



Cam Newton and Russell Westbrook's Symbolic Resistance to Whiteness in the NFL and NBA

Linsay M. Cramer*

Department of Communication Studies, Indiana University East, Richmond, Indiana, USA

ABSTRACT

Using critical rhetorical analysis (McKerrow, 1989) as a method of analysis and critique, and informed by critical whiteness studies (Nakayama & Krizek, 1995) and Black feminist thought (Collins, 1991), this project argues that NFL North Carolina Panthers' quarterback Cam Newton and NBA Oklahoma City Thunder's point guard Russell Westbrook rhetorically perform an alternative Black masculinity that symbolically contests whiteness's surveillance of male bodies who occupy Black positionality in the NFL and NBA via their performance of cool pose (Majors & Billson, 1992). Focusing on news and sports media coverage in the 2015–2016 season, this project also interrogates whiteness's strategies to reconstitute Newton and Westbrook's expressions of cool pose by inscribing Black masculinity with belittling and dehumanizing controlling images that favor whiteness and White masculinity. This manuscript closes with a discussion of the harmful repercussions of whiteness's strategies in pro sports as well as the possibilities that athletes like Newton and Westbrook bring forth for social justice initiatives.

KEYTERMS

whiteness; Black Feminist Thought; Black masculinity; National Football League; National Basketball Association; surveillance

In 2016, National Football League (NFL) quarterback Colin Kaepernick exemplified how men's professional sport in the United States has the rhetorical power to both challenge and contribute to dominant racial and gender ideologies that maintain whiteness (Collins, 2004; Griffin & Calafell, 2011; hooks, 2004). In many cases, professional sport, including the two most popular sport leagues in the United States, the NFL and the National Basketball Association (NBA), has historically been a site in which racial and gender surveillance and dominance by White masculinity¹ are played out in ways that marginalizes individuals who do not occupy whiteness, including those who occupy Black masculine positionality,² despite claims of sport facilitating a “color-blind” or “postracial” space (De B'éri, & Hogarth, 2009; Enck-Wanzer, 2009; Flores, Ashcraft, & Marafiote, 2013; Grano, 2010, 2014; Griffin & Calafell, 2011; Oates, 2007; Oates & Durham, 2004). Within these leagues, individuals who resist such control are worthy of

CONTACT Linsay M. Cramer ✉ Lcramer@coastal.edu 📠 Department of Communication, Media, & Culture, Coastal Carolina University, 306 Brittain Hall, Conway, SC 29528, USA.

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*Present affiliation: Department of Communication, Media, & Culture, Coastal Carolina University, Conway, South Carolina, USA

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public and scholarly attention, as they de-center whiteness and bring forth civil approaches to contesting White racial control and advancing towards social justice. Although the strategies of Kaepernick are remarkable and worthy of public and scholarly attention, this article examines the civil and symbolic strategies of two other athletes with arguably more rhetorical power due to their popularity: NFL North Carolina Panthers' quarterback Cam Newton and NBA Oklahoma City Thunder's point guard Russell Westbrook. Through my analyses and critique of U.S. news media and popular sports media, I argue that Newton and Westbrook rhetorically perform an alternative Black masculinity that symbolically contests whiteness's surveillance (hooks, 2004) via their performance of cool pose (Majors & Billson, 1992).

For this specific study, I argue it is essential to interrogate rhetorical texts and performances that resist whiteness's racial and gender control over Black masculinity, as such rhetorics provide meaningful alternatives and hope for marginalized individuals (Phillips & Griffin, 2014) and contribute to the positive social reconstitution and redefinition of Black masculinity (Jackson, 2006). I aim to extend critical projects that specifically name and interrogate whiteness's rhetorical power and its intersection with masculinity within U.S. men's professional sport (e.g., Enck-Wanzer, 2009; Flores, Ashcraft, & Marafiotte, 2013; Grano, 2007, 2010; Griffin, 2012; Griffin & Phillips, 2014; Oates, 2007; Oates & Durham, 2004; Mocarski & Billings, 2014), by analyzing the ways in which NFL and NBA players rhetorically resist such White masculine control. This is especially significant considering the current political and cultural climate of the United States that vigorously defends postracial claims in favor of White masculinity at the detriment of Black masculinity. Because this project aims to identify and dismantle rhetorical practices that maintain whiteness and White masculinity, which extend beyond sport into political and social policies and practices, it aims to contribute to projects within critical intercultural communication, critical whiteness studies, and critical rhetorical analysis (McKerrow, 1989; Nakayama & Halualani, 2013; Nakayama & Krizek, 1995). Using a critical rhetorical approach, and informed by Black Feminist Thought (BFT) and critical whiteness studies, in the following, I argue that Newton and Westbrook's liberating performances offer an alternative expression of Black masculinity, a form of contestation to whiteness and White masculinity's control, through their corporeal expression of cool pose (Majors & Billson, 1992). Cool pose is a performance of individuality integral in Black culture, which is often expressed in sport through celebrating, dunking, dancing, spiking, and even trash talk (Simmons, 2003). Cool pose, therefore, functions as a strategy for men and women who occupy Black positionality to both cope with White domination and White patriarchy and resist it concurrently (Majors & Billson, 1992). In reaction to this, my analyses further reveal that by controlling common interpretations of Newton and Westbrook's resistance, whiteness rhetorics of the NFL and NBA, as well as sports media and fans, continue to inscribe controlling images of Black masculinity on Black male athletes to strategically further whiteness's racial power.

