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ROUNDBALL AND RESISTANCE: PICKUP BASKETBALL AS SITE OF BLACK CULTURAL EXPRESSION

By

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ABSTRACT

ROUNDBALL AND RESISTANCE:
PICKUP BASKETBALL AS SITE OF BLACK CULTURAL EXPRESSION

By

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This study isolates and explores differences in playing styles and approaches to pickup, or informal, basketball by racial-cultural group. Informed by the theoretical contributions of cultural studies, particularly the work on black cultural resistance, the central argument advanced is that pickup basketball can possess different cultural meaning for black and white participants. The study identifies three areas where these differences are revealed: a) aesthetically, in style of play; b) verbally, in degree of vocal engagement; and c) performatively, in terms of positive impression maintenance. The three areas were observed while conducting in-depth participant observation in a pickup basketball setting. Racial-cultural differences are explored for the broader meanings they may hold for further understanding the relationship between urban black social location and black cultural practices in the U.S.

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[J]azz is an art of individual assertion within and against the group. Each true jazz movement . . . springs from a contest in which each artist challenges all the rest, each solo flight, or improvisation, represents (like the successive canvases of a painter) a definition of his identity: as individual, as member of the collectivity and as link in the chain of tradition.

Ralph Ellison

Basketball is jazz: improvisatory, free, individualistic, corporate, sweaty, exulting, screeching, torrid, explosive, exquisitely designed for letting first the trumpet, then the sax, then the drummer, then the trombone soar away in virtuoso excellence.

Michael Novak

Recently, much scholarly attention has been directed toward understanding the complex of issues which influence the contours of collective social identity for African-Americans (see for instance Gilroy 1987 & 1993; Mercer 1994; Dyson 1993; West 1990, Julien 1992). A primary site for locating these discussions has been African-American popular culture (see Dent 1993). Basketball, as a popular American sport with widespread black participation and identification at all competition levels, offers a rich space in which to explore the broader dynamics of race, class, and cultural practice which are salient in contemporary African-American intellectual discourse.

The game of basketball, from informal playground contests to the elite arenas of professional play, is often perceived as a racialized activity, a sport which is given meaning, value, and articulation through a particular African-American aesthetic. According to Michael Eric Dyson (1993), the game is the "metaphoric center of black juvenile culture, a major means by which even temporary forms of cultural and personal transcendence of personal limits are experienced" (73). For black urban youth, basketball provides a space within which is located a complex of signifiers where identity, inspiration, social meaning, and cultural information is stored and

produced.

This paper seeks to isolate and explore differences in styles and approaches to pickup basketball by "racial" group. The central argument that underlies this work is that pickup basketball can possess different cultural meaning for black and white participants and these differences are reflected in three facets of play: aesthetically, in playing style; verbally, in degree of vocal participation; performatively, in terms of positive self-presentation and impression management. For this task I will employ the theoretical work of cultural studies, particularly the work focusing on cultural resistance, symbolic interactionism, and sociology of sport treatments of race-performance difference. Thus far much of the relevant work in cultural studies has remained at the level of theory construction or criticism. This project, then, is an attempt to apply and link some of these concepts to data collected through participant observation.

Basketball, Race and Performative Difference

Although the immediate focus of this project concerns the cultural meanings that basketball holds for its participants, it should nonetheless be useful to enter this discussion by briefly identifying some scholarly treatments of basketball, race, and skill. Much of this body of work seeks to account for the disproportionate frequency of participation of African-American males in the upper-levels (NCAA Division I and II and various professional leagues) of competitive basketball and as skilled participants at all levels of play.

Donal Carlston (1983) identifies and systematically critiques four general theories, often combined or overlapping, which are oft-cited explanations for this disproportion: physiological, personality differences, socio-structural factors, and patterns of socialization (32).

Carlston notes that each of these projects summarily reveal at best only tenuous and partial relationships in explaining perceived performance differences by race. For instance, paradigms which emphasize constitutional differences by racial group (physiological and personality explanations) are refutable on the grounds that there usually exists as much intrarace physiological/personality difference than extrarace.[1] The thesis that a greater urgency toward "making it" in basketball among young African-American males due to constricted access to other modalities of empowerment cannot explain skill differences between whites and blacks who possess equal commitment to participation (Carlston 32-33). Finally, and particularly relevant to my discussion is the persistence of quite distinct styles and orientations toward the game which remain inexplicable when any or all of these theses are applied. Carlston asserts that even

> if all of these different theories were substantiated, there would still be glaring gaps in our understanding of race differences in playing *styles*. . . Why do black players emphasize scoring over other facets of play? Why do white and black youngsters play pick-up games using different rules to govern play? Existing theories are clearly unable to provide satisfactory answers to such questions (33, my emphasis).

With any of the above explanations, what is left unexplained in the final instance is not that there exist perceptible differences in skill level or innate physiology but rather that the styles of play and orientation to the game are significantly different. And it is this prominent absence which prohibits a complete understanding of race, sport, and performative differences.

In response to this absence, Carlston offers an "environmental theory" as a useful alternative framework for conceptualizing these perceived race-performance differences. Emphasized here is the complex of local forces in urban versus non-urban settings, which each tend to reveal particular racial concentrations, that enhance and shape varied styles, tendencies, and

orientations to the game among players. The social processes which circumscribe the "inner city game" for instance--higher concentration of players competing for more limited recreational space, high presence of spectators, cultural exigencies requiring heightened attention to positive outward-appearance maintenance--provoke a high degree of competitiveness, an orientation toward individuality, tolerance of high levels of physical contact, and a pronounced emphasis on the maintenance of positive self-presentation or front. What emerges and is continually reproduced from this complex of forces is a particular urban (mostly black, male) playing style which has come to be regarded as "more self conscious, more expressive, more expansive, more colorful, more intense, more assertive, more aggressive, and more focused on the individual than is the style of the larger society [white]" (Kochman 1982, 130). Alternately, the non-urban area, according to Carlston, is an environment which engenders a more egalitarian and team-oriented approach. In areas where playing space is ample and access to facilities is high, players have increased opportunities to develop individual skills. Intensive focus may be directed toward the practice and refinement of technical components of the game, particularly with regard to shooting form and technique, but this often occurs without the rigorous conditioning of game-like competition. Thus non-urban players are less likely to develop the aggressiveness, competitiveness, and orientation toward self-sufficiency in performance which urban areas evoke.

