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Dressed for success? The NBA's dress code, the workings of whiteness and corporate culture

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Dressed for success? The NBA's dress code, the workings of whiteness and corporate culture

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This paper explores the constitutive power relations and representational politics produced through the advent of a dress-code policy instituted by the National Basketball Association (NBA) in 2005. Using the methodology of contextual cultural studies this analysis suggests that far from a simple policy that requires a particular style of dress, narratives and practices surrounding the policy are embedded in an economic rationale frequently embraced in corporate cultures that also reproduce whiteness. In recontextualizing the dress code this paper maps out and makes visible the complex processes which both venerate and demonize the athleticism and entertainment value of the league's black masculine bodies, and simultaneously deny the salience of political, social and economic processes that produce discourses of a commercialized white normativity. The ultimate aim of this analysis is to generate broader public pedagogical interest in these contexts in order to promote new understandings of the dress code in the quest for social justice.

In October 2005, National Basketball Association (NBA) commissioner, David Stern announced a new dress policy for the league's players. This policy requires players to wear 'business casual attire' when 'engaging in team or league business'. Players not in uniform at games must also wear a sport coat, dress shoes and socks. Once leaving the arena after a game, players may wear 'neat warm-up suits issued by their team'. Items explicitly prohibited 'at any time while on team or league business' include:

> Sleeveless shirts, shorts, t-shirts, jerseys, or sports apparel (unless appropriate for the event (e.g., a basketball clinic), team-identified, and approved by the team), headgear of any kind while a player is sitting on the bench or in the stands at a game, during media interviews, or during a team or league event or appearance (unless appropriate for the event or appearance, team-identified, and approved by the team), chains, pendants, or medallions worn over the player's clothes, sunglasses while indoors and headphones (other than on the team bus or plane, or in the team locker room).[1]

In making this decree, the league released a statement presumably to NBA fans that read:

> We know that you share our desire that NBA players be appreciated not only for their extraordinary talent and hard work, but also for their accessibility to fans, their community service, and their professionalism – both on and off the court. To that end, we will be instituting, effective with the start of the regular season, a league-wide 'minimum' dress code. Many teams have previously issued their own dress codes, designed to demonstrate the seriousness with which their players take the representation of their teams, their cities, and our

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league; our new dress code is not intended to affect any of those that are more formal than what is set forth below in the new NBA dress code.[2]

Initial public and player responses to the NBA mandate were decidedly mixed. Some saw the policy as the inevitable and indeed long-overdue right of an employer, in this case the NBA, to dictate appropriate modes of dress and behaviour within the workplace. Still, other commentators suggested that the predominately white administrators of the largely black playing force were attempting to appease white, middle-class crowds especially nervous in light of several highly publicized incidents from the previous season.[3] The most publicized of these incidents was dubbed the 'malice in the palace', a fight in the Detroit Pistons' arena, The Palace of Auburn Hills, during a game with the Indiana Pacers. This fight included an incident where a fan threw a cup of ice at the Pacer's Ron Artest who then jumped into the seats to constrain a fan and eventually punched another fan who was verbally taunting him. Teammate Stephen Jackson also entered the fray. The incident resulted in a season-ending suspension for Artest. Eight other players – four Pacers, including Jackson, and four Pistons were suspended by the league for between one and 30 games. A small number of fans were barred from attending events at the Palace for life, due to their participation in the fight.

Some popular and academic commentators suggest a broader awareness of the racist history through which the Pacers-Pistons-fans fight was construed by the white-dominated media.[4] Still others have insinuated that the largely negative public reaction to the fight helped to provide the impetus which brought about the NBA dress-code policy.[5] Cultural critics McCann and Bandsuch suggest that the dress-code policy reflects racism in targeting the 'hip-hop generation' whose styles and mode of expression are frequently both exoticized and vilified by the white-dominated ownership of the NBA, its multinational corporate sponsors, and many white and middle-class fans.[6] Read from this perspective the NBA dress policy in essence banned a particular mode and style of black masculine hip-hop expression. That is, this policy banned 'throwback jerseys, baggy jeans, crooked baseball caps, knee length t-shirts, large items of jewelry and Timberland boots' as stated by Ken Beck in a comment posted to the CBSSports.com community blog.

Los Angeles Lakers coach Phil Jackson makes clear that the issue is partially about social class and consumption in identifying the league's idealized audience:

> To a majority of these young men, the rap stars, hip hop guys are really kind of like heroes or colleagues... We even have some that are owners in the league. And it's not the same audience. Our audience is corporate businessmen and businesswomen and kids. So it's a different audience that you're dealing with and these players should be aware of that.[7]

While coach Phil Jackson suggests the need to appease middle-class and corporate sensibilities, Indiana's Stephen Jackson was quick to point out the racial politics and attempts toward appeasement fuelling the policy:

> I have no problem dressing up... But as far as chains, I definitely feel that's a racial statement. Almost 100% of the guys in the league who are young and black wear big chains. So I definitely don't agree with that at all.[8]

