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Till Neuhaus

BIELEFELD UNIVERSITY, GERMANY
TILL.NEUHAUS@UNI-BIELEFELD.DE
HTTPS://ORCID.ORG/0000-0003-2576-5045

Niklas Thomas

UNIVERSITY OF MÜNSTER, GERMANY
N_THOM06@UNI-MUENSTER.DE
HTTPS://ORCID.ORG/0000-0002-6185-7556

Corporate Colonization of Blackness – The Representation of Blackness in the National Basketball Association from 1984 to 2005

Abstract: In light of current social justice dynamics, this article examines marketing strategies employed by the NBA (and associated companies) to sell predominantly Black athletes to a chiefly White audience. Through historical contextualization and critical analysis, the NBA's development from a non-profitable and scorned circus to a multi-faceted and multi-billion-dollar global attraction is explored. From the earliest league structures until the 1980s, a dichotomy between Black and White players (and the values/stigma they embodied) dominated the sport of Basketball. This however changed with the rise of Michael Jordan to fame. Jordan became the first basketball player who transcended these racial lines in terms of associated values and/or stigmas. Simultaneously, *His Airness'* rise to global fame let the NBA's popularity soar into astronomical spheres. A shiny Black Superhero was born, yet his public image is predominantly inspired by corporate considerations – a case of corporate colonization of Black bodies. Black players' transgressions and the NBA's reactions to those – as happened in the *Malice in the Palace* (2005) incident – highlight the conflicting lines along which the NBA constructs and presents its players with a clear tendency towards corporate colonization, a concept which will be outlined in the paper. Through critical historical reading of past corporate efforts, this article re- and deconstructs the strategic illustration of Black athletes.

Key Words: race, basketball, marketing, Black Lives Matter, corporate colonization

1. Introduction

The National Basketball Association is a multi-faceted entity and operates under diverging sets of internal logics. Some of these logics can be articulated openly and communicated with the public, others should – due to their potential to highlight internal inconsistencies – be kept private. One key dimension is the facet of sports which is widely considered "a bastion of fair play and equal opportunity" (B'Beri/Hogarth 2009, 90). This unidimensional understanding of sports leagues often corresponds with the demand that "politics should be kept out of sport" (MacClancy 1996, 2). While these observations and demands hold true for the actual sport of basketball, the NBA, due to its embeddedness into the system of mass media (cf. Stichweh 2005), also operates under the logic of commerce and business (cf. Wollert 2009, 75). The respective approaches associated with the areas of business and sports already hint at potential tensions. The NBA has to mitigate those, because the most marketable teams may not always be the most successful ones in terms of athletic performance. These tensions can be multiplied by considering further dimensions, such as (sub-)culture(s), geographies, or history. This intertwinement of different dimensions ultimately led scholars to perceive basketball as "a contested space" (Andrews/Silk 2010, 1267), in which these tensions are negotiated, (partially) integrated/mitigated, publicly displayed, and discussed. Simultaneously, the final product – the NBA as a brand with all of its outlets and references in other products (i.e. merchandise, commercials, or media productions) – can only consider selected facets of these dimensions. This paper argues that, from the plethora of potential choices, the NBA has chosen those which are best for business. As a result, certain of the league's and its involved actors' aspects are made invisible while others are overemphasized – a bias towards economic interest. In the NBA's case as well as the associated brands (i.e. sneaker, merchandise, or sportswear producers) this is of particular delicacy as the players make it into the league based on skills and effort and not based on potential marketability. This paper analyzes the NBA's portrayal of franchise players and underlying corporate strategies to mitigate diverging logics in their final product. It will be argued that – due to the business logic's primacy – the different aspects and facets of players, teams, and basketball culture were subordinated to the logic of business. Throughout this paper, this phenomenon will be referred to as *corporate colonialism* or *corporate colonization*[1] (cf. Deetz 1992).