The environmental thesis is a useful corrective to those theories which seek to explain disproportionate racial representations in basketball in terms of physiology, sociobiology or psychology. I would like to extend this theme and propose that not only does the environment produce the forces that affect the development of particular playing styles and abilities,

but that the differences are also a product of larger socio-structural forces which continually police, restrict, and limit--physically, psychically, symbolically--the opportunities for full development and access to life chances for individuals differentially located within society by race and class. As a result, the cultural terrain of basketball becomes an especially important arena for self expression and affirmation.

Conceiving basketball as a dynamic cultural field which demands that social actors acquire certain strategies of participation may prove useful for understanding held racialized perceptions of the game (that is oft-received notions of its dominance or mastery by African-American males). I offer the argument that insofar as basketball operates within its own particular aesthetic register which provides the criteria for evaluating "good" or "bad" play and this register is constructed on stylistic elements which are generated disproportionately over race (socio-cultural location) thus lending to racialized perceptions, certain actors (black players) become the archetypal performers upon which "good" play is based. In other words, if "black" or "urban" style is viewed as the aesthetic model for making value distinctions, then "good" players are perceived to be disproportionately reproduced by race. Having revealed this distinction, we must then engage a range of other--social, historical, political--issues for understanding what is seen as "black" overparticipation in the sport.

Black Expressive Style as Cultural Resistance

Recognizing the risks inherent to the reduction of highly nuanced, continually shifting cultural traits to a racial category which itself is an imposed ideological construct, I will here attempt cautiously to articulate some prominent elements of black cultural style. Style, according to

members of the Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies (CCCS), is created through the "activity of stylisation--the active organisation of objects with activities and outlooks, which produce an organised group-identity in the form and shape of a coherent and distinctive way of 'being-in-the-world'" (Jefferson et al. 1975, 54). Shaped at the interstice of collective experience, historical memory, and shared subordinate social location, black culture is polysemic, assembled from an extensive catalog of social-cultural forms, traditional African "survivals", prevalent Western practices, and various local forms. It is driven by an ethos of spirituality, expressivity, and an often self-conscious prioritizing of the stylized and performed self (Kochman 1981). Black culture celebrates the highly emotive and affective, often privileging aesthetic form and process over conclusive moment as modes of symbolic exchange in themselves (Gay 4-5); while emphasizing perpetual social re-creation through an orientation toward neotony; where high oral competence and an emphasis on the power of the spoken word, or *nommo* (Baber 1987), organize the fundamental means of viewing and negotiating reality. Black expressive style, writes Geneva Gay, is "at once pragmatic and aesthetic, poetic and paradoxical, sustaining and enriching, ironic, and incredibly imaginative" (3). It is a syncretic and heterogenous expression of the complexities and ambivalence which frame the African-American experience in the New World.

One central feature of black cultural form has been, and continues to be, the means through which unique black cultural practices articulate as modes of resistance, equipping black actors with strategies with which to negotiate and accommodate collective black identity. Black style provides the tools and space for making sense of, adapting to, and transcending the myriad forces which continually locate them at the margins of society.

Revealing the complexities which characterize the relationship between the collective black experience and larger American society is crucial in situating the unique source of black cultural form. For the CCCS group (1975) cultural meaning emerges precisely when "symbolic objects--dress, appearance, language, ritual occasions, styles of interaction, music"--are appropriated, developed, and deployed by particular social groups to "form a *unity* with the group's relations, situation, experiences: the crystallisation in an expressive form, which then defines the group's public identity" (Jefferson et al. 56). They continue:

> The symbolic aspects cannot, then, be separated from the structure, experiences, activities, and outlook of the groups as social formations. Subcultural style is based on the infrastructure of group relations, activities and contexts (56).

Expressive culture, as a subversion of dominant culture's hegemonic norms and sanctions, can be a highly effective means for group negotiation of a dislocated social space. Scholarly treatments of black cultural resistance and the sociohistorical context from which it manifests are well-developed (Majors and Billson, 1992; Dyson, 1993; Kochman 1972; Kelley, 1992; Gay 1987). Robin D.G. Kelley (1992), in his historical discussion of black expropriation of mainstream clothing styles, emphasizes the body as site of representation and resistance, where "clothes constitut[e] signifiers of identity and status" (1992, 163). hooks (1989) cites the multiplicity of black aesthetic forms which are enlisted in acts of "cultural intervention."

Perhaps the most radical treatment of black expressive culture and modes of resistance has been cultural critic Manthia Diawara's development of a "homeboy cosmopolitanism" (Diawara 1994)[2]. For Diawara, hyper-consumption of mass-produced fashion products, stylistic overdetermination of the public self, and the affectation of a "hard", defiant outward demeanor

are foundational to the urban black aesthetic and are themselves a special form of social and symbolic resistance which disturb conventional notions of the "place" or "role" of the black male subject. Full, even radical *over*-participation in mass commodity consumption is viewed here as an active inversion of a hegemonic capitalist edifice which has historically excluded and exploited black subjects. The clean and tidy surface appearance embodied in the black appropriation and re-inscription of widely available mass-cultural commodities becomes a symbolic act of resistance as the articles' meanings are re-evoked on the black urban body. Diawara's homeboy cosmopolitanism, then, is confrontational, interventional, and activistic *ipso facto*. But this is an extreme treatment and elides the many concrete problems of institutional access and participation for black youth in American society. To simply celebrate as activistic and interventional this form of radical consumerism by the disempowered without some sustained critique of structure and socio-historical emergence is highly problematic. Diawara's construction does however retain utility for discussions of meaningful acts of expression at the level of the body.

Cultural resistance can borrow from a large repertoire of symbolic strategies: a particular fashion ensemble (Hebdige 1979), an expressive form of presenting oneself in public space (Cooke 1972), or the use of exclusionary, in-group gestures or vernacular styles (see Kochman, ed., 1972; 1981). In place of creating identities and meaning through participation in mainstream institutional process, from which they have been largely excluded and denied, subaltern groups utilize immediately available forms of opposition--the vernacular, the body, the gesture, etc.--as sources for expression or what Eco (1986) might term "semiotic guerilla

warfare." How then do these forces emerge in the context of pickup basketball?

Basketball and the Black Metaperformance

Basketball has become a central site for black cultural production. The prominence of basketball in any number of specifically black cultural spheres has emerged in concert with the late-1980s resurgence in the sport's national popularity and the broader social and cultural transformations of this period. The unprecedented, explosive growth in average salaries and public visibility for elite basketball's mostly black participants[3], the mass culture industry's aggressive marketing strategies which both target and represent urban black youth through the circulation and exploitation of "street" and "playground" aesthetic images, and the strong symbolic and participatory identification with the sport by black youth have had the effect of enhancing the already uniquely black symbology which characterizes the game. The sport is now firmly embodied in a sort of transcendent black cultural aesthetic which synthesizes music, fashion, youth culture, and urban style[4]. Basketball then represents a multifarious source for African-American males (in particular) to have affirmed notions of self and identity and to clear for themselves a space for expression and positive being.