While we have yet to find a specific example of any violations that have resulted in sanctions, initial pronouncements suggested that violators would be subject to fines and possible suspensions. However the focus of this paper is not on documenting the fines and suspensions that the players received, but rather on the broader pedagogical functions at work through the introduction of this policy, that is – to explore the dominant meanings the initiation of this policy conveys and attempts to teach. Indeed critical theorists and cultural studies scholars argue for expanding definitions of pedagogy beyond a focus on

teaching and learning in school settings to instead situate understandings of pedagogy in relationship to broader matters of social concern. This more expansive understanding of pedagogy acknowledges that learning takes place outside of the classroom, suggesting the need to hone focus on 'what it means to assess the political significance of understanding the broader educational force of culture in the new age of media technology, multimedia, and computer-based information and communication networks'.[9] Much of the material originally circulating about this issue is still available via the World Wide Web – the policy even has its own Wikipedia page – suggesting both the continuing pedagogical salience of the NBA dress code and the ways in which the virtual world is embedded in nonlinear conceptions of time and space.

In this paper, we build upon this more expansive understanding of pedagogy as an entry into the constitutive power relations and representational politics produced through the NBA dress code and the attendant media narratives, which continue to circulate via the Internet. Far from a simple policy that requires a particular style of dress we read the NBA dress code critically, demonstrating its relationship to racialized, classed and gendered meanings and attempts at capital accumulation. That is, the initiation of the policy is related to similar practices which demonstrate 'the simultaneous commodification and demonization of hip hop and its Black male signifiers within the NBA . . . illustrating the complex and contradictory place of aesthetics, cultural values, and bodies that are constructed as both fashionable (desirable and cool) and suspect (dangerous)'.[10] This article builds upon critiques of the white-dominated ownership's policing of black bodies offered by Andrews, Hughes, Leonard and McCann to emphasize the particular role of racist discourses and whiteness in shaping both the NBA policy itself as well as the dominant discourses and economic rationale seeking to legitimate the dress code's inception.[11]

Our analysis of racism and the deployment of whiteness as a conceptual and analytic lens is predicated upon the understanding that race is neither biologically meaningful nor an apolitical essence of identity. Rather racialized categories such as 'black' and 'white' are hierarchical and relational constructs whose meanings are unstable and vary depending upon time and space. Furthermore the social construction of race legitimates a system of privileges that accrue to bodies racialized as white. Using the concept of whiteness thus necessitates an epistemological shift away from an exclusive focus on the effects of racism on people of colour to an investigation of the knowledge and structures, which produce racialized subjectivities as well as white economic advantages and social power. It is important to emphasize with John Hartigan that 'whiteness asserts the obvious and overlooked fact that whites are racially interested and motivated. Whiteness both names and critiques hegemonic beliefs and practices that designate white people as "normal" and racially "unmarked"'.[12] This perspective additionally acknowledges whiteness both within and beyond the case of the dress code, not as some static ideology, identity or worldview but rather, as always in process as 'a constantly shifting' performance embedded within 'complex maps of social, economic, and political power'.[13]

An examination of the discourses surrounding the dress-code policy not only allows for an examination of the complex workings of whiteness within the NBA and logics of late capitalism, but also serves to engage education in its broadest form. Toward this end, this paper uses contextual cultural studies as a method devoted to reconstructing the dress code's 'conjunctural relations, identity, and effects to produce a contextually specific map of' a particular racialized and economic 'social formation'.[14] This use of contextual cultural studies serves a progressive pedagogical aim – to educate readers via counter narratives, which offer alternative interpretations linking an everyday cultural practice

such as the dress code to normalizing strategies within contemporary neo-liberal capitalist mandates. Stated differently, in recontextualizing the dress code this paper maps out and makes visible the complex processes which both venerate and demonize the athleticism and entertainment value of black masculine bodies, and simultaneously deny the salience of political, social and economic processes that produce discourses of a commercialized white normativity. The ultimate aim of this analysis is to generate pedagogical interest in the contexts, which help to generate meanings and effects of the dress code in order to promote new understandings in the quest for social justice.

Telling tales: representing black masculinity and the power of whiteness

The NBA has long served as a racialized space and, as such, the dress code represents an example of the NBA's continuing attempts at surveillance and control of its predominately African-American playing force, in this case by promoting conventional styles of dress and expression at the expense of hip-hop styles.[15] And while NBA marketers continue to promote the larger-than-life personae and skills of the leagues' players, the promotion of the league also rests upon an unspoken commitment toward making the league's black masculine bodies both enticing and safe for white consumers. As is the case within the NBA, then, the 'story of race' related to the dress code 'is also a less visibly troubled story of whiteness – white anxiety and fear and white strategies for threat management'.[16]

