

The NBA isn't what it used to be: Racialized Nostalgia for '90s Basketball
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On February 24, 2020 the NBA mourned Kobe Bryant's death, on one of the last mass gatherings in a stadium setting—an eerie foreshadowing to an extraordinary year. Soon after, the Covid19 pandemic hit, which halted games across sports and thus, created a natural hiatus for collective memory practices. This remembrance predominantly took the form of nostalgia, mostly for the 1990s and the Michael Jordan era through *the Last Dance*; when professional men's basketball is considered by some fans and pundits to have been a “better” and “purer form” of the game compared to today. In this paper, we ask what better and this purity signifies.

While a simple explanation for this nostalgia might be that, escaping into a bygone era is only normal during a painful lockdown, combining tools from cultural sociology, critical race scholarship, and the sociology of sport, we make the case that the nostalgia for the '90s NBA points to a deeper issue— “the cultural policing and production of race through nostalgia.” Using nostalgia, a particular collective memory practice (Karakaya 2018), audiences not only remember the past, but police the present by naming what was better, and what they want back. Following Poletta's sociology of stories (2011), we conceptualize the '90s NBA as told by fans and select media pundits, as a story with three distinct characteristics. First, the game was tougher, competitive, not amicable, less globalized, hence, more masculine. According to this narrative, in contemporary basketball, “There aren't real rivalries, fouls are punished uselessly and the European infiltration to the game made it less tough,”. Second, team loyalty mattered more in the past and it was more enjoyable and rewarding to see players stay with one team/franchise for the majority of their careers. Where today, social media, personal branding, and increased player movement in the NBA killed collective spirit and team responsibility while

over-elevating player agency. In other words, an agentic player, who has a voice outside of the assumed sporting hierarchy and collective between management, team, and fans is not desirable. Third, the game was just a game back then—it was not political as it is today. President Trump himself asserted that “people did not want to be confronted with politics when watching sports,” and what they are doing “will destroy basketball.”

Like every story, the ‘90s NBA has lead characters (Jasper 2020; Polletta 2015) who are juxtaposed to today’s players. This contrast crystallizes in the persons of Michael Jordan and LeBron James. Studying the difference between these two iconic players makes the historical shift in the NBA, visible. Our discourse analysis of digital news sports media and prominent NBA television punditry during the live airing of *The Last Dance* (April 19th to May 17th 2020)¹ shows that this shift is not neatly absorbed or accepted by fans, journalists, and commentators. As a consequence, this leads to cultural policing and production of race through a sport-based nostalgia. Where in the ‘90s, the NBA revolves around the character of Michael Jordan, who is seen as athletically magical, super-human, competitively ruthless, respectable and politically-silent²; The 2010s NBA revolves around LeBron James, who is analyzed and viewed as an athletic icon, but also a representation of player-empowerment, dependent on befriending and recruiting other star players, and visibly politically engaged. This shift, where Black NBA players are not magical super heroes or manically ruthless and hyper-masculine competitors anymore, but people of flesh and blood who raise their voices against racism, causes a group of

¹ Even though this nostalgia is not limited to this period, we focus on *The Last Dance* as an event that triggered intensive engagement with the ‘90s era. We have collected online news media, podcast engagement (e.g. The Lowe Post, The Ringer Podcast Network, The Right Time with Bomani Jones)

² It’s important to note that in the 2000s, the NBA was marked by an era of “managing threatening blackness” (Leonard) This is evident in response to violence—exemplified by the Malice in the Palace, the 2005 fight between Black players and mostly White fans, and the NBA’s response to police 2000s hip-hop Black aesthetic through policies such as a dress code.

NBA commentators and the audience to lament a bygone era, where a safely consumable, super glitzy, yet hyper-masculine basketball culture reigned in a happy, post-racial, color-blind arena.

By putting together, the field of collective memory (Olick 1999; Boym 2001; Fred Davis 1979; Bonnett 2010) with critical scholarship on race, we are able to analyze the NBA as a public and popularly contested racialized arena of cultural production. We argue that a form of sporting nostalgia, which intersects with dominant ideas about masculinity, competition, celebrity, and sport's "apolitical" relationship to American society, is used as a cultural corrective to make sense of and discursively police the actions of current Black NBA players both on and off the court. Nostalgia is used as a racialized symbolic boundary marker to reinforce and produce what is the "right" and "ideal" professional Black athlete that deserves public adoration. A "right" persona that is super-human in athletic performance and single-minded towards winning on the court, yet importantly, mythically distant from the lay person, fans, their own communities, and crucially, removed from issues of politics and social injustice.

Analysis:

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