Finally, it is in terms of actual play and approach to the game and playing space, where I argue that particular black cultural styles are evident and meaningful. Basketball should be grouped, along with music and dance, among what Matthew Brown (1994) has identified as "black expressive culture's privileged aesthetic modes . . . [which] are syncretic, non-representational, often non-verbal [and] articulate their protest at

levels beyond that of literal content" (486). The black stylistic form in basketball--where emphasis is placed on individual expression, intragame contests, self-conscious and at times ironical presentation of a "cool" and stylized self, and orientation toward maintaining a strong, confident exterior image--gets articulated in a metaperformative modality. It is a self presentation that is mediated symbolically above, while also simultaneous with, the actual dynamics and flow of play and interaction which would comprise Goffman's primary "performance" (1959, 22). Here, the black player's "expressive equipment" is deployed both in the immediate space of the contest, performatively, but also in a way that attempts to transcend, metaperformatively, the expressional and functional conventions which frame traditional processes of play. It is this notion of metaperformance and its articulation across culture and social space that comprises the focus of attention for my study.

Method: The Writer as Player Ethnographer

Occurring in a social space which functions according to a highly refined, context-specific, and often non-verbal communication system, pickup basketball prohibits or problematizes certain field research conventions. Particularly, forms of direct verbal engagement or explicit elicitation of information from participants risk transgressing the widely accepted norms and expectations of this cultural space.

The flow of primary events and action, the selection of teams or the jurisdiction of rules for instance, occurs in highly sophisticated but often non-verbal and tacit manner. These primary codes of conduct then comprise the foundation upon which the flows of interaction, of play, take place.

In this sense the "rules of the game," those codes of communication and understanding, the main foci of ethnographic inquiry, are unspoken, implied, and presupposed. And paradoxically, the level at which this communicative system operates, discourages certain explicit verbal interventions. Certain typical forms of verbal interaction can be perceived as disruptive or worse reveal the naivety or inexperience of the transgressor. The consequences of such noncompliance to these norms is not insignificant. As will be demonstrated later, the means by which individuals present themselves as competent, talented, and desirable is paramount to successful participation in pickup basketball culture. For someone to be "out of the know" could significantly weaken the status which is derived through public mediation, not to mention the likely threat to actual playing time.

Research strategies for understanding the underlying principles which organized social interactions and flow of activity had to account for

the heightened non-verbal quality of the environment. Thus, a large portion of the data necessarily consists of direct non-verbal, or not explicitly or disruptively verbal, participant observation with a high degree of attention attuned to the space's visual, emotive, expressive, and physical dynamics. A strategy of this type obviously increases the already present problematics of ethnography involving authorship, interpretability, ascription of meaning, and representation of others (see Clifford and Marcus 1986). In light of this, perhaps the most effective means for negotiating these methodological snares is to simply concede that the subject position from which my observations are made is an interested, political, and partial one.

Over a six-month period I was a frequent participant, as player, observer, and casual social interlocutor, at an indoor recreation facility at a large midwestern university. This newly-constructed intramural facility (herein referred to as IM) housed two large arenas in which each was located two college-regulation basketball courts (see figure 11.1 below). Two courts in particular, those in arena II and furthest from the main entrance, here referred to as courts C and D, were consistently the site of peak use by participants over the course of my research. It was here that the major portion of my observations were conducted.

I conducted observations with a frequency of once to as many as four times a week. During weekdays I played and observed in the evenings, generally from about 6:00-8:00pm. On weekend days I usually attended the IM in the early afternoon. Over the course of my research, these time slots revealed both the highest frequency of participation and the highest standard of competition in my judgement. Weekend games, in particular, were highly competitive and included large pools of participants.

