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

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Examining how mixed racial groups of recreational sports players negotiate the politics of race and racism, can tell us a lot about players’ responses to micro and macro social forces, institutions, and organizations in society (Brooks, 2009; George, 1992; Hartmann, 2016; May, 2008; Shields, 2006; Wilson, 1997). Currently, book length sociological examinations of recreational basketball are scarce; more so, are ethnographic accounts of the everyday interactions and relations of recreational basketball players (Anderson & Millman, 1998; Axthelm, 1999; Boyd & Shropshire, 2000; Telander, 1976). Little research explores race or racism in this context or focuses specifically on mixed racial and ethnic groups of players (Hoffmann, Batchelor, & Manning, 2016; Jimerson, 1996; McLaughlin, 2008). Only a handful of book length texts exist which use a “Grounded Theory” perspective to examine the everyday racial and ethnic interactions and relations of recreational basketball players (McLaughlin, 2008; Strauss & Corbin, 1990; Thangaraj, 2015). Additional ‘Grounded Theory’ research could reveal much about race, social structure, and the organization of racism in recreational sports like pickup basketball. Mohamed’s Black Men on the Blacktop helps to fill some of this pronounced void.

Mohamed’s text contributes much to the long-needed and overdue conversations of race and racism in recreational sports. Through his analysis of black and white player’s social relations in pickup basketball, Mohamed demonstrates vividly how black men use their undesirable racial status to refashion urban sports spaces, for refuge and relief from broader racial oppression (Feagin, 1991). Based primarily on the perspectives of black men, Mohamed’s text is a critical expose’ of how black blacktop basketball players negotiate the politics of race and racism with white players, and of their struggle for sociocultural control over the flow of players and games. Based on three plus years of ethnographic field research of several Southern California Westside Blacktops (Vieyra, 2016; specifically blacktops in Culver City, Encino, Santa Monica, Westwood, Van Nuys, and West L.A.), Mohamed explains how and why black men’s interactions and relations with whites occur as racial conflict and resistance. Mohamed also illustrates how and why blacktops become social sites of struggle for black power, legitimacy, and respect—beyond the blacktop.

Mohamed opens with the assertion that basketball is ‘a contemporary black man’s game,’ which is not new (Brooks, 2009; George, 1992; Kuska, 2004; May, 2008; Telander, 1976). He argues, however, that a comprehensive analysis of the interactions and relations of black and white players reveals a lot about the broader cultural milieu and how black men now numerically dominate professional, big-time collegiate, and blacktop basketball. He provides numerous examples of black men’s imposition of sociocultural styles of play and athletic performances that demonstrates creative thinking derived from extensive participant observation. He also illustrates how black men construct and develop resistive identities rooted in firm notions of blackness, which aid their cultural re-appropriation of blacktop games and spaces.

Mohamed further develops this argument when he shows how and why black men perceive sport as more than a leisurely cultural pastime. He demonstrates how black men view professional and recreational basketball as vehicles for opportunities to increase their social status, and as a means to achieve economic advancement and upwards social mobility. He says blacktops are political texts, theaters, and platforms that are social sites of racial resistance and change, and temporal escapes that offer black men psychological relief from the broader unforgiving white landscape that is characteristic of major, racially oppressive, post-industrial U.S. cities. Vividly, Mohamed illustrates how black men demonstrate athleticism as exhilarative expressions of black relevance, and racial respect and personhood in light of the structural opposition to the inclusion and equality of black people in U.S. society, (5; 74). For the black men, blacktops are also perceived to be a deterrent to involvement in the deviance, drugs, street crime, and violence that results in the disproportionately high imprisonment and death of black men. Mohamed’s comprehensive explanation of his in-depth interviews with numerous black men demonstrates how and why so many black males cling to blacktop basketball as an identity and way of life (Brook, 2009; May, 2008).

The explanation of blacktops as one of few places and social spaces that black men engage with, commit to, and thrive in, is also not new. Mohamed suggests, apart from the daily comfort of blacktops for black men, virtually no long-term opportunities for actual economic advancement or upward social mobility exist. This is largely due to the behavior and social relations of black men with whites, which is comprised of multifaceted forms of racial conflict and resistance. This results in black men constantly laboring to demonstrate audacious countercultural positive athletic performances. Mohamed asserts that much of the black men’s behavior is a direct response and challenge to the everyday operation of structural and institutional forms of racism, specifically whites’ privilege and supremacy on and beyond blacktops. Black men’s resistance to whites is expressed towards whites’ gentrified residential encroachment, and towards white urban dwellers who desire to play on blacktops. Urban parks, picnic benches, hiking and bicycle trails, swing sets, monkey bars, and blacktops constitute semi-public recreational space where racial conflict can be seen in black’s and white’s ritual contact, interaction, and relations. Black men’s resistance to whites is highly visible in their demonstrations of black masculinity, which black men collectively express via their desires for athletic control over blacktops.

On the blacktops, the black men routinely manipulate the selection of players to influence the performance styles, pace, and flow of games to their advantage. These adjustments allow the black men to possess and implement a sociocultural advantage that helps to reproduce their domination of blacktops. The feedback these men receive from black and white players alike, regarding their athletic performances, affirms their legitimacy, and their resistance to white domination beyond blacktops. Black men use
much of the ill-conceived notions of their athletic superiority and black masculinity to open up space for access, acceptance, and inclusion; by doing so, they are able to create affirming sports identities, representations, and experiences. These men’s projections of positive sports performances are central to their racial pride, their feelings of achievement and perseverance, and their dangerous performances of hegemonic black masculinity.