To come to this conclusion, I first explain BFT as a critical frame for this analysis within the context of men's U.S. professional sport. I then describe the NFL and NBA's policies and practices that surveil. Next, I argue that Newton and Westbrook offer an alternative Black masculinity as a form of contestation. Finally, I examine how

the NBA, NFL, and news and sports media and sports fans reconstitute Newton and Westbrook's expressions through a White lens, allowing for whiteness's racial power to be practiced and ultimately ideologically inscribed onto Black male bodies. My analyses close with a discussion of implications for Westbrook and Newton's resistance strategies.

Black Feminist Thought

Although BFT focuses particularly on how race, gender, and often socioeconomic status intersect to influence representations and oppressions of Black femininity, BFT also provides an illuminating framework for the analysis of Black masculine representations and oppressions, as much BFT literature discusses the plight of Black masculinity (Collins, 2004). BFT's framework provides a rich and essentially critical framework for reaching social justice initiatives for individuals who are marginalized by whiteness and White domination due to intersections of race and gender, including individuals who occupy Black masculinity. Specifically, because of its commitment to examining historical marginalizations and exposing harmful constructions and representations of racialized "Others" in popular culture, concepts principally developed and explored within BFT, including controlling images and surveillance, provide a critical framework for examining and understanding the ways in which whiteness works to dominate, discipline, and watch Black masculinity and inscribe the Black male body with negative and harmful constructions grounded in U.S. antebellum slavery.

Controlling images

Collins (2009) explains that individuals who occupy Black positionality have, since chattel slavery in the United States, been dominated by whiteness through narratives, constructions, or inscriptions that she calls "controlling images" (p. 72). Whiteness is a strategic rhetoric and a cultural location of racial privilege as a result of a historical legacy of White domination (Nakayama & Krizek, 1995). Controlling images, which are part of that rhetoric, since the antebellum period, have been a communicative strategy used by whiteness and White masculinity to justify such racial and gendered domination and oppression, and continue to be used today in a variety of cultural spaces, including professional sport (Calafell, 2015).

Jackson (2006) explains that the body is socially understood and treated as a discursive text that people continuously read. For men and women who occupy Black positionality, inscriptions have historically been expressed uniquely, resulting in men and women being read and treated differently (Collins, 2004). For men, the controlling image of the "Black buck" was constructed and inscribed on Black male bodies by slave owners who occupied White positionality to (inhumanely) associate men who occupied Black positionality with an animal captured from Africa who needed to be tamed (Jackson, 2006). hooks (2004) explains that men who occupy Black positionality in U.S. society today are still wrongfully seen as "animals, brutes, natural born rapists, and murderers" (p. xii), and are often constructed, again wrongfully, within a White dominated society as someone who should be feared (Calafell, 2015). These supposed

qualities associated with being animal- or even monster-like, and therefore, in need of control, while not always communicated explicitly, are now expressed in more covert ways since the civil rights movement to maintain White domination (Bonilla-Silva, 2014; Calafell, 2015; Collins, 2004; Griffin & Calafell, 2011). Jackson (2006) calls this process scripting and argues that Black corporeal inscription “is not just about stereotypes and negative images; it is about how the treatment of Black bodies as commodities has persisted for hundreds of years and continues today” (p. 12). He states, “Socially, the body facilitates the perpetuation of ascriptive devices used to assign meanings to ingroups and outgroups; it also serves to jog the personal memories of cultural interactants, to remind them visually of the constitutive discourses that provide form and structure to their social cognitions about racialized bodies” (p. 1). He then explains that these bodily inscriptions are infused with iterations of whiteness ideology personified as Black physical objects, which are complicated by the dialectic of control and desire. Therefore, in addition to these controlling images, athletes who occupy Black positionality have also been subject to a different form of control, surveillance.

Surveillance

Although historically marginalized individuals may no longer be excluded from certain institutions, like U.S. men’s professional sports, the terms of their inclusion, such as the rules and social contracts that regulate their participation, have grown in significance (Collins, 2009; Grano, 2014). Collins (2009) explained that surveillance occurs when groups with more power, such as those who occupy whiteness or White masculinity, have authority to watch those with less power, such as those who occupy Black masculinity. This form of surveillance manifests in ways that often appear as normal, natural, or common sense, rather than explicitly racist. In the NBA and NFL, surveillance takes on two specific forms, materializing itself in disciplinary policies constructed and enforced by the leagues, as well as expressing itself in fan responses and news and sports media coverage and representations of the athletes. In the NFL, such disciplinary policies include those outlined in the *NFL Rule Book* (National Football League, 2016).

NFL surveillance

Scholars like Cunningham (2009) argue that the NFL has adopted strict guidelines to suppress individual athlete engagement. Specifically, the NFL has enforced rules for appearance and sportsmanship, which although pertinent to all NFL athletes, are targeted toward athletes who occupy Black masculine positionality considering that 68.7% of athletes in the NFL (who are all men) identify as African American (Lapchick & Robinson, 2015). The targeting is evident in that these guidelines endeavor to counter many of the aspects athletes who occupy Black masculine positionality have brought to sports, including those of individual expression in appearance and celebration. These NFL rhetorical practices, such as the *NFL Rule Book*,³ as well as the strategic positioning and silencing of players during TV broadcasted games aim to “tame” Black masculinity for the consumption of an audience that predominantly occupies White masculine positionality. This works for the NFL to market and “sell” its star athletes to fans and

consumers in a “safe” way, a “Whiter” way. In addition to practices that do not allow for individual players’ faces or voices to be seen or heard during media broadcasted games, players cannot engage in “excessive” celebratory practices, as they are considered taunting (Rule 12 Article 3). According to the *Rule Book*, such behaviors include (but are not limited to), “Using baiting or taunting acts or words that engender ill will between teams” and “prolonged or excessive celebrations or demonstrations” (National Football League, 2016). These practices and policies that limit fans’ ability to see players’ faces, hear their voices, or see their individual bodily expressions of emotion, I argue, allow for NFL players’ humanity, which is expressed in their facial expressions, words, celebrations, or even uniqueness of shoes, to be omitted during televised games. Such omissions work as a tactic of surveillance to visually and audibly elide the humanity of players who occupy Black masculine positionality from an audience that predominantly occupies White masculine positionality. For the NBA, the NBA Dress Code (NBA Media Ventures, LLC, 2005), developed in 2006, similarly expresses such control over Black masculinity.