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[1] Corporate colonization (cf. Deetz 1992) describes the primacy of corporate idea(l)s – i.e. efficiency, rationalism, and optimization – over others in organizations. What these ideas have in common is that they correspond to the logic of business and put measurable growth (i.e. revenue, market-share etc.) above all other indicators of success. Further, corporate colonization is employed to describe how these ideas travel (i.e. within organizations as well as across different organizations) and become widely acknowledged standards. In his analysis, Deetz primarily focuses on communication and inner-organization procedures. However, in this paper corporate colonization will be employed to partially explain the illustration of basketball players. As corporate coloni-

A pivotal indicator of these clashing antagonisms is the relationship between audiences and players. Prior to David Stern's mandate as commissioner (1984), the NBA was low in viewership and teams did not operate financially profitable. B'beri and Hogarth (2009, 91) argue that one key problem was the disenfranchisement of mostly White viewership from the predominantly Black players. From investor's as well as audience's perspective, the league was perceived as "[…] drug-infested and too-black […]" (Kiersh 1992, 28). However, David Stern argued that "[…] race would not be an abiding issue to NBA fans, at least as long as it was handled correctly" (Maharaj 1999, 231) and within the first 10 years of Stern's leadership the league experienced 1600% in growth (cf. Maharaj 1999, 232). This economic success story can be explained by Stern's "surveillance and regulation" (Leonard 2006, 160) of players which manifested itself in "seemingly innocent decisions, league administrations, and fan discourse" (B'beri/Hogarth 2009, 91) but also on- and off-court punishments (Lavelle 2010, 298; Cunningham 2009, 40) aiming at "Black players to conform to the moral and ethical economy of the professional sports leagues" (B'beri/Hogarth 2009, 91). Ultimately, it can be argued that Stern's vision of handling race *correctly* can be conceptualized as making "Black men safe for (White) consumers in the interest of profit" (Hughes 2004, 164) or, in other words, the corporate colonization of Blackness. These internal tensions between the NBA's competing logics – Black players making it into the league on meritocratic grounds versus the potential disenfranchisement with mostly White audiences – are of particular importance to racial issues as the "ongoing battle over representation of Black urban experience is fought" (Kelly 1997, 8) in these media products, a conflict that is of exceptional relevance to this journal's culture and media section. Further, sports have been considered occupations and spaces of equal opportunity which can help minorities to become parts of American society (cf. Boyle 1963); however, due to the mechanisms of corporate colonization, these "sanitized snapshots […] promote integration without equality, representation without power, [and] presence without the conforming possibility of emancipation" (McDonald/Toglia 2005, 248).

This paper tries to isolate and critically analyze the realized illustrations of Black basketball players from the theoretical stance of corporate colonialism. Due to the economic development of the league as well as its associates, the timeframe of David Stern taking over as commissioner (1984) to 2005 has been selected for this analysis. 2005 marks a pivotal year for the NBA as a major brawl, later known as *The Malice in the Palace*, occurred and highlighted the conflicting logics of the league. In order to be able to contextualize the images and strategies the NBA later – maybe consciously, maybe unconsciously – employed, this paper starts with an abbreviated history of basketball from 1891 to 1984 (section 2) before taking a closer look at the representation of selected

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zation primarily describes a specific mode of thinking and acting, it can be realized by an array of actors, such as the NBA as well as associated companies (i.e. shoe producers etc.) Due to the racial component of the analyzed matter, corporate colonization has been – at least with regard to the colonization aspect – broadened in its scope and has gained an additional meaning.

Black franchise players during the David Stern era (section 3). As argued, race is a key component regarding the conflicting logics outlined above. Therefore, this paper attempts to reconstruct and analyze representational strategies which have been employed by the NBA as well as selected associated brands (Nike and AND1) at given times. Such analysis can provide a deeper understanding of assumed audiences, the corresponding zeitgeist as well as specific understandings and readings of Blackness. The paper will end with a summary (section 4) and provide an outlook on how the concept of corporate colonialism could be used in other sports related contexts (section 5).