My technique for obtaining data usually consisted of direct

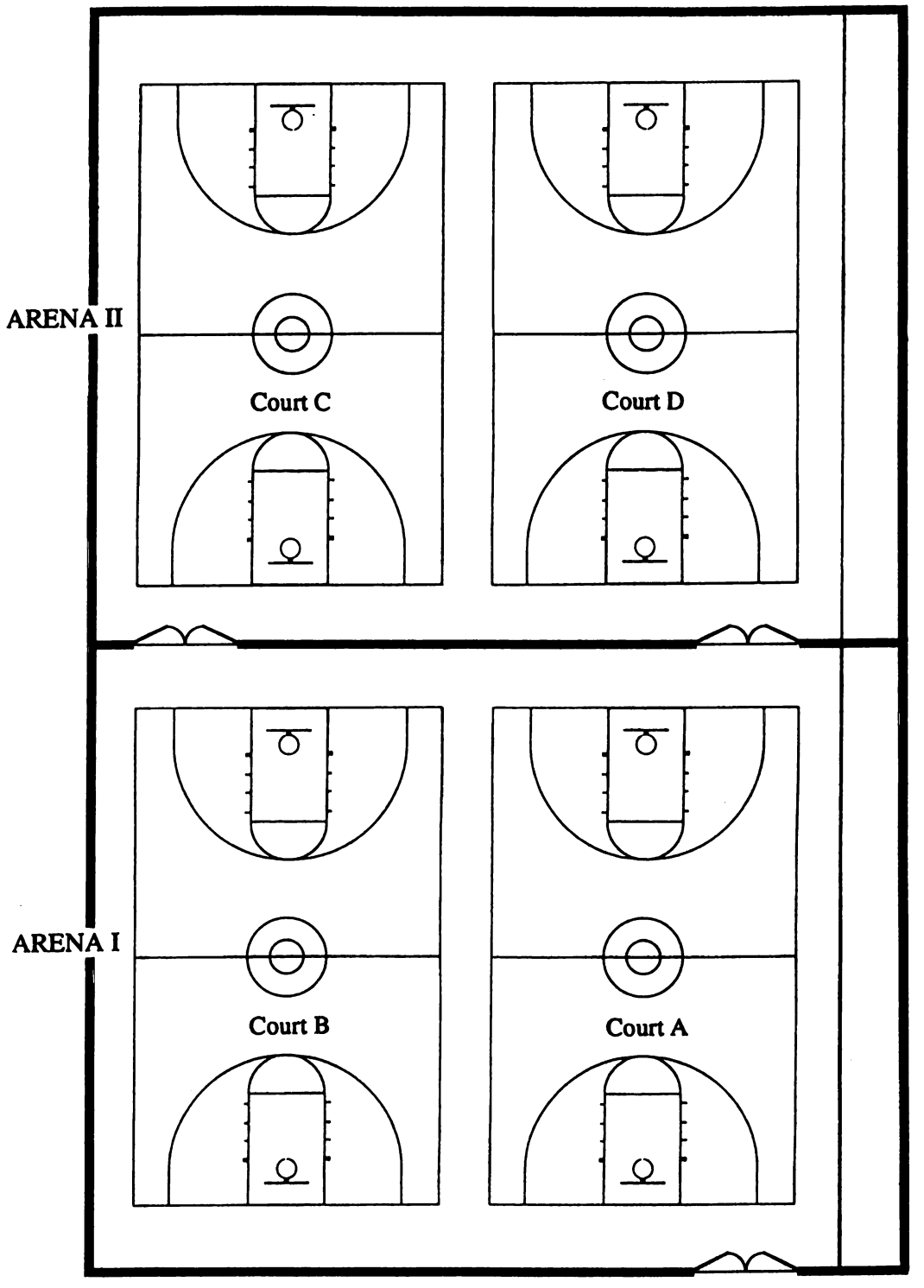

Figure I
IM Facility--General Floorplan

observations from some location in the arena. I often joined other IM participants along the east wall of courts C or D and observed play with them as they waited for their opportunity to participate. This provided opportunities to engage other players in casual social encounters and from a location within earshot of the general courtside action. At other times I sat alone in some removed area and simply watched games and action on the sidelines.

I would usually arrive at the IM wearing appropriate playing attire and fully prepared to participate in games. This enabled me to maintain a certain undisturbing presence when conducting observations. Wearing playing clothes also allowed me to alternate my locations of observation. As was often the case I would observe from the sidelines for a portion of the evening and play for another. In this way, I was able to more fully integrate into the social processes of this space than had I simply observed from the sidelines in street clothes.

Extensive fieldnotes were recorded immediately following observation periods. Notes were never recorded on site. In those instances when I was unable to fully record my observations immediately following an encounter, general notes and key events were recorded and full elaboration was conducted later. Included in my fieldnotes were diagrams, transcribed verbal exchanges, typologies of style and approach, in-depth descriptive passages, and relevant commentaries and analyses.

Use of the general IM facility was open only to students, faculty, and employees of the University. Entry was highly monitored and display of official university identification cards was required. From this, we can assume that a very high majority, if not all of the participants, the majority of whom were students, were members of the local university community.

Over time, a loose aggregate of about 20-30 "regulars" became identifiable as a core group of participants.

Six months of intensive exposure is perhaps a relatively brief span of time for establishing some sense of the intricate structures which govern play and interaction. Here it should be useful to illuminate some features of my own biography that help situate me as a participant and researcher.

I have been an active participant in the broad realm of basketball from player, to coach, to fan during a large part of my life. As an NCAA basketball scholarship athlete I competed at both the Division I and Division II levels as a college student. Following graduation I played basketball professionally in an Australian state league. This long, active involvement with the sport has no doubt equipped me with particular "common-sensical" or habituated understandings of basketball culture writ large. I thus bring to this research some a priori knowledge and expectations, what Anselm Strauss (1987) describes as "experiential data," which may not be available to a distanced or uninitiated "outsider." Likewise, my analyses will be shaped by my personal proximity to the environment, both my access to and presuppositions of this particular milieu, as well as the features deemed noteworthy during the course of observation.

Midway through the six-month period I also conducted some in-depth interviews utilizing a photo-elicitation technique to learn about participants background, familiarity, and understanding of pickup basketball. This was achieved by presenting informants with a series of black and white photos of various pickup basketball scenarios and eliciting from them in an a very open-ended manner their comments and descriptions of the information in the pictures. With the pictures, which were selected from Wielgus and

Wolf's (1986) excellent treatment of pickup basketball culture, I attempted to represent a range of player characteristics and game settings (race, age, skill level; indoor/outdoor, geographic location, racial composition, half/full-court, etc.) and particular game situations (various depictions of offensive/defensive moves, fouls, negotiations over calls, etc.). Photo-elicitation interviews provided the opportunity to generate open verbal responses from participants which were otherwise made difficult due to the aforementioned communicative dynamics of the IM space.

Race, Court Selection, and Style of Play

A discussion of race in terms of the social ecology of IM is an important entry point and should establish a general conceptual map of the milieu under study. Although the observed patterns of racial congregating is centrally important to an analysis of the pickup basketball culture, I only want to outline some general features with the hope that explanatory accounts may emerge later in the discussions concerning style, approach, orientation, sociality, etc. That is, I do not want to simply emphasize racial division without contextualizing the various forces that may produce it.

Very early in the observation process, there emerged a dynamic of what I will term "racial selection" on courts C and court D. In an very high majority of instances, court C was predominated by white players while court D with black. Though these demarcations were by no means rigidly bound or immutable, often times there were one or two participants in the racial minority on each of the courts, this general distinction nevertheless maintained throughout the course of my participation at the IM facility. Notwithstanding the aberrant circumstances--a broken rim on one court, volleyball nets requiring the use of other courts, one "integrated" court when the potential pool of participants was too low to utilize both courts--a discernable pattern was in place.

Insofar as these racial divisions were readily discernable superficially, the forces which underlied the patterns were difficult to identify. Were players somehow cognizant of the racialization of courts and thus consciously basing there decisions to play on one or the other court in light of this information? Was the perceived selection imposed by the actions or influence of one or the other or both of the groups? If segregation was not imposed or consciously conceded, what non-verbal information was being

passed along to dictate this visible division? Was the perceived racial grouping the spurious result of something other than race--skill or style of play for example?

It would appear that racial selection by court probably was the effect of a number of these issues working in concert. As was often the case, I would observe white players enter the arena through the main doorway (located off of court D; there was another doorway off of C but its use was limited due to its inconvenient location within the general traffic schema of the facility) and with little or no pause or hesitation proceed along the baseline of D toward C. Alternately, black players upon arrival would often wait, standing, in or by the doorway and observe the action on and around court D.

There would thus seem to be a voluntary or tacit system of selection at work here. I was never aware of hostile or exclusive action on the part of either white or black participants and numerous instances of integrated games and what could be perceived as semi-fluid boundaries between the courts would indicate that there were no explicit modes of channelling court participation by race. Indeed, the initial games in the early evening at IM were usually comprised of all available participants, regardless of race or court affinity.

