizenship, politics, gender, and race. The sport eventually allowed Latin American countries to show that, far from being inferior to Europe, they could match their colonial and neocolonial masters through sport" (Nadel 2014, 2).

In *Weapons of the Weak: Everyday Forms of Peasant Resistance*, a definitive work on peasant resistance, James C. Scott (1985) contends that traditional views of resistance[10] miss the continuous, informal, undeclared, and disguised forms of autonomous struggle by the lower classes—what he defines as *everyday resistance*. My ensuing description of the ritualistic and performative aspects surrounding pickup basketball is rooted in this perspective and places its emphasis on the events and institutions that socialize principally young members of the African American male community, creating for them alternative modes of political expression and everyday resistance.

The argument put forth here is not that these movements are revolutionary in their intent or outcome. Rather, the position I take stresses a specific means by which black Americans in the United States defend themselves against the predations of ongoing prejudice, economic inequality, and formal political impotence. In the aggregate, to the extent that they succeed in altering the terms of social engagement, challenging the existing order, and otherwise reshaping American culture and society, these efforts can be viewed as successful and of historical significance.[11]

I suppose one might ask, do these sorts of statements really matter? Do these subtle and unorganized actions of everyday folks have any real impact? In short, the answer is yes. Ta-Nehisi Coates said of black resistance, "the struggle, in and of itself, has meaning" (Coates 2015, 69). And, as Campbell (1988, 10) more expansively reasoned regarding the plight of Maroon societies in the Caribbean:

> [The maroons'] fight for freedom, however prepolitical, represents another chapter in the history of the human struggle for the extension of freedom—with all the contradictions. And, in this respect, a study of this kind is not, in the words of Hobsbawm,[12] "merely curious, or interesting, or moving for anyone who cares about the fate of men, but also of practical importance."

Finally, as Forrest Colburn (1989, 2) noted in the introduction to his edited work on peasant insolence, in the course of their everyday resistance and defense of themselves, subordinate classes "also have an impact—unwitting, slow, and quiet as it may be—on elites and their endeavors. Peasants too are agents of historical change."

Contributions to Existing Literature

Having overt structural barriers to professional sport in large part torn down throughout the 1940s and 1950s, opportunity for and representation of blacks in sport have increased to the point where black males, and more recently black females, have been thrust to the forefront of various sports in the United States. This representation is most conspicuous in basketball, where more than three-quarters of National Basketball Association (NBA) players are African American. An effect of this genesis of the modern black athlete has been an increased interest in sociological studies related to race and ethnicity as they affect or are affected by sport. However, much of the scholarship concerning the African American male athlete (particularly nonprofessionals) has been

and continues to be misdirected. The lingering foci on issues like sport as a vehicle for upward social mobility or as a means by which to produce intergroup harmony have overshadowed much of the critical theoretical evolution witnessed in other fields. As a result, many of the deeper race issues surrounding the black American athlete in the local community have been concealed.

The analytical focus has also been disproportionately trained on blacks in professional sports or highly organized amateur athletic settings, rather than on the everyday sports situations that more keenly capture the black experience in America. The outcome of this emphasis has been to draw attention away from the importance of using "diaspora," particularly the African diaspora, as a conceptual framework in problematizing widespread and lingering race-based inequalities in the United States. By recognizing the connected history of Africans in the Americas and "the ways in which collective memory and consciousness of displacement are produced and maintained across geography and through history," as sports sociologist Ben Carrington wrote, "Diaspora provides a framework to think about social movements, relations, and politics in a way that does not automatically defer to the nation state as either the primary or only unit of analysis" (Carrington 2015, 394).

In addition, studies on masculinity and sport have found that because of men's persistent presence in the foreground of organized sport, their experiences in sport *as men* have been obscured. This is to say that gender issues as they apply to men have been largely ignored due to the superordinate status of men in sport. A similar argument can be applied to race and sport scholarship centering on the plight of African American males. Due to their superordinate player status in premier American sports, many of the deeper intersecting race and gender issues revolving around young black men have been overlooked. It is worth noting, however, that several recent studies have shed some much-needed critical light on this deeper nexus among race, gender, sport, and class. In his excellent examination of high school basketball in inner-city Philadelphia, *Black Men Can't Shoot*, Scott Brooks (2009) provided a solid example of this emerging analytical style. Sociology professor Reuben May (2009) used a similar framework in his examination of a Northeast Georgia high school basketball team, *Living Through the Hoop*. Most recently, Woodbine's previously mentioned *Black Gods of the Asphalt* also makes important contributions to this literature.