NBA surveillance

Similar to the NFL’s *Rule Book* and media coverage of televised NFL games, various scholars have found that the 2006 NBA Dress Code functions as a materialization of whiteness to practice surveillance of NBA players, thereby inscribing controlling images of Black masculinity onto Black male athletes (Cunningham, 2009; Griffin, 2012; Griffin & Calafell, 2011). This is noteworthy considering that 74.4% of players identify as Black (Lapchick & Guiao, 2015). The code, which was enforced in 2006 by former NBA Commissioner David Stern, was a strategic effort by the NBA to “clean up” its “bad boy” and “thug” image constructed in news and sports media after the “Malice at the Palace” brawl between Indiana Pacers players and Detroit Pistons fans in November of 2004 (Cunningham, 2009; Grano, 2007; Griffin & Calafell, 2011). Still in its initial form, the code states that players are “required to wear Business Casual attire whenever they are engaged in team or league business” (NBA Media Ventures, LLC, 2005, para. 1). *Business casual* refers to “long or short sleeved shirt (collared or turtleneck), and/or a sweater. Dress slacks, khaki pants, or dress jeans. Appropriate shoes and socks, including dress shoes, dress boots, or other presentable shoes, but not including sneakers, sandals, flip-flops, or workboots)” (para. 1). The code also states that players are prohibited from wearing headgear of any kind, chains, pendants, or medallions over their clothes, sunglasses while indoors, or headphones. In total, the code functions as a form of surveillance of Black masculinity as it functions to, like the NFL’s policies, ensure fans a “toned-down” and “safer” version of Black masculinity, one that has been Whitenized, and therefore, more easily commodified by the NBA and “consumed” by an audience that predominantly occupies whiteness (Cunningham, 2009; Grano, 2007; Griffin & Calafell, 2011). In light of NFL, NBA, and media surveillance, I argue that Newton and Westbrook contest whiteness’s control and surveillance by socially rewriting and reconstituting common misunderstandings of Black masculinity via expressions of cool pose.

NFL Cam Newton's resistance

Cam Newton is a record-breaking, 28-year-old quarterback who occupies Black masculine positionality. In addition to his game-time record-breaking success, he has established himself as a sport and pop culture icon due to his celebratory “dab” dance, Superman pose, and his use of the southern Black dance move called “hit dem folks,” among other game-time dance moves, that many fans have both embraced and criticized as forms of taunting. In addition, his rhetorical performances during postgame press conferences have garnered media and fan attention and criticism. Namely, his choice to wear a hoodie with the hood pulled over his head during a postgame interview after losing Super Bowl 50 in January 2016 functioned as a notable moment in Newton's career. Through a critical reading of Newton's game-time dances and press conference responses during the 2015-2016 season, these specific forms of expression reveal an alternative masculinity—a performance of resistance to the use of controlling images and surveillance by the NFL, its fans, and sports media.

Cunningham (2009) explains,

For Black athletes, sport is a form of entertainment, and the athlete the entertainer. Thus all of the theatricalities that black males bring to sport- the highlight reel dunks, the choreographed dance moves after scoring, the trash talk- are endemic of a Black sportsmanship aesthetic that emphasizes individuality and performance. (p. 49)

Majors and Billson (1992) described this expression as cool pose, or a construction of unique, expressive, and conspicuous style of demeanor, speech, dress, hair, walk, stance, and handshake. Cool pose is a performance of individualism inherent in Black culture, which is often articulated in sport through dancing, celebrating, dunking, spiking, and even trash talk (Simmons, 2003). Muhammad Ali, an exemplary figure of cool pose, was, for instance, commonly understood as “flamboyant, colorful, and extroverted to the extreme” (Farred, 2003, p. 31) because of his trash talk before and even during matches, and his proclamations of “I am the greatest!”. Cool pose, then, is a strategy of coolness and style that has developed through time as a way for individuals who occupy Black positionality, like Ali, to both cope with White domination and White patriarchy and contest it simultaneously (Majors & Billson, 1992).

In addition to expressiveness, part of cool pose requires a “restrained masculinity” of sorts (Majors & Billson, 1992, p. 4). This includes conforming to White masculine ideals for behavior, such as constructing the self as composed, controlled, stoic, emotionless, and unflinching (hooks, 2004; Majors & Billson, 1992; Trujillo, 1991). Such expectations for restraint worked and continue to work as survival strategies that originated during chattel slavery when slave owners occupying White positionality punished any nonverbal expression by slaves who occupied Black positionality. When individuals who occupied Black positionality and who were enslaved explicitly displayed emotion, they were often severely punished, therefore, they learned to use communicative strategies (i.e., those associated with whiteness) that would minimize or avoid punishment and harm (Majors & Billson, 1992). Majors and Billson (1992) explain, “Since the days of slavery, African-Americans have used coolness to express themselves without risking punishment. Playing it cool becomes a routinized, stylized method for expressing the aggressive masculinity that pervades black life” (p. 27). This legacy of control over emotional expression is evident today, as behaviors deemed as “civil” or even “moral,” and those

most likely to assist one in professional and social advancement, are those that are represented and commonly displayed by men who occupy White positionality (Grano, 2007, 2010; Khan, 2017). These include the practice of self-restraint, and a demeanor characterized as impersonal and dispassionate (Majors & Billson, 1992). Grano (2010) argues that players who do not conform to these standards are often disciplined by sports media discourse through characterizations as morally inept and “incomplete” in character. Therefore, similar to practices during chattel slavery, performances of cool pose, which work as both contestation and conformity, can occur simultaneously and contradictorily as survival strategies.