Nevertheless, when asked of their perceptions of the social dynamics of the IM people were very quick to point out that indeed, in the words of one white woman with whom I spoke, "that court [C] is white and that one [D] is African-American." Other comments by IM participants provide further insight about racial selection:

> "It's too run and gun over there" (a comment made by a white male to another white male who asked to participate in a game on D).

> "The pace [on D] is definitely faster, you want to warm up here [C] first before trying to get in games over there [D]" (from a white male whom I briefly interviewed).
>
> "Let's wait for a game here [D], it's too slowed down over there [C]" (a comment made by a newly arrived black male player to his black male friend).

These comments tend to explain racial selection in terms of style of play. Court D, for both black and white observers, appears to be characterized by a faster, uptempo pace. Play on court C on the other hand is slower and apparently perceived by some as more oriented toward team participation over individualistic or "run and gun" styles.

To fully understand this dynamic of self-selection one would have to explore the more fundamental play of black-white relations on this campus, the social interaction tendencies of the student body in general, and perceived experiences of racism, racialism (awareness of racial elements in a particular social instance), and intergroup relations. One might conjecture that the IM dynamics closely mirror the patterns of the campus at large and are perhaps mediated by identical codes and norms.

The decision to play on one or the other court may also reflect a difference in intensity and orientation toward competitiveness, vocal expressiveness, and general sociality. As will be discussed in the analysis, the level of contention over calls and the degree of verbal exchanges--jawing, boasting, mocking--was in general higher on court D. What may be perceived by some players as playful, good-spirited banter may be interpreted by others as aggressive and threatening (Kochman 1981). This may also help explain why some white participants, who are perhaps not equipped or sympathetic to an interactional style which requires a higher intensity of contestatory self-representation, would be turned off by what may appear to them to be inordinate contestation of calls which in turn

creates more frequent stalls in play.

Perhaps some insight into racial selection dynamics can be revealed obliquely in the analysis of other features of the IM culture which may shape perceived racial divisions. What follows is an extended discussion of cultural style and differing orientations to the game and social space which were revealed in during the course of my research.

FINDINGS

There was much evidence to suggest that particular styles, orientations, and approaches to playing, observing, and negotiating the public space differed over race. These differences were revealed in various forms that included playing style and the tendency to engage in what I have termed a metaperformance of play among many black players, the degree of verbal interaction among players during games, and differences in presentation and awareness of self in a public realm. Isolation of these differences should be perceived in terms of typological constructs. They are not intended to be universal or immutable instances. Particular features of each of these forms and how they were revealed during the course of investigation at the IM are discussed below.

The Basketball Aesthetic and Metaperformance

What I have termed the metaperformance is enacted through the use of a rich catalog of what Goffman terms "expressive equipment" to evince in others the recognition that you are talented, skilled, suitably "hard", and worthy of respect. Goffman (1959) writes that

> [w]hile in the presence of others, the individual typically infuses his activity with signs which dramatically highlight and portray confirmatory facts that might otherwise remain unapparent or obscure. For if the individual's activity is to become significant to others, he must mobilize his activity so that it will express *during the interaction* what he wishes to convey (30).

The projection of confidence and self-revelation of perhaps otherwise unrecognized clues becomes a mediating force in establishing yourself as a player attractive to others. At the IM, any number of strategies were enlisted to elicit this symbolic recognition of status in others. Playing apparel, from the type of shoe to the cut and style of shorts to legitimating

"insider" basketball references on t-shirts, seemed to be highly prioritized by many participants as vehicles for establishing and suggesting competence. Warm-up and informal shooting styles also revealed self-conscious orientation to indicating to others that "one's got skills."

For many African American participants pregame shooting sessions were approached with a casualness and partial disengagement, where the stylization of shooting and dribbling form was privileged over some concerted effort at *game* preparation. I witnessed, for instance, numerous players who were highly proficient at performing manuevres such as delivering the ball between the legs on a dribble and retrieving it with the same delivering hand; an impressive, stylistic move but one that is perhaps superfluous and potentially risky in a game situation. White players, on the other hand, often appeared to be more focused on literally "warming up"--loosening muscles, practicing particular shots and correcting for perceived flaws in technique, etc.

This finding is supported by Carlston (1983)who writes:

> The inner city player is more likely to try to keep his composure ("cool") and self-confidence prior to games, viewing the game itself as a contest between players. There is less emphasis on "psyching up" or "concentrating" intensely . . . [and] inner-city players often view individual shooting practice as irrelevant to game situations, and thus a waste of time (47).

For black players to place more emphasis on the form and aesthetics of the shoot around where white players view it in terms of an inward moment for game preparation perhaps reflects both the elevation of expressive and emotive style within black culture and a heightened urgency to establish and maintain "respect" through appearances in black urban social spaces. Looking good is paramount, and a necessary concomitant, to *being* good.

A strong surface presentation indicative of skill is only partially

determinant in convincing others of one's authenticity and ability; the player must also deliver in terms of actual performance. The most persuasive aesthetic presentation is the one that is supported, indeed amplified, by good play. And much is at stake in negotiating one's presentation, as expressed by Kochman (1981):

> [w]hen stylistic expression is not accompanied by a successful execution, the result is humiliating, because the audience regards the performer as having laid claim to a greater expertise than he can demonstrate. . . . 'everything must come together' (139).

A dialectic of sorts emerges where players must mediate through self-reflection their perceived ability in purely skill terms vis-a-vis a presentation of self that is congruous with that range of skill. A highly talented player, the determination of which itself is dictated in context, has a wider plane on which to project their image of being talented and can even take "risks" or overtly display arrogance knowing that a general level of respect has been established upon which his actions, even if momentarily unconvincing, are judged and respected. Likewise, a highly skilled player may feel less pressure to present himself in a particularly overdetermined or self-conscious manner, instead basing his presentation on a deeper confidence and assuredness of ability.

This is presentation-skill dialectic was clearly evident at IM as players "announced" themselves in highly stylized and self-consciously assembled outfits while correspondingly exhibiting a wide range of actual basketball talent. In an attempt to provide a general framework of styles I include below two excerpts from my field notes which describe two players, one black (referred to here as William) and one white (Daniel), who were frequent participants at IM. In a sense, we might view their particular style and approach as typological constructs of prominent actors in this

social space.

William:

William's outfit was pristine--white-with-white-stripes classic hi-top Nike Air Force shoes, mid-shin level white socks consciously tucked under to appear double thick, bright white Champion brand shorts that draped to just above the knees, with two inches of green and white boxer short exposed at the top. He wore a black t-shirt, which he removed when he played, with a picture of a gold Sphinx on the front. Three inches of white plastic straw dangled out of his mouth (he played the first three points with this still in his mouth!). . . .