2. Basketball from 1891 to 1980

James Naismith developed basketball as a gap filler for the winter season in 1891 (cf. Sahre/Pommerening 1995, 168). Through the networks of YMCAs and colleges, the sport of basketball quickly gained popularity. In 1898, the first professional league was founded and, in 1919, the first international tournament was organized (cf. Kränzle/ Brinke 2003, 52). The first league establishing itself more permanently was the National Basketball League (NBL) in 1925, lasting three years before it went bankrupt (cf. Kränzle/Brinke 2003, 72). Early on, teams had a higher degree of longevity than leagues. Two of the most famous and long-lasting teams were the New York Renaissance and Harlem Globetrotters, the latter being founded in 1926 by the Jewish businessman Abe Saberstein (cf. ibid). The two teams consisted of almost exclusively Black athletes providing a platform for Black players, who were denied participation in professional leagues. The NBA started in 1946 as the Basketball Association of America (BAA) and renamed itself after the integration of the National Basketball League (NBL) in 1948/49 (cf. Kränzle/Brinke 2003, 73). From 1950 onwards, Black players were allowed to compete in the NBA. As a result, the Globetrotters primarily focused on showmanship and the promotion of American values during Cold War times (cf. Thomas 2011, 778). Multiple leagues competed for dominance in the field as well as the acquisition of the best players and top talents. In the 1950s, the NBA was able to establish itself as the most competitive league by having the Minneapolis Lakers and their superstar George Mikan (cf. Rader 1990, 271). From 1957 to 1966, the Boston Celtics dominated the league and manifested Bob Cousy and Bill Russell[2] as superstars (cf. ibid.). Due to multiple rule changes as well as the integration of promising and exciting teams and talents, society's interest in competitive basketball grew and viewership increased "from less than 2 million in 1960 to 10 million in the late 1970s" (Rader 1990, 272). The growing interest in basketball and the emerging

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[2] Russell, just as Lew Alcindor (later known as Kareem Abdul-Jabbar), also toured through Africa in 1959 (cf. Witherspoon 2013, 1510). While Russell had relatively huge success promoting American ideas, the newer generation was less cooperative and was also less successful in the early 1970s (cf. Witherspoon 2013, 1508/1509).

opportunities lured competitors into the field of professional basketball, such as the American Basketball Association (ABA). The ABA distinguished itself from the relatively White NBA, which at the time featured later legends such as Jerry West[3] or 'Pistol' Pete Maravich. Basketball was segregated among racial lines in the late 1950s and early 1960s (cf. Eitzen/Yetman 1980, 333). In direct contrast to the NBA, the ABA was considered the Black league featuring stars such as Julius Erving (cf. Criblez 2015, 374). Eventually, the ABA was integrated into the NBA after 9 years of existence. The 1970s mark a turning point as Black athletes now outnumbered White players. Simultaneously, salaries increased drastically[4]. The rise in salary can be explained by the emerging public interest, but also by the competitive situation between the two leagues, which ultimately caused the ABA's bankruptcy.

Inspired by the Civil rights movement and given the opportunity to speak publically, representatives of the more militant branches of the Black power movement gained visibility – Lew Alcidor, later know as Kareem Abdul-Jabbar, can be considered a prominent archetype of these developments. The 1970s can be considered an "[…] era of Black power and white backlash" (Goudsouzian 2016, 2), an observation which can also be made in the realm of basketball. The White backlash articulated itself in a decrease of viewership, which was enhance by transgressions of multiple players. In the late 1970s and early 1980s, the NBA suffered an image crisis (cf. Cady 1979, 15) and "[m]any advertisers saw the NBA as a drug-infested, too-black league with dwarfish Nielsen ratings" (Kiersh 1992, 28). This image crisis also affected the financial performance of the involved franchises as 16 out of 23 teams were not profitable in 1983/84 (cf. Nick 2009, 79). 1984 marks a peripeteia for the NBA as David Stern became the league's commissioner and turned it into a highly profitable association. In the following, it will be analyzed how Stern and the NBA presented their talents in order to make them appealable to a wider and financially more potent audience. Or: How did basketball-related corporations colonize (mostly) Black players, bodies, and expressions along the line of the corporate revenue?