These anxieties are part and parcel of broader patterns of white racist preoccupation with the allegedly threatening and inferior character of black masculinity, preoccupations that can be traced back to slavery and reconstruction, and which have been frequently used by whites to legitimate the political *status quo* in relation to black cultural and political inequity. Rooted in social-Darwinist thought, white racist fears and anxieties infer that blacks are closer to nature, thus more physically gifted, but in need of supervision since they are allegedly less civilized than whites.[17] This dualistic mind-body dichotomy rests upon the presumption of black intellectual and cultural inferiority, and the presumption of white superiority continues to fuel and justify racist treatment including the contemporary dismantling of social welfare programs. White supremacist discourses have merged with gender ideologies throughout history in constructing black masculine bodies as violent, naturally or culturally different, and in need of control. Too frequently these images rely upon stereotypical notions of blacks as overly sexualized and dangerous. The intense contemporary commodification of such threatening images, seen most prominently in sport, music and visual culture has in turn promoted both fear and also fascination with the apparently edgy, dangerous and exotic nature of black masculinity.[18]

John Fiske identifies three strategies of white supremacy – exnomination, naturalization and universalization – which contribute to similar representational processes seeking to bolster white advantage. Exnomination – the capacity to avoid being named, thus escaping scrutiny – keeps the interests and practices of whites off the agenda for change.[19] In this way focus is not turned inward toward the definers and white privilege, but in marking boundaries to create and control racialized others. Naturalization represents dominant white interests as the inevitable, common-sense cultural norm while universalization additionally suggests that these norms and the dominant narratives which sustain them are meant to apply to all of humanity.

The scrutiny of black bodies reached its zenith in the NBA during the early 1980s when the league was thought to be on the brink of collapse. While rarely explicitly named as such, at that time the NBA was widely mediated, via coded language, as antithetical to white middle-class sensibilities due to the large number of African-American players in the

league and allegations of widespread drug abuse.[20] Rather than confronting stereotypical notions of blackness promoted to maintain white cultural and political advantages, the league instead instituted a drug policy while promoting the league and its players as the embodiment of the American Dream. Paradoxically, while championing its allegedly 'raceless' character, the league also reached financial solvency via the promotion of the racialized rivalry and friendly admiration between the white Boston Celtic's Larry Bird and African-American Los Angeles Laker star Magic Johnson. Dominant narratives of racial uplift, equality and racial harmony made through the Bird-Johnson rivalry helped to reorder white anxieties and fears, although the alleged deviance of urban blackness was never replaced and remained a powerful undercurrent within the league.[21]

The elevation of Michael Jordan as the league's global superstar and affable celebrity endorser during the latter portions of the 1980s and beyond again helped to neutralize dominant imaginings of stereotypical black masculinity as dangerous and excessively sexual. Strategies promoting the always competitive, but likeable, Jordan and the Jordan-era league as composed of personalities akin to those found in Disneyland were marketed by the NBA and its corporate sponsors in ways designed to evoke desire rather than dread.[22] Despite these attempts, white preoccupation with the alleged deviance of blackness, although rarely explicitly discussed as a preoccupation in popular narratives and media, continues as a powerful undercurrent in the post-Jordan era. Indeed new economic arrangements and fresh attempts to brand the NBA in an era of increasing globalization have in turn produced a reformulation of racial codes.[23]

One such movement has been the growth of cross-marketing promotional campaigns featuring connections between the NBA, popular music and celebrities. While the league has drawn upon musical styles from a diversity of musical genres, the public face of the NBA has increasingly been associated with styles, images and sounds of hip-hop.[24] Todd Boyd has chronicled the connections of the NBA to hip-hop culture suggesting that Kurtis Blow's release of the single 'Basketball' in 1984 initiates this connection. By the 1990s the hip-hop and basketball link achieved a unique status amongst other popular forms of music.[25] For example, NBA star Shaquille O'Neal and other players such as Kobe Bryant, Chris Webber and Ron Artest all recorded rap songs while 'videos on music networks MTV and BET promote hip-hop artists sporting jerseys and headbands of their favorite teams, and often include shots of their favorite players'.[26] Several years ago rapper Master P engaged in a highly publicized, but failed, attempt to make it to the NBA, further linking the NBA to hip-hop.[27] However, Boyd suggests that Allen Iverson's selection in 1996 as Philadelphia's first-round draft choice marks the most important connection between hip-hop and professional basketball. That is, 'Iverson was the living embodiment of hip hop in a basketball uniform. His own take on stylish penetration chic involved wearing his hair in cornrows and he has more tattoos than a hells angel. He refused to bend over backwards to accommodate the tastes of the mainstream'.[28] Within the context of white-dominated sport and music industries, Iverson's refusal to follow dominant cultural norms have frequently served contradictory ends, both promoting the edginess of hip-hop masculinity to seduce a youth market, while also tapping into dominant white anxieties regarding a threatening black masculinity. According to one cultural critic, similar white imaginings in contemporary times have produced a powerful figure in the white imaginary in that the 'athlete, the gangster rapper and the criminal' have merged 'into a single black male persona that the sports industry, the music industry, and the advertising industry have made into the predominant image of black masculinity'.[29]