William was a talented player. But maybe more than highly-skilled or physically-gifted, William *looked* good. His playing style was smooth and crafty; he had a lot of "moves." He did not seem to engage in any small talk or banter and instead smiled to register notable plays or mistakes both by him and on his behalf. He was confident then, but in a passive or self-assured sense. When arguments over calls between other players erupted he only observed quietly. William seemed very well respected as both player and as a general presence among his peers.

Daniel:

Daniel was an older player, perhaps a graduate student, probably in his late twenties or early thirties. He wore a pair of well-worn, black Nike mid-cuts with thick double-paired socks pushed down around his lower shins.

Daniel dominated the play on court C tonight. At approximately 6-3 he is of above average height for the IM and is a very skilled shooter and aggressive rebounder. What most struck me about Daniel's style was his over-determined seriousness toward competition. I had the sense that playing well (without mistakes, aggressively, "fundamentally sound") and winning was of crucial importance for Daniel. That is not to say that my experience in observing at any other time has lead me to view "winning" as a secondary virtue for other players, but rather he took a very serious approach to the final score.

Two rather distinct approaches to and presences within the game are revealed here. Both players are "good" but the criteria for establishing each player's particular ability is different within the context of play (William on the predominantly black court D, Daniel on mostly white C). William's

overall aesthetic presence was cool and assured where Daniel possessed a style which appeared to be much less concerned with outward appearances, one where "expressive equipment" was used to communicate seriousness and competitiveness.

Interestingly, these two players' abilities might be read differently if they were to have switched contexts. On court C, William may have appeared aloof, self-centered, and less committed to winning than making the spectacular play. Daniel may be perceived humorously by court D participants who feel he has no grasp of the appropriate level of engagement. Not that playing hard is in itself disregarded for D players but rather Daniel might be viewed as having no sense of the game's levity, no irony. According to Kochman:

> Whites view competitive sports exclusively in terms of winning and losing. Blacks view competing in sports in terms of dominating the field, being the best, and performing in a show (148).

Although Kochman has perhaps over-simplified this distinction in orientations, the point is made. For black players the realm of pickup basketball provides a locus for competitive play, but also offers a metaperformative space where a range of expressive and stylistic codes are displayed and mediated.

Finally, brief attention must be given to an IM regular, whom will be referred to here as Shane, whose exceptional status served in an ironical sense to confirm the black-white stylistic typologies. Shane was a white player who usually played on the predominantly black court D. I continue with an excerpt from my field notes:

> At approximately 6-6, [Shane] is not only the most talented player in purely skill and athletic terms on the court at any moment, but he performs in a highly stylized, smooth, and expressive manner. At one point, I was observing play from

> the east sideline along court D when he made an offensive move toward the basket and, heavily guarded, successfully executed a difficult and athletic reverse lay-up. The response of the black observers on the sideline was a kind of exaggerated display of awe--"NOOO!"; "Tell me he didn't just hit that", etc. One regular exclaimed, "he's *so* city!!"

"He's so city!" says much about the nature of race, culture, and playing style in pickup basketball. By identifying a white player's style as "city" this comment serves to conflate racial and cultural metaphors. "City" takes on a racialized meaning which evokes a particular catalog of styles and behavior specific to urban black culture. But by acknowledging and affirming the presence of city (black) style in a white player, notions of racio-biological essence are removed leaving only cultural-environmental forces, the lifeworld of the city, to explain black-white differences in playing style and ability. It is also significant to note that much of Shane's high status, among both black and white players, was derived from his particular playing style. That this style was "urban" reflects perhaps a general orientation within basketball culture that privileges urban black expressive aesthetic forms over others.

Verbal Styles

Observations at the IM revealed that orientations toward vocal expression and interactional styles in the pickup basketball space differed perceptibly by racial-cultural group. In most instances the degree, frequency, and intensity of verbal participation was greater among black participants. It was often the greatest when the contest was most homogenous by race (in all black settings). This finding clearly resonates with the body of research which identifies the emphasis on oral practice and verbal countenancing of self or "signifying" in black culture (Gates 1988; Gay and Faber 1987; Kochman 1981).

As indicated above, pickup basketball culture is mediated through a highly ritualized, often nonverbal system of communication where "sound is displaced by vision and words are generally second to gestures" (Gilroy 1994, 56). Those actions which are fundamental to flow and process of play--the negotiation and coordination of moving bodies in physical space, the many reflexive, intuitive, and kinetic elements of sport--rely heavily, if not entirely, on phenomenologically-derived perceptions rather than explicit verbal utterances. Even those social negotiations which are ancillary to actual play, choosing sides or negotiating the social norms of the cultural milieu for instance, contain a primary nonverbal element which generates from tacit knowledge. The use of and motivation for explicit verbal expressions in this space are often secondary and thus provide significant instances of varied speech and expressive practices by culture.

Within the context of play, and it is important to note that the "context" at IM extended far beyond a court's four sidelines to include nonplaying bystanders and various environmental elements, use and type of verbal expression was varied. Practical verbal interactions, the process of calling a foul or inquiries about who had "next" game, were widespread, even if secondary to the unspoken negotiations. But it was the more "gratuitous" types of verbal expression--taunting, hounding, signifying, celebrating, announcing, riffing, denouncing--which revealed the most about cultural style.

We might name the general catalog of verbal styles in the pickup context by referring to the oft-used term, "talking trash."[5] These pronouncements include an variety of verbal or expressional tactics which serve to boost, celebrate, or affirm one's own play or to denounce, embarrass, or humiliate an opponent. Use of expressive verbal tactics is

often closely linked to particular moments during play which result in a player being "shown up" or "faced" by another (see below). Two general types of "trash talk" may be roughly distinguished by identifying the subject for whom the statement is intended. For the purposes of discussion, I will term these two types outward gestures and inward gestures.

Outward gestures can be characterized as those verbal pronouncements which are explicitly targeted at another player. Here we identify the range of common verbal sparring techniques and "taunting" rituals: "You can't hold me!"; "You're game is weak!"; "Oooh, you just got dunked on!"; etc. The intent of the outward gesture is to call attention to a player's (usually opposing) weaknesses and thus demean or denounce. In turn this gesture also serves, implicitly, to elevate the status and performance of the player doing the talking. Outward gestures can vary widely in degree of intent (from playful to ironic to malicious) and degree of reception or effectiveness (ignored, flustering, enraging, or entertaining).