3. The David Stern Era

David Stern's main concern was to create a consumer-friendly and well-marketable league. Consumer-friendliness and marketability closely correlate with the concept of identification, in this case with certain teams and players. Identification should result in lower price sensitivity, more regular game attendance, and higher consumption of

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[3] Jerry West was not only a very successful basketball player but also the template for today's NBA's brand logo. This coincident brought him the nickname Jerry 'The Logo' West.

[4] In 1970, the league was half Black and half white with an average salary of $35,000 per year. Ten years later, the league was 70% Black and salaries went up by 500% (cf. Criblez 2015, 373). The rise in salary but also the ABA's bankruptcy can be explained by the fact that the ABA had overpaid talented prospects for over a decade trying to outbid the NBA (cf. Simmons 2009, 9).

merchandise (cf. Meng/Stravos/Westberg 2015, 199). Allegiance towards teams arises from "success, peer group acceptance, vicarious achievement, nostalgia, and star players" (Funk/James 2006, 206). Gradually, Stern established multiple mechanisms and rules which should guarantee a well-balanced and competitive league as competition translates into higher revenue (cf. Caudill et al. 2014, 246). Even though the franchises can be considered crucial, the "NBA is [still] marketed around a limited group of individual stars" (ibid.). Stern attempted to connote these *faces of the league* with certain values, attitudes, and ideals, hoping for an image transfer resulting in fans' and sponsors' affirmation of and identification with the product (cf. Gwinner 1997). Those connotations and values – the building blocks of corporate colonialization – largely remain constant over his years as commissioner.

David Stern continuously ran a dual strategy by providing two narrative paradigms at the time. Assumingly, this dual strategy covers the different target groups more efficiently than a single-minded approach. The Magic Johnson/Larry Bird rivalry is a prime example of the 1970s approach towards the Black/White-binary. Stern was simultaneously cultivating Michael Jordan's image, which should fully blossom in the 1990s. What all three athletes had in common is that they had barely any public scandals[5] and thereby fit Stern's idea of marketability. All three "contributed to the (racial) re-assemblage of the NBA […]" (Andrews 1999, 505) and created new categories and mental models beyond the Black/White dichotomy. Even though the performances of these superstars were stunning throughout their careers, it can be assumed that the created images and associated legacies are the product of well-choreographed efforts coordinated by a business-oriented marketing machine.

3.1. Bird, Magic, and Jordan

Larry Bird and Erving *Magic* Johnson cannot be understood without the myth which surrounded their respective teams, the Los Angeles Lakers and Boston Celtics. Both franchises are rich in tradition and look back on multiple world championships. In the late 1970s however, the predominantly White Celtics were underperforming before Larry Bird turned them into a winning franchise. On the contrary, the mostly Black Lakers had reached the semifinals the year before Johnson was drafted, had Kareem Abdul-Jabbar on their roster, and belonged to one of the most vibrant and interesting franchises

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[5] After Johnson was infected with the HIV-virus, which was still widely associated with the gay and drug addict scene (cf. Capozzola 2003, 219), he retired and, besides 32 games in the 1996 season, only played the 1992 Olympics (cf. Raack 2016). Those were the first Olympic Games in which professional basketball players were allowed to compete and Johnson, as one of the most dominant players of the recent years, should not be missing. The United States dominated the tournament. The 1992 Olympics are often considered the NBA's first opening up towards Europe (and the former USSR). As a consequence, many European players entered the league in the following years. Further, the 1992 Olympics are also considered the *passing over of the torch* from the Johnson/Bird generation to Michael Jordan. Larry Bird retired in 1992 due to back problems.