For Newton, his utilization of cool pose is found throughout his various game time and post-game time displays, which emphasize emotion, rather than restraint, and therefore, challenge expectations whiteness places upon men who occupy Black positionality. First, during the post-Super Bowl press conference in 2016, Newton’s choice to wear a hoodie with the hood over his head and partially covering his face was significant (Orr, 2016). A hoodie represents a garment and style associated with Black masculinity and hip-hop culture, making it an expression of his racial and cultural identification (Givhan, 2012). Furthermore, his emotional expression of grief, as evident in hiding his face, speaking in a low tone, and offering brief responses to media questions serve as a form of resistance to common strategies of Black masculinity that conform to White masculine standards of emotional suppression.

In addition, Newton’s infamous “dab” dance, among his other dance moves like the Superman pose, which he performed to celebrate touchdowns, border on the NFL’s definition of taunting. His dance moves have been used and modified by young men who occupy Black masculinity throughout the United States as a form of expression, as evident in the various YouTube videos posted by young men using the “dab” that have received millions of views (see Aspect Zavi, 2016). As such, his performance works to resist White masculine efforts to suppress Black masculine expression that are communicated in the *NFL Rule Book*. Majors and Billson (1992) explain, “Dancing is a form of nonverbal expression that exudes freedom, creativity, spontaneity, and improvisation. The so-called ‘rhythmic style’ in black culture is epitomized by dancing” (p. 75). Within this definition, dancing, like the dab, is understood as a positive expression of freedom and creativity. Considering that a restrained masculinity, one that is controlled and emotionless, are elements of cool pose that conform to whiteness, and are often used as a strategy for survival, Newton’s expression of emotions, whether sadness, anger, or joy, are expressions of resistance to whiteness’s control, and ones that challenge his “survival” in the NFL, as he could potentially be fined for such behavior if deemed excessive by White masculinity.

Newton’s expression of emotion, and therefore, his symbolic contestation, is reminiscent of the nonviolent resistance also expressed by Muhammad Ali. Sports media worked to reduce Ali to physical strength and athleticism without the sharp keen intelligence and critical wit that he possessed, but he consistently contradicted such constructions with repeated performances of nonviolent rhetorical resistance (Gorsevski & Butterworth, 2011; hooks, 2004). One of his methods of challenge was to counter the Black buck image as silent and unemotional by daring to speak loudly, to be bold and boisterous, and to express a range of emotions, from sadness to joy to anger to hurt

(hooks, 2004). Likewise, Newton's position in football as the quarterback, a position usually associated with White masculinity, as it is the most "intelligent" position in the game (Hartmann, 2007; Mercurio & Filak, 2010), works in combination with his emotional expressions to forge an alternative Black masculinity and reinscribe positive understandings of Black masculinity on his own body. His insistence on expressing intelligence, athleticism, and emotion, whether through his celebratory game-time dances and use of the "dab," his insistence on wearing a hoodie over his head, or his grief expressed during press conferences, contradict the expectations that whiteness and the *NFL Rule Book* place upon Black masculinity to be unthinking and unfeeling, to set aside associations with hip-hop culture or blackness, and to only perform athletically as a corporeal object (hooks, 2004). As a result, his rhetorical performance of an alternative Black masculinity via the utilization and contradiction to cool pose challenges whiteness's expectations placed upon him.

Whiteness's reframing of Cam Newton's resistance

Although Newton's performance of a rescripted Black masculinity works as form of resistance to the *NFL Rule Book*, fans, and sports media's insistence on suppression of thought and individuality, his rhetorical performance is arguably appropriated and redefined by fans and sports media to serve the interests of whiteness. Such performances of cool pose, those that inscribe men's athletic bodies with blackness, are contradictorily embraced by professional sport as forms of hip-hop entertainment and young Black culture, and ultimately a marketable commodity for a fan base that predominantly occupies White positionality, and also feared as dangerous and violent (Mocarski & Billings, 2014; Watts & Orbe, 2002). This exemplifies a desire vs. hate dialectic, as Jackson (2006) describes, which traces its beginnings to Antebellum south preoccupations with lynching Black bodies as both punishment and (White) public entertainment. Likewise, cool pose is embraced for its expression of hip-hop culture and authentic blackness as a form of entertainment. It is concurrently, and problematically, vilified, and ultimately, disciplined, controlled, marketed, and sold by whiteness and White masculinity, thereby maintaining the legacy of the antebellum south in modern-day U.S. professional sport. Subsequently, in addition to the previously described NFL rules, rhetorical strategies of control that subject Black masculinity to White masculine control were evident during the discourses surrounding Newton's touchdown celebrations and press conference responses. Through a critical reading of online U.S. news and sport media responses in the 2015-2016 season to Newton's game-time dances and his Super Bowl 50 press conference appearance, I argue that Newton's rhetorical performance was scripted by whiteness ideals as arrogant and cowardice.