An interesting instance of an outward gesture occurred during a game on court D between a team of three African-Americans and two white players (team A) and a team of four African-American players and one white (team B). During the course of play a black player from team A scored a high percentage of his team's points against the concerted defensive efforts of a black player from B. Three of his successful shots were long jumpshots from three-point range[6]. Upon making the third three pointer he exclaimed with his back turned to his defender and in the general direction of other players, "Who's gonna guard me?!" The players registered his comment with smiles and giggles. Although he did not explicitly engage his defender, his comment served indirectly to single out the defender's inadequate performance. The comment had the quality of an

outward gesture in that it was targeted at the ability of a particular player, but rather than addressing his defender directly, he "called him out" by commenting on his weak play to everyone *but* him. By ignoring his very presence the offensive player's gesture could be perceived as even further denouncing the status of the defender.

The inward gesture is characterized by self-referential exclamations. Boasts and "signifying" are examples of this practice. Statements such as "I've got mad handles" [a claim that one is a talented ball-handler] or uttering "butter" just prior to releasing a shot as a confident prediction of its success, indicate forms of announcing one's positive status in public space. The inward gesture serves as a form of self-enhancement where verbal commentary accompanies one's physical performance in projecting the complete image of talent. In elevating the status of the speaker they may also function to weaken, indirectly, the status or image of opposing players. Ceola Ross Baber (1987) writes that the function of the signifying act is to "talk about, put on, put down, or 'sound on' through *innuendo and implication*" (emphasis added). Inward gestures, at once, serve to promote and enhance one's "on-stage" status while undermining this public presence in others.

The expression of inward gestures was widespread at IM. During one evening game on court D, a particularly vocal black participant made a series of notable plays. At one point he drove to the basket under heavy defensive pressure and made a lay-up over a much taller defender. He then jogged back down the court toward his defensive end with his arms dangling by his side, head tilted back, yelling "RESPECT MY GAME!!, *RESPECT* MY GAME!!"

This act was a self-initiated comment on his own performance.

Aware that he had accomplished a meritable move in the game, he verbally recognized the action and used it as a means of self-affirmation. Whether or not his performance actually was "respected" seemed to have less relevance than the moment of boasting that it provided. Demanding "respect" in this instance seem to serve as a comment on this player's ongoing performance: "I am talented, I am performing well, and the verbal demand of respect will help you become aware of this."

Discussions of taunting and the decline in "sportsmanship" in popular sport have recently become salient in public discourse (see for instance Albom 1993). The terms of discussion often reveal implicit racial biases which demonize certain group (black) practices--"passionate celebratory acts" or "excessive verbal provocation." It is thus extremely important to identify and locate certain forms of oral expressive behavior as uniquely black cultural practices. Baber asserts that

> Whether it is used to make a profound point or it is a harmless exercise in humor, signifying serves a socializing function in the Black cultural community. It trains Afro-Americans in the art and practice of street talk; it helps them to develop an endurance for and resistance to insult and thereby assists in preparing them for life's more serious insults and harassments, sharpening their wits and cultivating their sense of humor as survival strategies (1987, 97).

The importance of cultural forms as modes of resistance are clearly articulated here. Differences in use of and response to expressive gestures are revealed at the particular site of African American sociohistorical experience. My experiences at the IM suggest that the range of expressive communicative forms--used as strategies to announce, denounce, celebrate, signify, or intimidate--were forms most deployed , appreciated, affirmed, and initiated by black participants. Recognizing these as practices which emerge from black cultural orientations, one must immediately question the

racial and ideological motivations which underlie current discussions. The furor over taunting or spectacularity is perhaps less a matter of the decline in "sportsmanship" due to the cultural conventions of many black participants than it is the perceived threat to the conventions or sensibilities of the many mainstream white observers.

The "Face" and Impression Management

A significant feature of the pickup basketball culture at IM was the heightened self-awareness among participants of the public feature of their performances. This awareness was evident in the many efforts made by players to avoid what Goffman terms "performance disruptions" (1959, 208) and maintain a positive, respected personal front. The act of impression management, again articulated by Goffman, where individuals seek to assert their capabilities and assets while avoiding or reducing attention to deficiencies, becomes especially difficult in the context of an activity in which human error is inherent. Basketball as dynamic human process is predicated on mistakes, the defensive lapse, the unforced dribbling error, the missed lay-up, fouls, turnovers, etc. And although imperfection in athletic performance is expected to a degree by observers and participants, the task of maintaining an adequate self-impression remains a continual source of preoccupation.

There seemed to be a general sense among IM players that certain unforced errors, missed shots or mishandled passes for instance, were common and thus unremarkable. It was rather the ubiquitous threat of being "faced" by the actions of another player that was the central force motivating impression management. In pickup basketball lexicon, the "face" might be defined as "[t]hat intangible at stake in any man-to-man

playground encounter that makes even single plays memorable" (Wielgus and Wolff, 1986, 222). A "facial" might take place in a variety situations. It usually occurs when a player is made to look awkward, inadequate, silly, or weak as a result of an opposing players performance. Having one's shot blocked, having a dribble stolen, being faked out on defense, having a difficult shot executed against one's defensive effort all are potential sources for "getting served" or being "faced." The ultimate act of degradation, that which player's may speak about long after the fact, is to be "dunked on" by an offensive player.[7] In the often masculine-identified arena of sport, the person that gets dunked on experiences a sort of temporary emasculation where a symbolic discrediting of their worth is achieved.

The severity of any discrediting "face" is highly determined by contextual factors external to the specific act. Two examples here will be illustrative of the interaction of context and event in constructing significant acts of being "faced."

Late on a weekday evening, I observed a game on court C between two teams composed of players of generally average to below-average skill levels, both black and white. It was apparently the final game of what had perhaps been numerous others and the players were obviously fatigued, lacking sharpness, and generally unserious. There was nevertheless a casual and playful atmosphere about the game and players were openly riffing on each other's performances. A continuous exchange of banter occurred as the game progressed. At one point a white player who had been quiet through the course of play made a long jumpshot over his black defender who had been a particularly active participant in the many verbal exchanges. Registering the general atmosphere of playful interaction, the player exclaimed "All Net!" to his defender. Everyone, including the player,

laughed at this. There was a sense that he had "faced" his defender by successfully making a long shot under close defense, but the general mood of the game and the incongruity of the claim with the demeanor of the quiet player made the exchange humorous rather than demeaning or self-aggrandizing.