at the time (cf. Smith 2011, 3). By adding Johnson, the Lakers built a dynasty later known as the *Showtime Lakers*. The labels of *showtime* as well as *Magic* Johnson hint at the 1980s' dominant image of Black players. Black success is often linked to genetic disposition and neglects the hard work, dedication, and required abilities (cf. Carrington 2007, 4689). Further, the idea of *Showtime* implies that the performed actions are effortless and "Black athletic success was not ascribed to strategy but to attributes like height and strength" (Williams 2006, 62). Erving Johnson, who played point guard at the size of 6 foot 9 inches and the Lakers who were known for high-pace fast-break basketball without countless systems, plays, and half-court offenses, embodied this. The illustration of the Lakers and Johnson are clearly inspired by notions of the 1970s perpetuated by the Lakers size, appearance, and playing style. Together, they reinforce the myth of the racially superior athlete who not only wins on the basketball court but also entertains the masses. The racial connotations Larry Bird and Erving Johnson were exposed to are mostly congruent with the duality between the (White) NBA and (Black) ABA. The Black league was marketed around physically strong athletes and individual class (cf. Criblez 2016, 374) whereas the rather White NBA impressed with toughness, teamwork, intellect, and bravery (ibid.). The same dualistic approach can be applied to the Bird and Johnson as well as the Lakers and Celtics rivalry. While Johnson was the physically dominant Black magician (cf. Kränzle/Brinke 2003, 96), Larry Bird was known for being physically weaker than his mostly Black opponents, but made this up with high basketball IQ, team play, toughness, discipline and hard work (cf. Smith 2011, 3). However, these traits were attached to the players externally – media coverage as well as advertisement, both partially controlled by the NBA – and do not stem solely from their in-game stats as also Erving Johnson had an incredibly high basketball IQ and dished out plenty of assists, usually considered an attribute of a team player. Also, the attributes of intelligence, camaraderie, and toughness/discipline were also attached to other Celtics players, i.e. John Havlicek or Dave Cowens, who lead the Celtics to titles in the early 1970s (cf. Smith 2011, 5). While the two franchises dominated the 1980s, it can be argued that the protagonists' representation is primarily a product of the prior decade. This should change with the introduction of Michael Jordan in 1984.

Michael Jordan and the Chicago Bulls won 6 NBA championships in the 1990s. Due to his unmatched physical abilities, which brought him his nickname *Air Jordan*, but also due to the domination of the 1992 Olympic Games, which is often referred to as the first step of the NBA's globalization strategy, Jordan "is perhaps the best and most well-known athlete in the world" (Dyson 1993, 64). Jordan's status as a cultural icon is undeniable and partly developed religious-like tendencies as Michael Jordan was considered to be "basketball's high priest" (Bradley 1991, 60) and "more popular than Jesus", yet with "better endorsement deals" (Vancil 1992, 51). But what made Jordan so appealing to audiences, fans, and sponsors alike?

One of David Stern's first major decisions was the renegotiation of TV rights. With the emerging importance of TV stations and media coverage, the commercial logic infused professional sports (cf. Dauncey/Hare 2013, 11) and the trinity of television,

sports, and sponsors[6] had a powerful impact on the representation of sport stars (cf. Steen 2013, 2234). Prior to his first game, an upcoming shoe brand endorsed Jordan and created a personalized sneaker exclusively for him. Jordan became one of the biggest stars and Nike became the most successful and influential sports equipment producer on the planet. Even though Jordan shot countless commercials, he was generally detached and kept away from the cliché image of urban Black Americans. (cf. Andrews/Silk 2010, 1629). The NBA started to embrace hip hop culture in the early 1980s, mainly to sell Black culture to a White audience (cf. Lorenz/Murray 2013, 28). They did not try this with Jordan, arguably to distance Jordan from the clichés attached to urban Blackness, such as hyper-masculinity, misogyny, violence, and the overemphasis on material wealth (cf. Rose 2008, 1/2). To avoid such connotations, Michael Jordan was presented as the "embodiment of American virtue" (Naughton 1992, 154). His story of making it to the NBA after being cut from his high school team, reinforced his qualities as a hard-working man and constant references to his incredible work ethic let him transcend the racial lines and made him compatible with Reaganite ideology (cf. Andrews/Silk 2010, 1627). Jordan countered stereotypes Black players were typically confronted with. Instead, Jordan's work ethic and financial modesty were paired with the innate desire to compete:

> I love to compete and it isn't for the money. I like the challenge. I could play you for a dollar. But …if I'm going to play then I'm going to play to win. That's enjoyable to me. That's fun …We can play for pride. That's enough. But I am going to try to beat you (Michael Jordan, in Vancil, 1995, 76).