With the notable exception of these books and a handful of other recent works like them, this study is different from past works in three primary ways. First, using the general framework of *everyday resistance*,

I identify sport as a vehicle for social and cultural resistance. I directly challenge the contact hypothesis, described in more detail later, which has tended to dominate the discourse revolving around minority partici-pation in sport. Second, I draw attention to the social construction of identity formation in the black community. In this regard, I appeal to themes such as DuBois's *double life* or *double consciousness*, "this sense of always looking at one's self through the eyes of others, of measuring one's soul by the tape of a world that looks on in amused contempt and pity" (DuBois 1903, 2). This involves the idea that ethnically absolutist discourses arrange sociopolitical relationships so that black and white appear to be mutually exclusive social statuses, with the legitimate claim to "American" being "white." Dominant racial narratives in US society simultaneously claim to embrace diversity while frowning on public dis-plays of cultural distinction—black culture in particular. And, as Paul Gilroy (1993, 1) wrote, "Occupying the space between [black and white] or trying to demonstrate their continuity has been viewed as a provoca-tive and even oppositional act of political insubordination." This is the case because, in the words of Douglas Hartmann (2006, 322), "The very notion of a double (or split) consciousness almost invariably signals the problems and pathology of race in America" and debunks popular notions of inclusivity. Ultimately, through a legacy of imperialism, nationalism, and selective racial subservience, US society mandates that African Americans live a double life as black and as American. Again, as DuBois wrote in *The Souls of Black Folk* (1903, 122–123):

> Such a double life, with double thoughts, double duties, and double so-cial classes, must give rise to double words and double ideals, and tempt the mind to pretence or to revolt, to hypocrisy or to radicalism. . . . Feel-ing that his rights and his dearest ideals are being trampled upon, that the public conscience is ever more deaf to his righteous appeal, and that all the reactionary forces of prejudice, greed, and revenge are daily gaining new strength and fresh allies, the Negro faces no enviable dilemma.

Third, I add to existing conversations about race by introducing and exploring several themes that were recurrent as I looked at the nexus between blackness and sports, basketball in particular. The first of these is what I identify as *reverse emulation*.[13] While it is not limited to black American culture, reverse emulation involves a process in which historically dominant groups appropriate the more superficial features of this reconstructed black male identity for seemingly cursory and cosmetic purposes, transforming them into fad and fashion. How-ever, upon closer examination, this annexation of black urban culture by members of economically and politically dominant groups, while

perhaps not as substantially definitional in the sense that it reconstructs the identity of the dominant class, or at least the public's perception thereof, may also serve as its own form of resistance for non-black participants. Essentially, walking and talking "black," listening to rap music, and adopting a hip-hop style of dress may all be ways in which non-black teens rebel against adult social institutions and their own voicelessness. However, they do so with the luxury of knowing that with a change of wardrobe and a different playlist on their iPod, they can easily slide back into their lives as accepted members of society.

The second thematic contribution to existing discourses on race, particularly those involving discussions of sports, is what I observed as the *black man's rules*. This concept characterizes the contextual status of black male supremacy in defining the rules of competition during interracial pickup basketball contests. It also captures the disproportionate power black men have in mediating contested foul calls and other disagreements that commonly occur on the pickup basketball court. Albeit very limited in scope, this position of black-over-white authority is qualitatively different from the regulatory and dispute resolution structures that black men experience in virtually every other aspect of their daily lives.

Finally, this book brought to bear what I have identified as the *Mandingo syndrome*, a term I use in reference to the conscious or unconscious formation of ideas that are rooted in and reinforce stereotypes of innate black male athleticism. I also explore how the biases incorporated into these stereotypes are often mobilized, internalized, and ultimately valued by black men themselves in ways that are counterproductive to debunking these myths and distract young black men from seeking success through avenues outside of sports.