Given this history and contemporary imaginings, Hughes suggests that the NBA continues to attempt to remain financially vibrant by mitigating popular racist discourses

by celebrating 'urban, politically neutral hip hop and coolness' against perceived threats of blackness including 'indecent rap music, unrestrained tempers' and the 'team destroying narcissism or egos of stars'.[30] The imposition of the dress code can thus be understood as yet the latest attempt at a peculiar form of 'diversity management' designed to both manage, but ultimately profit from, stereotypical images of urban black masculinity as immature, uncontrollable, greedy and egotistical.[31] Other attempts to control similar connotations include the imposition of a first year player salary cap which limits compensation to rookies and the instigation of an age restriction limiting the league to players aged 19 years or older.[32]

This fear of a homogenized and demonized black masculinity is apparent both in discussions about the dress code and in conservative responses to the Pacers-Pistons-fans fight. Radio talk show host Rush Limbaugh's characterizations suggest the ways in which conservative discourse made sense of this fight, specifically suggesting that the brawl was 'hip-hop culture on parade'.[33] Asserting that this episode was 'gang behavior on parade minus the guns' and conceding that his remarks would be 'tagged as racist' he continued on stating that the NBA uniforms are now in gang colors. They are in gang styles'.[34] Rather than a personal expression of bias these views assert many of the racist codes upon which white supremacy rests equating black bodies with incivility, chaos and deviance.

Phil Jackson, head coach of the Los Angeles Lakers, also expressed similar sentiments. In lending support to the new dress-code policy Jackson noted that:

> The players have been dressing in prison garb the last five or six years. All the stuff that goes on, it's like gangster, thuggery stuff. It's time. It's been time to do that. But one must remember where one came from, I was wearing bib overalls when I was a player one time, but I wasn't going to the games or events in them.[35]

NBA commentator, Jason Whitlock makes a similar observation linking clothing styles enjoyed by some NBA players to hip-hop expressions by noting that:

> Too many young, black professional athletes have too closely aligned themselves with the hip-hop culture, which in reality is nothing more than prison culture. Shut up! You know it's the truth. Gun-toting, drug-dealing, full-body-tattooed, gang-repping rappers have overrun hip-hop music and hip-hop culture and have poisoned just about the whole scene.[36]

Jackson's discussion of prison attire and Whitlock's assertions about prison culture link to similar sentiments, including those of Limbaugh, in implicating the alleged individual pathology of black males. Words such as gangster, drug dealing and thuggery allude to historical, powerful images of black masculinity as dangerous. Jackson's remarks reaffirm white normativity while black players who don 'prison garb' are conceived of as the 'other' in need of control. Interestingly, while Jackson references his own playing career with his persona as a 'maverick', (also the title of his first book), he also suggests that to be 'dressed in overalls' is a much more rational choice then the game-day dress of many players since this was his private attire away from the game.

In contrast to Jackson's and Whitlock's insider status Limbaugh promotes his own outsider image by suggesting that in raising the issue, he is 'fearless when it comes to this, because the truth will out'.[37] And yet in constructing a demonized vision of black masculinity Whitlock, Jackson and Limbaugh all mobilize a long-standing moralizing rhetoric, which imagines a benevolent, but actually superior, mode of whiteness in characterizing the behaviour of the players. Additionally, the ease with which Limbaugh and Jackson mobilize such expressions, and slippages between words such as hip-hop and gangs, can be partially attributed to contradictory trends including the increasing

commodification and wider mainstreaming of hip-hop culture and continuing demonization and criminalization of black masculinity.

It is important to note, this conservative response has not gone unchallenged. In regards to the NBA's dress code and against Limbaugh's assertions, Allen Iverson notes that it 'would not change a person's character regardless of what type of clothing they wore' and that 'associating hip-hop styles of dress with violent crime is racist'. Iverson has also pointed out the economic interests at play noting that 'many prominent NBA sponsors, such as Nike, Reebok, Puma, and Adidas were heavily influenced by hip hop culture'(Iverson quoted in Ken Beck's blog at CBSSports.com). Golden State guard Jason Richardson offers a similar response observing that, 'You still wear a suit, you still could be a crook ... You see all what happened with Enron and Martha Stewart. Just because you dress a certain way doesn't mean you're that way'.[38] Indeed, Jeffrey Skillings and Ken Ley regularly wore business suits as they oversaw the corruption promoted by energy corporation Enron, while thousands of Enron employees and shareholders lost thousands of dollars, life savings and pensions upon Enron's collapse.