This however does not fit Jordan renegotiating his contract in 1996 and earning $30 million dollar for a single season (cf. Denzin 1996, 324). The greatly artificial representation of Blackness in this context aims at the creation of an American hero; a player, who wants to prove himself for the sake of competition, while being highly successful in what he is doing. Even though this representation is well-known in the sports world nowadays, bringing together the motifs of the uber-athlete and combining it with an incredible innate work ethic marks the crossing of a line, which would not have been possible in the prior era. As such, the depiction of Michael Jordan can be considered innovative for the time being. Though the unification of these motifs, Michael Jordan fits the image of an economically productive, patriarchal, and White world of corporate life (cf. Maharaj 1999, 230). In summary, Stern as well as his corporate associates amalgamated the most beneficial aspects of Black and White rep-

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[6]   Here it becomes particular obvious that images of athletes are not solely created or shaped by the league but also by sponsors, advertisers, and the wider cultural environment (i.e. the music or film industry). However, all of these have in common that their operations are economically driven and that they adhere to an economic logic. This also explains why these efforts, even though they are perpetuated by different actors, all direct into the same (or at least a highly similar) direction as these economic ideals have permeated these actors, institutions, and organizations through corporate colonization.

resentation in Jordan. From today's perspective, this does not seem incredibly creative; however, it fits the zeitgeist as the Reagan years were primarily about free and individual choice (cf. May 2009, 444) as well as meritocracy. Jordan's image and representation can be read as an extension to every stereotypical Black basketball player before him as he unites those Calvinistic values and "the attitude of hope and faith that looks forward to the fulfillment of human wishes and desires" (Ping 1980, 11) – key traits of the *American Dream*. A look at the slogan of Jordan's major sponsor *Nike* supports the claim that dreams can be achieved if you *Just Do It*.

3.2. Urban Experience and *Malice in the Palace*

"The NBA faithfully mirrors the tensions between 'Blackophilia' and 'Blackophobia[7]' […]" (Andrews/Silk 2010, 1627) and correspondingly swings between the selective embracing of hip hop culture and the commodification of Black bodies while simultaneously demonizing both (cf. Leonard 2006, 160). After having Michael Jordan as its key brand ambassador and fan's favorite, the NBA decided to partly alter the representation of their players and revitalized associations with elements they tried to avoid 15 years prior. Simultaneously, the hardworking and competitive image of Michael Jordan has been transferred to other players, such as Kobe Bryant during his campaign to his fourth (2009) and fifth title (2010). The NBA tried to unite urban culture with corporate values through an emerging number of players, who imported well-visible hip-hop imagery. The reasons for this change are diverse. Some argue that the sneaker market and AND1's attempt to win costumers by labeling their products as authentic and street-proven (cf. Campbell 2015, 53) influenced the league's representation strategy. However, others believe that the success story of making it from the ghetto to the league was especially appealing to White audiences as it reinforces the ideal of a meritocratic society (cf. Sailes 2009, 137). Independent of the reason, the target group's preference shifted and the NBA's representational strategies needed to accommodate that change.