Notes

1. There are several classic studies of street basketball or the intersection of street basketball set in major East Coast and Chicago basketball hubs. Examples include Pete Axthelm's *The City Game*, Scott Brooks's *Black Men Can't Shoot*, Darcy Frey's *The Last Shot*, and Rick Telander's *Heaven Is a Playground*. George Dohrman's *Play Their Hearts Out* focuses on youth basketball leagues in Southern California, not street basketball per se. However, his work offers strong insights into California basketball culture.

2. For more on the impact of the American Housing Act, see Martinez (2000).

3. The notable East Coast exception to this vertical poverty phenomenon is Washington, D.C. In 1899, as part of an effort to preserve D.C.'s "European feel" and in response to the 1894 construction of the fourteen-story Cairo Hotel in D.C.'s Dupont Circle neighborhood, Congress passed the Heights of Buildings Act (amended

in 1910), which effectively eliminated tall residential and commercial structures in the nation's capital.

4. See http://www.theatlanticcities.com/neighborhoods/2012/01/municipal-feud -made-hollywood/1007/# (last accessed January 20, 2013) for more information on the feud between Culver City and Hollywood.

5. The National Housing Act of 1934 significantly altered the availability and location of housing in the United States and was part of a major New Deal–era government effort to stimulate housing construction. Among other major developments, it authorized the newly created Federal Housing Administration (FHA) to create a national mortgage association to provide a secondary market where home mortgages could be sold, thereby allowing more money to be available for home loans.

6. These data were taken from Michael J. Bennett, *When Dreams Came True: The GI Bill and the Making of Modern America* (1999), as quoted in http://rortybomb .wordpress.com/2009/09/11/gi-bill-and-suburbanization/ (last accessed January 20, 2013).

7. Maroon societies were established by runaway slaves throughout the Caribbean and, to a lesser extent, North America. These establishments highlight the process through which the bands of runaways were able to alter their political condition at the height of colonization and the trans-Atlantic slave trade through both traditional and everyday resistive tactics.

8. See "Big Racial Divide over Zimmerman Verdict: Whites Say Too Much Focus on Race, Blacks Disagree," Pew Research Center for the People & the Press. Available at http://www.people-press.org/2013/07/22/big-racial-divide-over-zimmerman-verdict / (last accessed September 6, 2013).

9. This claim contrasts with the social interactionist–oriented contact hypothesis, which suggests that prolonged exposure to members of different racial or ethnic groups, coupled with a common goal or theme, serves to mitigate racial hostility and promote the elimination of discrimination and prejudice (McPherson et al., 1989). It is argued that contact is most apt to be effective when the interaction occurs on an equal-status basis, is carried out in a noncompetitive and nonthreatening environment, and takes place on more than superficial levels. One of the more popular avenues through which contact theory has been translated into practice is in the promotion of intergroup involvement in sports. See "Basketball Teams for Peace," http://articles.cnn.com/2009-01-26/living/ypwr.evans_1_lapin-social-networking -northern-ireland?_s=PM:LIVING (last accessed October 30, 2011); and Cherner (2010). Specific to this study, the precarious history of the African in America, and the feeling among blacks of the ongoing pervasive nature of racial discrimination along with the simultaneous lack of recognition by whites of ongoing discrimination, the equal status essential for contact to be effective cannot or does not exist among certain significant groups of black Americans.

10. In its ordinary academic usage, the term *resistance* implies activity organized from above with the aim of enlightening, benefiting, and increasing levels of productivity among the citizens or subjects for whom it is intended.

11. In his wonderfully detailed analysis of Jamaican slave owner Thomas Thistlewood's diary, historian Trevor Burnard endorses the position that everyday attempts to disrupt systems of domination should not qualify as resistance. Citing Michel de Certeau's work, Burnard wrote that "resistance is only possible when the dominated group or dominated individuals act outside of the system of domination that encloses them" (Burnard 2004, 212). Rather, Burnard suggests that these everyday practices should be theorized as "opposition." While I certainly respect Burnard's position, I contend (supported by the work of James Scott and others) that it is nearly impossible for dominated groups to act fully outside of systems of

domination. Therefore, to accept Burnard's position is to accept the idea that true resistance is relatively rare and can only exist in a political vacuum in which power relations are suspended.

12. E. J. Hobsbawm, *Primitive Rebels: Studies in Archaic Forms of Social Movement in the 19th and 20th Centuries* (New York: W.W. Norton, 1965).

13. As far as I am aware, *reverse emulation* is an original term.