Despite these and other counter narratives attempts at 'diversity management' continue to flourish, sidestepping issues of racism and inequitable social arrangements to instead focus on promoting a culture of character via attempts to manage, discipline and redeem these racialized subjectivities. This is consistent with the production of broader cultural discourses which focus on disciplining the bodies and actions of people of colour, racialized as the 'other' while white interests and practices are naturalized and universalized thus largely escaping comparable surveillance.[39]

The normative power of whiteness to structure social relations and dominant understandings of the dress-code policy is also evident in the justification offered by Commissioner David Stern in instituting the policy. In one interview Stern references the Pacers-Pistons-fans fight as an important reason for the initiation of the dress code:

> The brawl sort of [became] a flashpoint for a lot of feelings that are out there. With race, there's always an issue. And the brawl, unfairly, became the opportunity for the commentators to talk about all NBA players, although 450 of them were not involved in the brawl. 'These people'. 'These thugs'. 'These punks'. And that was a horrible sort of libel and slander of the NBA players. Images that ran were run in the context of a condemnation of all NBA players, and that really upset me. That became a critical flashpoint. And so we've got to dig out from under that.[40]

Unlike the conservative reaction to the fight, Stern's narrative points to the presence of racist sentiments that homogenize and demonize the league's players. Thus at first glance Stern's explanation appears to be progressive in acknowledging the racism that greeted popular constructions of the Pacers-Pistons-fans altercation. And yet, Stern's rhetoric also paternalistically shifts the focus away from the racist actions and reactions of the fans and instead relies upon liberal and individualistic responses in offering the dress code as a strategy for change. Much as with conservative responses, ultimately this narrative fails to address structural and ideological inequities.

Thus, while purporting 'to address negative stereotypes' the justification of the dress code's prohibition of 'chains, headgear and throwback jerseys', instead 'stigmatizes those items and the people that wear them. Furthermore, it reinforces the unfortunate associations with such styles, when it should be working, instead, to broaden society's understanding and tolerance'[41] The naturalized and privileged response additionally directs attention away from the actions and material advantages of white bodies while further perpetuating 'a cycle of stigmatization, assimilation and subordination'.[42]

Delia Douglas's analysis of tennis stars Venus and Serena Williams' 2001 reception at the Indian Wells (California) tennis tournament reveals that similar processes are at work in many sporting spaces and is thus instructive in further dissecting the wide-spread racial implications of practices such as the dress-code policy.[43] Much as with racially charged incidents involving the Williams sisters on the Women's Tennis Association Tour (WTA), the NBA dress policy ultimately focuses attention on the actions and alleged behaviours of black athletes while legitimating the workings of the white-dominated management groups, fans and the broader culture. For those not familiar with this incident, Indian Wells is where Venus Williams withdrew from the tournament with an injury and where sister Serena Williams faced booing, jeering, racial epithets and virulent hostility from the predominately white fan base who imagined that Venus's withdrawal was orchestrated by father Richard Williams in a type of 'match fixing' episode.

Douglas's analysis of this episode focuses on the spaces and atmosphere of women's professional tennis, which is historically constitutive of a normative, indeed, hetero-normative, white, middle-class sensibility (think of the normative femininity embodied by Chris Evert, Anna Kournikova and Maria Sharapova). And yet, the very presence of the African-American sisters challenges the exclusivity of this space and thus the very hostile reaction offered by the white fans, particular white players, and the white-dominated media is fraught with racial politics. Also instructive is the lacklustre response by WTA officials to these hostile reactions. Indeed the WTA response consisted of power and colour evasive discourses and appeals to economic rationale (i.e., we must cater to our paying fan base) in admonishing the Williams family while appeasing and indeed absolving the largely white fan base of any culpability for their hysterical reaction.[44] Much as with the fan reaction that greeted the Pacers-Pistons-fans fight, reactions to the Williams serve as a form of white racial hostility and white backlash. These serve as one manifestation of longstanding racist discourses that position whites as superior, at the arbitrators of moral authority and position blacks as suspect (e.g., Richard Williams as fixing matches).

Reading this analysis of the Indian Wells incident alongside the initiation of the dress code reveals the ways in which the power of whiteness in the NBA case also relies upon colour and power evasive discourses, which in turn rely upon a particular form of cultural capital. Used here the term 'cultural capital' derives from Pierre Bourdieu's conceptualizations, in which it is defined as the attitudes, beliefs, preferences, formal knowledge and behaviours that are acquired and in turn position and equip people differently within a given culture. Cultural capital, then, also serves an additional function in promoting social and cultural exclusion.[45] In the context of the dress code, imagined norms of civility, respect and appropriate dress are hailed as necessary for the proper decorum which is thought to fuel success while urban styles and dress are devalued. Much as with schooling, where middle-class children learn the dominant norms, attitudes and belief systems necessary to achieve, so too does the NBA dress code reproduce white and middle-class norms, promoting the need to 'dress for success'. Those not demonstrating the 'right stuff' are hence thought to be culturally deficient thus ideologically justifying inequitable social relations. Seemingly innocent, the NBA dress code actually serves as a mechanism which combines with other forms of white cultural capital to safeguard the political and economic interests of whites and the dominant social class.