Performances of cool pose are often perceived as threatening to the racial and social expectations of men's professional sport and are routinely represented as selfish and arrogant (Grainger, Newman, & Andrews, 2006; hooks, 2004). In the case of Newton, his dab dance and Superman pose, among other moves, have elicited mixed responses from fans and media (Fowler, 2015; Jones, 2015; Siner, 2015a, 2015b). Most, however, have labeled his actions as a form of taunting and have described him as elaborate, inappropriate, showy, and arrogant (Siner, 2015a). In November 2015, after attending a

Carolina Panthers game with her 9-year-old daughter, a Tennessee Titans fan, Rosemary Plorin, sent Newton a personal letter, which she then sent to the *Charlotte Observer*, the local newspaper in the city that Newton plays for, and posted it onto her Facebook page. In her letter, she stated:

Because of where we sat, we had a close up view of your [Newton's] conduct in the fourth quarter. The chest puffs. The pelvic thrusts. The arrogant struts and the "in your face" taunting of both the Titans' players and fans ... My daughter ... started asking questions. Won't he get in trouble for doing that? Is he trying to make people mad? Do you think he knows he looks like a spoiled brat? I didn't have great answers for her, and honestly, in an effort to minimize your negative impact and what was otherwise a really fun day, I redirected her attention to the cheerleaders and mascot. I could tell she was still thinking about it as we boarded a shuttle back to our car. "I guess he doesn't have kids or a Mom at home watching the game" she added. (Siner, 2015a, para. 4–9)

Such constructions reinforce common controlling images of Black masculinity, and particularly athletes who occupy Black masculine positionality, and inscribe their bodies as inherently selfish and arrogant (Grainger et al., 2006). As previously mentioned, White masculine standards call for a Black masculinity characterized as controlled, emotionless, and stoic, resembling the behaviors enforced by White masculinity upon slaves who occupied Black positionality during the antebellum period. Newton contradicts these controlling practices of expression through his dances as well as his choice to wear a hoodie during a press conference immediately after losing Super Bowl 50. For this, however, his expression of cool pose as well as his choice to not remain "cool" by expressing emotion, was found to be misunderstood, as he garnered more media criticism. Namely, media and fan responses sought to chastise him as child-like and disrespectful, a practice common for sports media depictions of NFL players occupying Black positionality (Grano, 2010). For instance, a *Sporting News* online article stated:

Look, I'm a big Newton fan ... But if you're going to be the new face of the NFL, you have to handle losing the Big Game with more dignity and professionalism than that. The video of the sullen Newton will only give more ammo to critics who say the 26-year old QB is a cocky diva who dabs when he's winning—but runs and hides when he's losing. (McCarthy, 2016, para. 4–6)

The article then goes on to compare Newton to other NFL stars who have lost in a Super Bowl, both those who occupy Black positionality and White positionality, stating, "They were all devastated and angry. But they handled it" (para. 7). These claims worked to situate Newton within the Black buck image, a man who needed to be disciplined and forced to conform to whiteness's standards, thereby furthering White domination over Newton and Black masculinity (Collins, 2004).

In response to the previously mentioned letter that Plorin submitted to the *Charlotte Observer*, she received several criticisms from fans and media alike, many of who defended Newton as a role model because of his numerous charitable efforts in the Charlotte area (Siner, 2015a, 2015b). When asked about the letter in a press conference, Newton responded, "Everyone is entitled to their own opinion ... If she feels offended, I apologize to her, but at the end of the day, I am who I am. It is what it is" (Siner, 2015b, para. 6). After Newton's apology, Plorin, satisfied with Newton's response to her criticisms, then stated:

I watched the video of Cam Newton responding to media questions about my letter to him earlier this week. I really appreciate his comments and his respect for my thoughts, and I was impressed with the sensitivity and graciousness with which he spoke. I am sorry I didn't understand him better until this week. It is clear from his remarks that he recognizes his leadership role, both on and off the field, and that he truly cares about the kids watching him. I respect his comments just as much as he did mine, and I wish him nothing but continued success on the field and in life. (Siner, 2015b, para. 7–8)

Plorin's satisfaction with Newton further expresses White control. By Newton acknowledging his leadership role, which Plorin takes credit for bringing his attention to (as if he did not already know), as well as his respectful and civil response to her unsolicited opinions, furthered her supposed authority to watch and control Newton's game-time actions, and therefore his blackness, and force an apology from him for expressing elements of Black culture, even though he had done nothing to her or her daughter.

In total, Newton's performance of cool pose, elicited, and continues to elicit, responses from fans and media that fail to understand Newton's expressions as a form of individuality and resistance to a legacy of racial control and surveillance in the United States. Rather than seeking understanding of Black masculine positionality or why Newton and so many other players choose to engage in expressions of emotion through dance or even their choice of clothes, fans and media who occupy whiteness perpetuate whiteness by engaging in knee-jerk reactions of distaste and disapproval, inhumanely reinscribing Black male bodies as mere physical vessels for athletic performance and White entertainment and nothing else. They do so through an expressed form of rhetorical surveillance and discipline, and ultimately, distaste, thereby perpetuating whiteness as the normative standard by which all players are measured and judged. Furthermore, such responses function as whiteness's justification for rhetorically situating White positionality as the "rightful" disciplinarian of behavior, resulting in the degradation of Black masculinity and Black culture.

NBA Russell Westbrook's resistance

Russell Westbrook, a 29-year-old NBA point guard who occupies Black masculine positionality, is a five time NBA all-star who plays for the Oklahoma City Thunder. He is often considered one of the most athletic players in NBA history and is widely recognized as one of the best all-around players currently playing in the NBA (Kalra, 2016). His popularity as both an athlete and a distinguished public figure is evident in that he was honored in 2015 by *Ebony Magazine* as one of the heroes of the Black community by selecting him to its 2015 Ebony Power 100, a group that the magazine describes as those who lead and inspire within the Black community (*Ebony*, 2015). In addition, his complex performance of resistance to NBA control is noteworthy and deserving of a close reading.