According to Mohamed, much of the selection of players and flow of games are racial games premised on the athletic performance of hegemonic black masculinity. Black men perform typologies of black masculinity via their defiant counter-cultural demeanors, which are commonly associated with and attributed to beliefs about black’s natural aggression and genetically superior athleticism. Beyond these beliefs, the black men must perform these typologies in ways that contest and conflict with racism and racial inferiority, and white privilege and supremacy. Through their use of everyday language, religion, and music, they formulate and implement socially acceptable, appropriate, and desirable racialized sports performances (6). These demonstrations are central to their selection and network of players, which is related to their conscious carving out of people from their broader racially-oppressive, socio-economically-restrictive urban environments. Their imposition of black masculine rules, norms, and values is also part of their temporal escape to blacktops for socio-psychic relief and relaxation. Mohamed declares that although these black men possess less socioeconomic and political power than most members of U.S. society (due to overt and covert institutional forms of racism and discrimination), when given chances to resist their subordinate racial status, they do so in creatively expressive ways that exemplifies their everyday struggle for control of blacktops (8-9; 58).

In his conclusion, Mohamed argues that styles of blackness on blacktops now result in reverse emulation—the process whereby historically dominant groups (i.e. whites) appropriate superficial aspects of subordinate groups (i.e. blacks) for cursory and cosmetic purposes transforming them into fad and fashion (18). Absent of white players’ understanding and experiences with racial oppression is their fascination and embrace of black forms and styles of basketball. The black men use whites’ emulation of them to negotiate race and racism that is rooted in whites’ pseudo-scientific notions of blackness as prescriptive sites of racial controversy and contestation (Brooks, 2009; Hartmann, 2016; Kuska, 2004; May, 2008). Although these kinds of interracial games often appear little more than recreation, peppered with episodes of unbridled black bravado, Mohamed demonstrates how and why black men’s ‘cool pose’ is used to minimize and repel interracial contact and interaction with whites and whiteness (Majors, 2017).

The racial trappings of hegemonic forms of black masculinity are manifest in the ideology and imagery of the Mandingo, rooted in pseudo-scientific racist understandings of natural athleticism and sports dominance (Hoberman, 1997). Mohamed shows this, and then explains how race, racism, and masculinity intersect in sport as a triple-edged sword diminishing the access, opportunities, identities, and experiences of black men on and beyond blacktops. ‘The Mandingo’ helps black men to negotiate control of blacktops, but simultaneously places them victim to the cunning snare of innate racial prowess, physical aggression, and violence. It becomes difficult for black men to balance their racial resistance with positive self-representations, and affirmative self-expressions of intelligence given the profound operation of race and racism that is expressed in Mandingo stereotypes. Mohamed asserts that an unexamined kind of racial duality of consciousness occurs in the black men that stems from a DuBoisian double consciousness, which is a product of the creation and negotiation of racialized sports identities in a white-dominated society.

Mohamed’s text adds greater breadth and depth to the sociological research about race and racism in everyday recreational sports—like blacktop basketball—and gives voice to the interracial interactions and experiences of black players. His focus on black men’s negotiation of the politics of race and racism contributes to previous theorizations of players’ creation and maintenance of games via the informal control over the selection of players, games, and space (Jimerson, 1996, 1999). Additional examples of how blacktop styles and performances are tied to the stellar styles and performances of professional basketball players could have help better contextualize much of the sociocultural deference white basketball players have for black players and black masculine athletic performances (Axthelm, 1999; Harper, 2000; Hoffmann, Batchelor, & Manning, 2016; Thomas, 2004).

A deeper analysis of black men’s sociocultural cooptation of speech, clothing, and specific musical genres could have further developed the arguments of blacktop tolerance, acceptance, and inclusion, which once barred black men from participation in professional and recreational sports (Boyd & Shropshire, 2000; Hoffmann, Batchelor, & Manning, 2016; Kuska, 2004). Reference to white-over-black sport paradigms, specifically the racial shifting of players from key functionary positions to virtually all sports positions may have help to explain the lack of desire of black males on blacktops, to not want to play with and integrate with whites (Peterson, 2016). Reference to some of the subtle and not-so-subtle racial codes that define how ‘black’ basketball players and games are played in concert with the development of hip-hop cultural styles and performances could also have illuminated the significance of blackness for the black men in and beyond blacktops (Boyd & Shropshire, 2000).

Despite a personal desire to see some additions in a few areas, as a contribution to research in this area, this book has few shortcomings. Perhaps, more first-hand accounts of the actual responses of black men could have painted a more vivid picture, rather than the comprehensive grand synopsis of the men’s resistive racial identities and sports experiences. More attention to male voices instead of the singular extended female account of ‘the social salvation of blacktop basketball’ would be more telling in engaging in life on and beyond blacktops. Black Men on the Blacktop, as it is, is an insightful easy read that requires readers to critically think and engage with the everyday sociocultural operation and negotiation of race and racism from the perspective of black men. Such work is an essential contribution to the development of analyzing recreational sport, specifically the micro-level operations of social structures, and sociocultural forms of resistance and self-representation that are undeniable the conscious intelligent actions, interactions, and activities of black men.

References