Cross-marketing whiteness and corporate culture

The dress code can thus be understood as a type of whitewash in the 'form of impression management meant to enhance business and to counteract previous images of Ron Artest

running into the stands or of a tattooed Allen Iverson standing on the sidelines adorned with baseball cap, throwback jersey and gold medallions'.[46] The initiation of the dress code is particularly duplicitous in that while attempting to limit the appearance of modes of hip-hop expression such as throwback jerseys and large jewellery, the league's marketers continue to use music, celebrities and signifiers of hip-hop culture to promote an edgy sensibility in attempts to capture a youth market and financially capitalize on hip-hop's global appeal. In this way, the NBA's symbiotic link with hip-hop is part and parcel of late capitalist economic relations where black bodies serve as hot commodities in the global marketplace.[47]

There are numerous examples of this symbiotic relationship. One year prior to the initiation of the dress code, the league used British comedian Sacha 'Ali G' Cohen in television commercials where he appears accessorized in hip-hop-inspired wear – a tracksuit, skullcap and sunglasses with a large chain. 'The selection of Ali G is riddled with racial overtones since Cohen's character satirizes white culture's fascination with hip-hop culture, even though he is not black himself'.[48] Another example of the merger of hip-hop with basketball is the videogame 'NBA Ballers', or 'the exclusive one-on-one basketball videogame highlighting the bling-bling lifestyle of NBA superstars'.[49] The game allows participants to embody the identity of current NBA players and the league's promotional rhetoric promises the game is a means to acquire '[m]ansions, cars, jewelry, women – if you've spotted it on 'MTV Cribs', you're going to see it here'.[50] A third example is a Nike advertisement, once featured on NBA.com, that offered images of NBA player and hip-hop aficionado Allen Iverson alongside the famous musician 50 Cent. More recently the website proclaimed June 2009 as National Basketball and Hip-hop Culture Month celebrating the 25th anniversary of the fusion of hip-hop with basketball in the Dunkadelic Era. Rapper Jay-Z (also known as Shawn Carter), who is also part-owner of the New Jersey Nets, has been featured in a series of commercials championing the NBA television game coverage on the TNT cable network. In discussing these spots, Turner Sports Executive Craig Barry notes, 'Using Jay-Z's own words and powerhouse persona, we wanted to showcase his sophisticated style to parallel the tenets of sports and music'.[51]

These types of promotions, advertisements and video games once again reveal the symbiotic and cross-promotional connections between sports and hip-hop. And the NBA is clearly not alone in seeking to appropriate signifiers of hip-hop including 'the hood', 'authenticity', 'street credibility' as these are 'contained in commercials for Gap, Sprint Mobile, Nike, Reebok, Tommy Hilfiger, Sprite, Wintergreen gum, Heineken beer, Chevrolet, and many more'.[52] Given the dominant and resistant meanings that attach to representational processes, these promotional strategies produce contradictory ends even as they are produced within regimes of containment as signified by the dress code.[53] Hip-hop music that accompanies NBA-produced videos and programming such as the television show *Inside Stuff* does allow for the proliferation of hip-hop sensibilities as sites of identification and resistance against a whitened status quo. That is, the globalization of the NBA allows for the proliferation of icons of black success via images of such stars as Michael Jordan, coupled with hip-hop sensibilities which serve as 'floating signifiers' across the black Atlantic, to be taken up in complex ways by various black populations.[54] Themes of hip-hop and basketball serve as sites of racial pride, affinity and potentially could point toward the need to challenge the racial *status quo*. Of course such readings are best facilitated by knowledge of broader contexts, particularly the workings of whiteness.

The use of Jay-Z as a promotional tool for the NBA via both his image and his music additionally reveals dominant class interests. As a figure, Jay-Z is an entrepreneur who embodies the individualistic mentality of the United States – the 'rags to riches' success

story. Not only is he part of an ownership group of the NBA's New Jersey Nets (other artists who share in ownership include Usher, Cleveland Cavaliers and Nelly, Charlotte Bobcats, respectively), but his Roc-A-Fella Records is a multimillion dollar record company which also features Memphis Bleek, Young Gunz, Beanie Segal and Teairra Mari. His empire additionally includes Roc-A-Fella Films and Rocawear attire. The Reebok S. Carter shoe is the first signature shoe line for a non-athlete.[55] Moreover, Jay-Z's music and persona is packaged for US mainstream consumption as a type of racial cross-over who can sell 'dress, style, slang, body language and music predilections of the black ghetto' as signifiers of black authenticity to a youth market primarily composed of whites.[56] According to hooks, hip-hop music such as his not only reinforces the racial status quo via essentialistic imagery but additionally helps promote dominant gender ideologies.[57] In this way, elements of hip-hop are ideologically aligned with dominant gender relations and images of hypersexuality which are also remade through elite professional sport which continues to promote masculine hegemony.[58]