Like Newton, Westbrook is known for his distinctive pregame and game-time dances, as well as his unique handshakes, many of which are choreographed with his teammates (see NBA Life, 2016). In addition to these expressions of cool pose, through a critical reading of Westbrook's fashion choices for gameday arrivals and postgame press conferences during the 2015-2016 season, I argue that Westbrook also offers an alternative

Black masculinity. This is particularly accomplished through his fashion and style, which violate restrictions placed upon expressions of Black culture through the NBA Dress Code. Westbrook has become the NBA's most prominent fashion icon since Dennis Rodman. He has appeared in magazines like *Vogue*, *ESPN the Magazine*, *GQ*, and the *New York Times* solely for his fashion choices. In August 2016, Westbrook was awarded the "Best Dressed" award for the 2016 season by the National Basketball Players Association Players Voice Award (Tsuji, 2016). He even launched his own fashion line in 2016 with the brand True Religion.

Juxtaposed against his remarkable athleticism and athletic physique (six feet and three inches tall, and 200 pounds to be specific), Westbrook adorns himself with high fashion that contradicts the required garments listed in the NBA Dress Code. He is known for his expression of "nerd chic," which includes thick rimmed glasses, bow ties, suspenders, and other "geeky" clothes, which challenge the NBA's definition of professional attire (Moore, 2016). Most recently, he has worn chains, sunglasses while indoors, ripped jeans, cut-offs, t-shirts, sweatpants, sneakers, boots, and hats, all of which are listed within the policy as banned garments (NBA Media Ventures, LLC, 2005). For instance, during Game 4 of the NBA playoffs against the Dallas Mavericks in 2016, he arrived to the game wearing a white cut-off t-shirt and sweatpants with Christian Louboutin Gray Louis men's flat sneakers. He later arrived to Game 2 against the San Antonio Spurs wearing a Ramones (rock band) t-shirt and acid-washed Saint Laurent blue jeans. To Game 5 against the San Antonio Spurs, he wore a faded blue-jean coat with white ripped jeans and white sneakers (Medworth, 2016). His style is far from "business casual," as required by the code, but he has yet to be fined or reprimanded for his fashion choices.

The result is a defiant expression of an ambiguous amalgamation of masculine and feminine style, contradicting the White masculine expectations for Westbrook, and all other NBA players, to conform to the White masculine standards for dress outlined in the NBA Dress Code. His expression continues a legacy of athletes like Muhammad Ali, who in addition to exclaiming, "I am the greatest!," also exclaimed, "I am the prettiest!" (Farred, 2003). Ali embraced Black aesthetics, took pride in his trimmed, manicured afro, and called his opponents "too ugly," challenging masculine norms for expressions of style (Farred, 2003). Today, Westbrook's use of style and high fashion has set the standard for similar expressions of Black culture, and therefore resistance to the NBA Dress Code, as numerous NBA players have followed his lead by combining hip-hop and high fashion for their pre- and postgame apparel, allowing for a group cohesion and unified form of contestation and rescripting of Black masculinity from hypermasculine or violent, to artistic and even expressively feminine. As a group, they take the pleasurable and make it political, a function of the vernacular (Farred, 2003). By rewriting a unique Black masculine script, Westbrook exemplifies how the "popular is the social conjuncture that marks the complicated nexus between pleasure and resistance" (Farred, 2003, p. 1).

Similar to the ways in which slaves who occupied Black positionality resisted White domination during antebellum slavery through expressing "cool" with subtle nonverbal expressions, such as mannerisms, facial expressions, and body postures, Westbrooks rhetorical performance of cool has developed and been expressed under the watchful

eye of the NBAs surveillance (Majors & Billson, 1992). hooks (2004) explains that “Negative stereotypes about the nature of black masculinity continue to over determine the identities black males are allowed to fashion for themselves” (p. xii). Although news and sports media continue subject NBA players like LeBron James and NFL players like Richard Sherman to negative stereotypes and controlling images, including violent, animalistic, and beast-like (e.g., Dickerson, 2016; Page, Duffy, Frisby, & Perreault, 2016), given players’ celebrity platform, through media appearances and social media, they can work to construct (or co-construct) their own identities (e.g., Mocarski & Billings, 2014) as a form of resistance to controlling practices of the NBA as well as common media representations within mainstream sports media. During pregame, postgame, and both NBA and non-NBA public appearances, Westbrook has aimed to, through fashion, craft a softer, feminized version of Black masculinity, which contradicts these historical controlling images that have been inscribed upon him. Commonly framed as violent, animalistic, and even monster-like, expressions of femininity through the adornment of clothes that are commonly associated with women, like tight pants, shirts that look like dresses, or wearing the color pink, allows for a softer masculinity to surface within the NBA.