A second instance reveals the central role of context in determining the significance of being "faced." Weekend early afternoons at IM were usually crowded and produced especially competitive games on all courts. I observed a Saturday afternoon game on court D between an all-African-American team (team A) and a team comprised of three African-American and two white players (team B). There were approximately 15-20 players all African-American observing play from the sidelines of D.

The game was close and at one point featured a series of plays which elicited excitement from players and bystanders, including two long jumpshots made consecutively by a player from team A, and a dunk by player from B. As each of these plays occurred, the level of excitement increased, as evidenced by the heightened attention paid by observers and the increased amount of verbal expression accompanying plays.

A loose ball was recovered by a player from team A on his defensive end who then broke away for an uncontested layup at the other end. Seemingly unaware that a defensive player was pursuing him, the offensive player casually shot a lay-up. Instantly, his shot was forcefully "pinned" or blocked against the backboard by the trailing defender making the ball careen back toward one side of the half-court and then out of bounds. The response of the players and observers was immediate and dramatic. Many bystanders commented with "oohs," stifled giggles or similar responses suggesting that they were acknowledging both the skilled play of the

defender and the loss of face by the offensive player. The response of the defender who made the block appeared modest and non-emotive. He quietly turned back toward his offensive basket and waited for the ball to be retrieved so that play could resume. The response of the player whose shot had been blocked was much different. Immediately following the block he appeared shocked by the unexpected sequence of play. When players and bystanders began to comment he became defensive and said to no person in particular: "That ain't shit!" He then affected a demeanor which seemed to suggest that nothing extraordinary had just occurred. He avoided eye contact, appeared narrowly focused on resuming play and firmly waited for the ball to be retrieved.

Goffman (1967) defines face as "the positive social value a person effectively claims for himself by the line others assume he has taken during a particular contact. . . . [it] is an image of self in terms of approved social attributes" (5). "Face-work" is the catalog of face-saving practices deployed in various social moments where social image is threatened (15). The player whose shot was forcefully blocked used a face-work maneuver which Goffman would identify as a defensive strategy. Instead of conceding that the skillfully blocked shot perhaps reflected a error on his part, he attempted to lighten the impact of the experience by claiming that in fact the blocked shot "wasn't shit." By then focusing all of his attention on resuming play and ignoring the comments and behavior of those around him, he further attempted to indicate to others that the act did not threaten his image.

The dynamic of "facing" showed significant degrees of value and meaning over context and by cultural milieu. That both avoidance and pursuit of the denigrating act was especially emphasized among many black

participants is highly significant. As a result of perpetually denied mainstream institutionally access, maintenance of status and respect in the public sphere exist as central priorities for many black urban males. Even the temporary and arbitrary "loss" of respect by being shown up in a pickup basketball game can create instances where black peer status is undermined, where the "face" might hold much less import for white participants.

CONCLUSION

In-depth participant observation at IM was a useful and informative project for furthering articulating some of perceived differences in style, approach, and orientation to pickup basketball. These differences were especially apparent in three areas of play: 1) playing style and performance, 2) verbal style, and 3) impression management and the "face."

The playing style of many African-American participants indicated an emphasis on the stylization and form of play, moves which were expressive and often individualistic, and the projection of a cool and competent self. Many white players on the other hand appeared less self-conscious of stylistic presentation and more focused on the dynamics of the event itself, playing hard and aggressively with great attention to outcome (win or loss).

My observations also revealed significant differences in verbal interaction practices. The amount expressive verbal behavior, in the form of what I have identified as outward and inward gestures, occurred with a much higher frequency among black participants.

The use and meaning of various techniques for impression management also appeared to differ by racial group and cultural context. Here, my experience at IM suggested that the very nature of being "faced"

in a public space can take on different degrees of import according to social group. Preoccupations with both "facing" and "being faced" generally appeared higher among African-American participants.

Finally, there was evidence to suggest that the "black" basketball aesthetic was the archetypal and privileged style for many participants of all races. But this racialized style must be understood as a dynamic cultural construct which emerges from a particular sociocultural nexus (the black urban community). Black style is thus not an immutable fact but rather a constellation of expressive codes and approaches to self-presentation which is deployed by a black subaltern to negotiate social spaces that have historically excluded, policed, and channelled their movement.

NOTES

1. At various historical moments, innate theories of racial difference have received widespread endorsement and attention from both the academic community and in mainstream public discourse. These theories are often presented from the "transparent" or "neutral" standpoint of positive Science. Stephen Jay Gould (1981) forcefully argues that biologically deterministic explanations for human difference have been hegemonic, with especially ubiquitous currency in times of general social crisis, for the past two centuries (21-29). These various theoretical and experimental enterprises, craniology, phrenology, eugenics, IQ analyses, etc., done in the progressive pursuit of scientific truth, have spawned and fueled the discourse of scientific racism. See Troy Duster, *Backdoor to Eugenics* (1990) for more discussion of this issue.

2. My discussion draws heavily from a paper presented by Diawara for the Center for Afroamerican and African Studies (CAAAS) lecture series, titled "Representing Gender in Black Popular Culture," at the University of Michigan, Ann Arbor on November 17, 1994. Some of these ideas are anticipated in Diawara, 1992.

3. Selected average National Basketball Association player salaries by season*

Year	Salary
1967-1968	$ 20,000
1979-1980	185,000
1984-1985	302,000
1988-1989	625,000

*Source: Coakley, 1990

Salary cap negotiations, intended to guarantee players a share of league revenues while limiting overall cost and preventing monopolies, have been ineffective in curtailing this precipitous growth. With the 1993-1994 team cap set at $15.1 million, average NBA salaries now hover around $1.25 million (Gorman and Calhoun, 1994, 157).

4. Black urban culture magazines such as *Vibe* or *The Source* frequently contain advertisements and articles about basketball players and culture. *Slam* (cf. March 1995) is a New York-based magazine devoted to the

treatment and celebration of basketball from what might be viewed as an urban insider's perspective. Issues include hiphop album reviews, urban fashion layouts, and other cultural items not specifically related to basketball.

5. A variety of terms exist refer to this act: "talking shit," "talking smack," "talking garbage," "dogging," "hounding," "chatter," etc. The very proliferation of terms suggests the salience of this verbal activity in pickup basketball culture.

6. In my experience at IM, three points were never awarded for shots made beyond the 19'9" arc which designates the three point shot in collegiate rules. Baskets made from beyond the arc were worth one point like all other shots. Players were nonetheless aware of the merit of the three-pointer. Made three point shots were often celebrated by using the official referees gesture: both arms extended straight above the head.

7. The dunk is a shot which is executed when a player elevates near the basket, raises the ball above the rim and then forcefully throws it through with one or both hands.

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