The process of commodification supported by the NBA simultaneously serves to bolster white power as these highly commercialized images, such as those embodied by Jay-Z, play up the roots of hip-hop as an expressive element of popular culture while simultaneously severing the fashions, attitudes and aesthetics of hip-hop from some artist's radical critique of racial *status quo*. Indeed historian Robin D.G. Kelley places rap and hip-hop within a longer trajectory of black vernacular expressions such as the improvisational language game, 'the dozens', where two competitors cleverly and (frequently) playfully trade insults in a masculinist test of verbal and mental acuity.[59] Over the course of the 1970s and 1980s some forms of hip-hop merged this skilled use of language and expression of visceral pleasure with social commentary as a way to 'describe and analyse the social, economic and political factors that lead to its emergence and development'.[60] These politicized forms of rap served as a critique of whiteness and were also aimed at addressing classism, social neglect and urban pain. Among the many topics discussed, especially in less commercialized forms, were the consequences of inequitable power relations between the white middle-class communities and poor blacks whose urban communities continue to be sites of violence via state-sponsored racial profiling and police brutality, drug abuse, teen pregnancy and material deprivation.[61] While a diverse array of political positions and stylistic elements remain, Michael Eric Dyson credits the rap group Run-DMC with developing and honing rap's creative integration of social commentary and diverse musical elements. He further notes the role of the rap concert in creating a space for the refusal of censored speech and as a site of cultural resistance against the surveillance and condemnation from mainstream society.[62] And yet, read from within the context of contemporary capitalist marketing strategies, like those employed by the NBA and promoted in the corporate media, the aesthetic signifiers of hip-hop are increasingly celebrated apart from the very material conditions of inequality that some forms of hip-hop seek to critique. With great gusto and considerable economic clout, corporate marketers now overly promote artists whose storylines celebrate iconic stereotypes of 'authentic' street life as hustlers, gangstas, pimps and 'hoes'.[63] In this way, these representational practices remake what Stuart Hall and others have termed the 'spectacle of the other.'[64]

Adding to the complexity of this process is that frequently, class-based discourses, also articulated in relation to the NBA dress code, circulate to suggest that genres like gangsta rap promote violence, misogyny and homophobia. There is no question that rap and hip-hop lyrics contain misogynistic and violent overtones, and frequently contribute to the broader cultural legitimation of these ills. However, the context from which many attacks

on hip-hop emerge is important to interrogate as these attacks often allow critics to complain about black youth culture without a sophisticated understanding of the corporate and political interests involved in promoting one-dimensional images of street life. Furthermore, many social commentators who have criticized hip-hop culture as violent have also severed such images from broader cultural concerns, which largely ignore the structure that creates the very problems critics blame rap for causing.[65] While there is sexism and homophobia throughout the genre, these are also widely prevalent in almost every other musical form and also embedded in dominant sporting forms like the NBA. And thus censorship campaigns such as those in the 1990s lead by Tipper Gore, the wife of then Vice-President Al Gore, mistakenly focus on the lyrics of micro-level violence while downplaying attempts to materially counter other forms of violence like police brutality, material deprivation, unemployment, war and the US prison-industrial complex.[66] These censorship campaigns form a similar function as the dress code performs in focusing attention on the behaviour of black bodies while attempting to maintain white, middle-class sensibilities to secure profits.

This brief mapping of the connections between hip-hop and the NBA suggests that the NBA dress code links to a broader set of practices and strategies. This information provides an additional context to support the contention that the NBA serves as a 'management spectacle that continually redefines the potentially unruly and unproductive black body as the problem that it perpetually solves'[67] Located within a commercialized process that severs the most radical critiques from the signifiers of urban blackness, the dress code helps position the white-dominated ownership structure and its white fan base as necessary arbitrators of 'appropriate' moral behaviour. In this way, the constant policing of black bodies simultaneously allows for the proliferation of a benevolent whiteness.

Concluding thoughts

The NBA continues to use hip-hop to promote the league while the dress code continues to censor and censure players who adopt this style. Additionally the hip-hop music and lifestyle promoted by the NBA are highly commodified versions that permeate the airways largely devoid of its black nationalist roots as a medium for black males, especially from the poor working class, to speak out against oppression. The highly commercialized rap and hip-hop music celebrated by the NBA instead reifies simplistic binary racial thinking by positioning black males as 'authentic'. Although dominant popular culture continues to imagine young black inner city youth as authentic embodiments of blackness, the dress code and corresponding backlash 'reflects desires to police 'authentic blackness'[68] Furthermore, despite notable forms of resistance, the version of hip-hop promoted by the NBA is consistent with the broader commercialized hip-hop genre that according to hooks has minimal transformative potential as it is laced with themes of consumption, capitalism and misogyny.[69] Indeed lost from many discussions about rap and hip-hop both within the NBA and beyond are the various movements of global capital. De-industrialization and economic restructuring coupled with privatized and downsizing of welfare have greatly impacted urban centres. These economic conditions and racist histories of whiteness are also some of the very conditions that the originators of hip-hop sought to critique, challenge and change.