Majors and Billson (1992) explain that “style includes attitudes, assumptions, and feelings about self and others, as they are expressed in language, dress, and nonverbal behavior” (p. 72). Being cool requires a distinctive style. This style is highly personalized and articulated through variations of talk, walk, choice of clothes or shoes, tattoos, and hairstyles (Majors & Billson, 1992). Westbrook’s styling, then, is an answer to the silencing, marginalization, dehumanization, and control that Black masculinity has historically experienced, as it is a proactive way that he communicates individual thought and value. Westbrook, through fashion, and therefore style, has reconstituted rather mundane events in the NBA, such as arriving to a game and speaking to the press after a game, into spectacles of individual expression. This has resulted in Westbrook being rhetorically positioned as simultaneously the embodiment of celebrity and alternative Black masculinity. Majors and Billson (1992) explain, “Cool pose brings a dynamic vitality into the black male’s everyday encounters, transforming the mundane into the sublime and making the routine spectacular” (p. 2). Furthermore, expressions of style work as an evolving and dynamic art form characterized by new aesthetics. This historically has been seen in rap music or dance, in which expressions, such as break dancing proclaim, as Majors and Billson (1992) put it, “White man, this is my turf. You can’t outdo me here” (p. 70). Therefore, Westbrook’s expression of style, and particularly through the use of high fashion and even a more feminine fashion, is part of a legacy within Black culture to express individuality, value, and even resistance to White domination in a unique way that challenges whiteness to outdo him.

Whiteness’s reframing of Russell Westbrook’s resistance

In response to Westbrook’s rhetorical performance, however, the NBA and sports media have worked to redefine his symbolic action in a way that serves whiteness and undermines Black masculinity. Namely, this is achieved through constructing Westbrook as a racial spectacle as well as attributing Westbrook and other players’ financial and social

successes to the NBA Dress Code and Stern, thereby maintaining White racial control over Black masculinity. Jackson (2006) states, “the interpretations of mass-mediated inscriptions of the body reveal the hidden contours of psychic and institutional investitures that drive, indeed motivate, the producers of inscriptions” (p. 1). In the following, I detail how whiteness’s interpretations of Westbrook allow for insight into the producers of such inscriptions.

The very presence of media responses to Westbrook’s fashion choices speaks rhetorically. Throughout the 2015–2016 season, as previously mentioned, Westbrook was featured in a variety of mainstream magazines and newspapers like *GQ*, *Ebony*, *The New York Times*, and *USA Today* not for his basketball success, but to highlight his fashion choices. Within these articles and many others, Westbrook was constructed as a racial and gendered spectacle through a focus on his expensive and elaborate style as well as through constructing him as a side-show, a strange fashion display to laugh at. For instance, one article stated, “Russell Westbrook showed up to Oklahoma City’s season opener on Wednesday night looking like Waldo getting lost at Fraggles Rock” (Chase, 2015, para. 1). Another article reproduced a Tweet by 120 Sports, which compared an image of Westbrook in a silver outfit wearing glasses to an image of Steve Urkel dressed up like a robot asking “Who wore it better? Russell Westbrook or Steve Urkel?” (Chase, 2015). Such mockery invites the audience to laugh at Westbrook, rather than consider and appreciate the symbolic expressions of artistry and individuality found within his fashion choices. This sort of mockery is a legacy of post-slavery minstrelsy, such as the Sambo character (in the years 1769 to about 1927), who was played by a man occupying White positionality in Blackface dressed in rags. Sambo was reflection of the White majority’s perceptions of Black positionality, as he was characterized as inadequate, nonintellectual, and incompetent (Jackson, 2006). Still today, Jackson (2006) explains, men who occupy Black positionality are recovering from these disparaging comedic images, as they were of the most “wicked, scornful, and psychically injurious representations” (p. 21). The treatment of Westbrook represents this legacy of scorn and the corporeal inscription of Black masculinity as ridiculous, abnormal, and worthy of mockery.

In addition to mocking Westbrook’s fashion expressions, many articles discussed and estimated what his clothes cost, whether he pays for them or not, and how much he makes per year (Chase, 2015). In a *SBNation* article, Medworth (2016) broke down each outfit that Westbrook wore to the 2016 NBA playoffs, focusing on the brand, how much each garment cost, and where it could be purchased. Medworth stated that Westbrook wore Christian Louboutin Gray Louis men’s flat sneakers that cost \$895 to Game 4 of the NBA Playoffs against the Dallas Mavericks, Saint Laurent blue jeans that cost \$750 to Game 2 against the San Antonio Spurs, and a \$1,595 faded blue-jean coat to Game 5 against the San Antonio Spurs (Medworth, 2016). Similarly, a *USA Today* article calculated that it cost \$300,000 per season to dress like Westbrook (Chase, 2015). The article finished by stating that even if he does not pay for all of his clothes, as some may be given to him by the brand itself, he can afford them, as he earns \$16,744,218 in the 2015–2016 season, averaging out to \$204,000 per game for an 82 regular game season. These articles work to create a form of shock and awe surrounding Westbrook and his fashion choices. This is especially interesting in a celebrity-

saturated media context in which celebs are repeatedly photographed wearing designer clothes, but rarely is the cost of their daily outfits or salaries regularly calculated.

In addition to the continued focus on how much Westbrook's clothes cost and his annual salary, the media rhetorically attributes the success of Westbrook, as well as others who have developed into fashion icons, to the NBA Dress Code and Stern. The recent successes of players within the fashion world are quite expansive. For instance, Steph Curry models for Express, Nick Young modeled for Forever21, Dwayne Wade developed RunWade, a fashion night in Miami, and Kyle Lowry launched the Roots × Kyle Lowry fashion collection (Markovivic, 2016; Spagnolo, 2014). Numerous players have also been recognized in mainstream media outlets as fashion icons including Iman Shumpert, Dwight Howard, Chris Paul, Blake Griffin, Amare Stoudemire, LeBron James, Carmello Anthony, John Wall, James Harden, Andre Drummond, and Pau Gasol (Gonzales, 2016). In response to these achievements, whiteness has worked to claim their successes as its own, thereby perpetuating a legacy of appropriation by whiteness.