As AND1 tried to create a consumer-friendly Blackness which differed from the mainstream image occupied by Nike, the company had to find an alternating approach. AND1 decided to interlink the aforementioned values with authenticity by using street credibility. Streetball features a lot more creative expression of self (cf. Campbell 2015, 54), mainly expressed through playing style but also in more individualized clothing. The latter opened up a sheer infinite market. As the face for their marketing campaign, AND1 chose Latrell Sprewell, who was considered an enfant terrible after physically attacking a coach in the 1997 season. Sprewell was marketed as an individualized and updated version of the American Dream as the 1999 campaign *I am the American Dream* im-

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[7] The dichotomy of Blackophilia and Blackophobia describes the fact that certain actors and groups partly identify with and appreciate selected traits, actions, and/or products of the Black community while actively discriminating others (cf. Yousman 2003). The NBA as well as its associates have been pending between these two extrema, depending on the temporal as well as cultural context.

pressively illustrates (cf. Campbell 2015, 55/56). The individualizing tendencies can be found in other campaigns, such as the *I am what I am* campaign tailored to Allen Iverson, who on the one hand embodies the ghetto/thug image with his cornrows, jewelry, and tattoos, while on the other hand is portrayed as a hard worker. Especially Iverson catches interest as he is compensating his height (5'11/6'0 feet) with willpower, determination, and on-court hustle. One of his tattoos spells the words *Only the strong*, which is shifting the focus away from physical strength to mental strength – an association, which would not have been possible for Black players in the early 1980s. Iverson's team (Philadelphia 76ers) made the finals in 2001, where they were beaten by the Los Angeles Lakers led by their two superstars: The goofy yet extremely dominant Shaquille O'Neal and the prodigy Kobe Bryant. The Lakers three-peated from 1999 to 2002 and the image of the Showtime Lakers experienced a renaissance. The 2001 finals series underlines the two major representations of Black athletes (the ghetto underdog vs. Showtime Lakers 2.0) competing in the early 2000s. This seemingly ideological but also athletic competition turned out to be highly profitable as the league continued to expand globally in the 2000s (cf. Naito/ Takagi 2017, 10) and both franchises were extremely successful in merchandise sales. Especially the 76ers let some scholars conclude that the league is "not running away from associations with urban culture but marketing them to death" (Zirin 2007, 108) – another instance which could be considered *corporate colonization* of racial issues.

Even though the battle of the ideologies was a huge commercial success, the rough and urban streetball image backfired in December 2004. Ben Wallace, also signed by AND1 and part of the current champions Detroit Pistons, who were marketed as the Bad Boys 2.0, and Ron Artest had an on-court fight. Hit by a glass thrown from the stands, Ron Artest rushed into the ranks and knocked out a fan. The entire incident was labeled the *Malice in the Palace* and the image of Artest hitting a fan in the face was featured constantly in the media. Artest was suspended for an entire season. Still, the league's image was in danger as Stern found himself in the same situation as in 1984 as the league was perceived as too-black and infused with a ghetto mentality (cf. Leonard 2006, 159). The audience's reaction was devastating as the 2005 finals ratings were 20% lower compared to the previous year (cf. Lorenz 2013, 29). The NBA responded in 2005 and established three different measures: a dress code, an age limit, and increased fines after technical and flagrant fouls (cf. Leonard 2006, 161). Particular importance for the representation of Black players inhabits the dress code, which primarily monitored "racialized forms of expressions" (Lorenz 2013, 24), such as jewelry, snapbacks, or bandanas. The league pretends to be colorblind but takes White expressions as the standard and then distinguishes between the *good other* and the *bad other* (cf. Leonard 2006, 161). Thus, it can be argued that the NBA presented Black players "as an extension of a broader Black community perpetually plagued by 'social pathologies'" (May 2009, 444). The league reacted with restrictive measures, while arguing not to regulate Blackness but to promote (corporate) professionalism (cf. Lorenz 2013, 24).