The dress code attempts to bolster the image of the NBA while simultaneously proliferating images of hip-hop in an attempt to seduce a youth market. This works through the promotion of urban styles and expressions as 'cool', exotic and edgy, styles that are both devoid of social commentary and banished from the game's sidelines. The NBA's mobilization of late capitalist cross-marketing strategies coupled with the advent

of the dress code both celebrate and demonize aesthetics and styles commonly associated with urban black masculinity. Read from this perspective the NBA dress-code policy serves to further shift attention away from the power of whiteness to shape dominant understandings and the material effects of race and representation. Close inspection of hip-hop-inspired NBA marketing campaigns further suggests that such representations are powerful in serving a pedagogical function in potentially teaching the broader public about what matters, in an attempt to normalize white middle-class ideologies to legitimate the accumulation of capital. This analysis has instead offered an alternative pedagogy, one that suggests the need to interrogate and contextualize seemingly trivial practices and policies such as the NBA dress code.

Notes

[1] This and the preceding four quotations are all from NBA.com 'NBA Player Dress Code'.
[2] InsideHoops.com, 'NBA Dress Code'.
[3] McCann, 'Reckless Pursuit of Dominion', 827.
[4] Leonard, 'Real Color of Money', 159.
[5] Sheridan, 'Stern: Dress Code Debate'.
[6] McCann, 'Reckless Pursuit of Dominion', 828; Bandsuch, 'NBA Dress Code', 7.
[7] Cited in Siler, 'Jackson Glad to See'.
[8] Cited in Elsworth, 'Basketball Ban on Bling'.
[9] Giroux, 'Cultural Studies, Public Pedagogy', 60.
[10] Leonard, 'Real Color of Money', 161.
[11] Andrews, 'Michael Jordan's Blackness'; Hughes, 'Managing Black Guys'; Leonard, 'Real Color of Money'; McCann, 'Reckless Pursuit of Dominion'.
[12] Hartigan, 'Old Tribes', 1.
[13] Ellsworth, 'Double Binds of Whiteness', 264.
[14] Andrews, 'Coming to Terms', 114.
[15] McCann, 'Reckless Pursuit of Dominion', 827; Bandsuch, 'NBA Dress Code', 7.
[16] Hughes, 'Managing Black Guys', 164.
[17] West, *Race Matters*, 120.
[18] hooks, *Black Looks*, 16.
[19] Fiske, *Media Matters*, 42.
[20] Cole and Denney, 'Visualizing Deviance', 129.
[21] Ibid.
[22] McDonald, 'Safe Sex Symbol?', 349.
[23] Leonard, 'Real Color of Money', 169.
[24] McCann, 'Reckless Pursuit of Dominion', 830.
[25] Boyd, 'They're Playing Bas-ket-ball'.
[26] McLeod, 'We Are the Champions', 537.
[27] Bachelor, 'Music Industry Keeps its Eye on the Ball', 50.
[28] Boyd, 'They're Playing Bas-ket-ball'.
[29] Hoberman, *Darwin's Athletes*, xviii.
[30] Hughes, 'Managing Black Guys', 177.
[31] Ibid.
[32] Leonard, 'Real Color of Money', 163; McCann, 'Reckless Pursuit of Dominion', 832.
[33] Media Matters for America, 'Limbaugh on NBA Fight'.
[34] Ibid.
[35] Cited in Siler, 'Jackson Glad to See'.
[36] Whitlock, 'Black NBA Players'.
[37] Media Matters for America, 'Limbaugh on NBA Fight'.
[38] Cited in Associated Press, 'Pacers' Jackson'.
[39] Garner, 'Whiteness', 63–67.
[40] Cited in Sheridan, 'Stern: Dress Code Debate'.
[41] Bandsuch, 'NBA Dress Code', 7.
[42] Ibid., 8.

[43] Douglas, 'Venus, Serena and Women's Tennis', 260.
[44] Ibid.
[45] Clay, 'Keepin' it Real', 1347.
[46] Bandsuch, 'NBA Dress Code', 16.
[47] Collins, 'New Commodities, New Consumers', 301.
[48] Bandsuch, 'NBA Dress Code', 37.
[49] Hoopsvibe.com, 'NBA Ballers'.
[50] McCann, 'Reckless Pursuit of Dominion', 828 (as quoted in Tom Ham, NBA Ballers, *Washington Post*, 25 April 2004: F09).
[51] Cited in NBA.com, 'New TNT Spots Promote'.
[52] Osumare, *The Africanist Aesthetic*, 161.
[53] Ibid.
[54] Carrington et al., 'The Global Jordanscape', 182.
[55] Osumare, *The Africanist Aesthetic*, 162.
[56] Ibid.
[57] hooks, *We Real Cool*, 151.
[58] Squires et al., 'Evaluating Agency and Responsibility', 727.
[59] Kelley, *Yo' Mama's Disfunktional*, 38.
[60] Dyson, *Michael Eric Dyson Reader*, 402.
[61] Ibid., 403.
[62] Ibid., 403.
[63] Rose, *The Hip Hop Wars*, 4.
[64] Hall, *Representation*, 223.
[65] Ogbar, *Hip Hop Revolution*, 127.
[66] Dyson, *Michael Eric Dyson Reader*, 403.
[67] Hughes, 'Managing Black Guys', 180.
[68] Leonard, 'Real Color of Money', 175.
[69] hooks, *We Real Cool*, 150.

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