This is achieved, for instance, in media coverage like a *Huffington Post* (Marmon, 2015) article entitled "How David Stern's Dress Code Transformed the Modern NBA Star," which rhetorically accredits former Commissioner Stern and the NBA Dress Code with athletes' successes and stardom related to fashion. Additionally, Cheng (2016) stated in *The Stanford Daily* "the NBA has accomplished what it intended with the dress code—it has spruced up its public image and thereby created new business opportunities for players and the league" (Cheng, 2016, para. 6). Here, these media sources elide that Stern never stated that he intended for the code to create new business opportunities for the players. Rather, it was a reactionary policy solely developed as a public relations effort by the NBA to "clean up" its "bad boy" image in response to events like "Malice at the Palace" In addition, and most notably, such rhetorics obviate the individual creativity and ingenuity of players that have led them to symbolically protest the restrictions of the code by blatantly violating it. That means that players have achieved fashion icon status and have occupied new business ventures despite the code's restrictions. Such rhetorics that attribute Stern and the code with player successes ignore that player violations of the code have led to their individual and collective fashion icon statuses and successes, not the restrictions and/or requirements of the code. The rhetorical strategies of whiteness found within media, however, lead audiences to believe that the player base who predominantly occupies Black masculine positionality is better off due to whiteness's racial surveillance practiced by the NBA, as if racial surveillance practices like the NBA Dress Code, which monitor individual cultural and racial expressions, fosters, rather than suppresses, individual freedoms and opportunities. Through a critical reading, rather than attributing successes to NBA policies, as this article has argued, Westbrook and other players' unique fashion expressions work as cool pose, challenging such restrictions on individual cultural expressions and gaining popularity and success as a way of saying you can't hold me down. Despite Westbrook's resistance, however, dominant discourses within media, guided by whiteness, function to reframe this resistance as social and business success due to former Commissioner Stern's policy, allowing for whiteness to remain as the authority of "right" behavior, and reinscribing Black masculinity as immature and in need of discipline and guidance.

Discussion

Whiteness garners much of its power through its ability to maneuver around challenges to its cultural space, and therefore maintain its invisibility and centrality (Nakayama & Krizek, 1995). In sport, as an invisible and centralized rhetorical strategy and cultural space, whiteness has established itself as normative and guiding, resulting in inscribing racial “Otherness” on the bodies of Black masculine players in the NFL and NBA. Such inscriptions of Black masculinity, as evident in the media constructions of Newton and Westbrook in 2015–2016, as in need of discipline, as a racial spectacle, and as childlike, result in problematic and harmful repercussions for men who occupy Black positionality, their families, and their communities, reaching beyond the boundaries of sport, and influencing everyday life. Ultimately, the continued strategies of whiteness within sport maintain current ideologies that dehumanize men who occupy Black positionality and support systemic inequalities evident in policing and incarceration rates that disproportionately target men who occupy Black positionality.

In 2016, Philando Castile, a 32-year-old man who occupies Black positionality, was shot and killed by a police officer in Falcon Heights, Minnesota during a routine traffic stop (McLaughlin, 2016). Also in 2016, Terence Crutcher and Keith Lamont Scott were shot and killed by police officers in Tulsa, Oklahoma, and Charlotte, North Carolina, respectively (Eversley, 2016; Karimi, Yan, & Almasy, 2016). The justification for their deaths is and was rooted in whiteness’s strategic marginalization of Black masculinity, such as those in the NFL and NBA described in this paper, which script Black bodies as lesser than human and unworthy of respect or care. Given the hypervisibility of Black masculinity within pro men’s sport, like the NFL and NBA, communication scholarship that names whiteness’s rhetorical strategies within sport is essential for critical intercultural communication work as it strives and works towards racial justice and equity. Jackson (2006) tells us that because mass media and popular culture, which includes professional sport, are littered with negative interpretations and inscriptions of Black masculinity and Black bodies, those, like Newton and Westbrook, who dare to struggle toward emancipation and rewrite social understandings of Black masculinity, despite whiteness and White masculinity’s insistent disciplining of their expressions, are imperative for crafting a culture that respects, cares for, and embraces racial difference, and in which Black masculinity and Black bodies can finally be free of the harms of White control. Although Westbrook and Newton’s resistance and use of cool pose is unique to that of Muhammad Ali or even Colin Kaepernick, their contestation and use of cool pose as an expression of Black masculinity is significant, meaningful, and effective for the larger struggle toward racial justice and equity.

Notes

1. To identify individuals who contribute to and/or benefit from whiteness’s cultural space, I refer to individuals as those who “occupy White positionality” and “occupy Whiteness” or a variation of these terms rather than as “White” (Nakayama & Krizek, 1995). Consistent with American Psychological Association formatting, I capitalize “White” but not “whiteness” to identify “White” as a racial identification and to call attention to its significance.

2. When describing individuals who identify as Black or who occupy Black positionality, I have chosen to use the label “Black,” a name that individuals who occupy Black positionality have historically claimed for themselves (Collins, 2004). This label is appropriate, rather than “African American,” because it references African heritage or ethnicity, which may not be accurate for all individuals who occupy Black positionality, as they could have a different ethnic identity or heritage. I also refer to individuals who identify as Black as individuals who “occupy Black positionality” or a variation of this phrase. In such instances, I capitalize “Black” and I only use “black” when providing a direct quote from an author.
3. The NFL Rule Book was updated for the 2017 season, after this analysis was conducted, to allow for players to 1) participate in premediated group celebrations, 2) celebrate on the ground, and 3) use the ball as a prop during celebrations. All other rules described in this study are still in place as of 2018.

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