The NBA, in desperate need of a scapegoat, promoted another image of their players. So, the second major representation strategy of Black players in the post-Malice-

in-the-Palice time was infantilization. The created narrative was that Black players are not able to use their talents and resources on and off the court. On the court, players can be productive if tamed by White coaches and/or referees (cf. Ferber 2007: 20/21). Off the court, multiple players made appearances on the news as they went bankrupt shortly after their retirement. One of the most infamous cases is the above mentioned Allen Iverson, who allegedly spent $150 million dollars and faced bankruptcy (cf. Carlson 2016). All of these incidents accumulate to the bigger picture of Black players not being able to use their monetary resources in sustainable fashion (cf. Benet-Weiser 1999, 408). A clear tendency to infantilize Black players can be found and is supported by journalists claiming that after 2005 Stern relentlessly pushed his agendas and "treated the players like children" (Cohen 2012). For the latter of two problems, the NBA installed educational programs for players to learn about finances (cf. Furman 2015) – a narrative reinforcement of the caring and benevolent team owners and the irresponsible Black player. This evokes a perverted and romanticized parent-child-relationship. Summarizing, it can be stated that after the 2004 incident, the NBA applied a short-term infantilization strategy to wipe off any negative connotation before reestablishing the professional and virtue driven image of the earlier decades.

From 2005 to 2012, Stern fostered the already available image described above. While further perpetuating a globalization strategy, he cultivated a new generation of stars, such as LeBron James, Dwayne Wade, or Carmelo Anthony. James and Anthony both have endorsement deals with Nike or JORDAN. Stern left the league in 2012. After a transitional period, Adam Silver became new commissioner in the 2013/14 season. Silver is one of Stern's affiliates and shares a similar vision of the NBA.

4. Corporate Colonization of Blackness – Patterns and Tendencies (Summary)

This article illustrated different representations of Blackness promoted by the NBA, starting in the mid-1980s until 2005. The paper has shown that David Stern's representational strategies, the core of NBA's marketing strategy, are tightly linked to corporate American values. These core values are realized differently throughout time as they respond to mainstream society. The first major narrative was the Larry Bird/ Erving Johnson rivalry in the 1980s. Larry Bird served as the face for the promoted values while Erving Johnson's representation was still closely related to the cliché of Black basketball players. However, all negative and potentially business damaging aspects were kept away from Erving's persona. The next step in the illustration of Black basketball players marked Michael Jordan as he not only abandoned the negatively connoted qualities of Black players but embraced virtually all values of corporate America. This corporate American image is revitalized by the NBA as soon as transgressions of their players occur. The Jordan era was later accompanied by a phase which emphasized Black urban elements. Ultimately, it cannot be explained

whether those tendencies were endogenous, due to an emerging number of players from an urban background, or exogenous, due to marketing strategies which relied on authenticity and street credibility. The leaning towards a more urban approach was immediately stopped after the 2004 incident, which should later be known as *The Malice in the Palice*. In the short term, the NBA reacted with an infantilization strategy of players while reinforcing corporate appearance. These examples stress the point that the image created by the NBA is primarily revenue-driven – the corporate colonization of Black bodies, expressions, and being.

5. For the Damaged Coda (Outlook)

Considering the phenomenon of corporate colonization, countless aspects and actors related to professional basketball could be analyzed. Some of the more fruitful future endeavors are outlined in this section. While the NBA has a relatively straight-forward approach of illustrating Black players, similar questions could be asked with regard to different ethnicities as the NBA actively targets Asian and Latino viewership through their advertisement (cf. Morago 2015). Further, players expression through new and/or social media (cf. Santomier/Shuart 2008, 87) as well as the NBA's reactions toward these can and should be analyzed in the future. Especially issues in which players and the organization disagree – and eventually negotiate that disagreement partly publicly, partly privately (cf. Xu/Yu/Hoi 2015) – have potential for insightful works.

Lastly, the NBA also serves as a mirror for attitudes and tendencies in American (consumer) society. The case of Donald Sterling who had to sell his share of the Los Angeles Clippers after recordings of him making racist remarks about Black people were made public (cf. Lavelle 2015), may show how openly articulated racism as well as power structures that accommodate racism are beginning to become socially unacceptable. While this incident may be interpreted as the NBA becoming more committed to promoting racial justice, it is justice without equal opportunities, representation, or ownership. The NBA could also be investigated in terms of more recent developments and serve as a litmus test on how (consumer) society positions itself towards certain racialized issues, such as the *Black Lives Matter* movement.

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