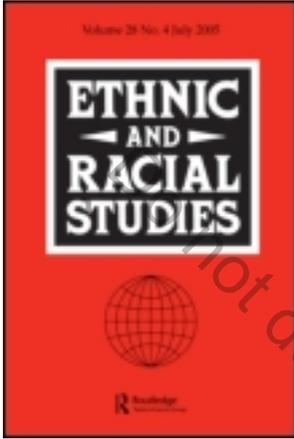


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Ethnic and Racial Studies

Publication details, including instructions for authors and subscription information:

<http://www.tandfonline.com/loi/rers20>

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Version of record first published: 30 Mar 2012.

To cite this article: Douglas Hartmann (2012): Beyond the sporting boundary: the racial significance of sport through midnight basketball, *Ethnic and Racial Studies*, 35:6, 1007-1022

To link to this article: <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/01419870.2012.661869>

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Beyond the sporting boundary: the racial significance of sport through midnight basketball

Douglas Hartmann

(*First submission September 2010; First published April 2012*)

Abstract

Sport is among the most potent institutions in the production, maintenance and contestation of race in the modern world. The last decade has witnessed a significant increase of sport-based research on the cutting edge of theorizing race and racism in the post-civil rights, post-colonial era. Nonetheless, the study of sport has yet to be seriously engaged by mainstream social scientists. This paper argues that sport scholars need to better demonstrate the powerful, even irreducible racial significance of sport in politics, public policy and popular culture. This argument is illustrated and elaborated with findings from an ongoing, multifaceted research project on midnight basketball in the USA. Key points include: the complexity of racial imagery in and around sport; sport's legitimating functions for racialized neo-liberalism; and the impact of sport and race politics on federal crime policy. Revealed throughout is a more sophisticated understanding of the centrality and complexity of contemporary racial formations.

Keywords: Sport(s); race; culture; politics; public policy; neo-liberalism.

Introduction

For those who study and work in the area, there is little doubt that sport is one of the most powerful and important institutions in the production, legitimation and (at least potentially) contestation of contemporary racial formations. There are three primary reasons for this. One has to do with the cultural popularity of sport itself. The sporting world boasts several of the largest and most passionately followed international events in the world (the summer Olympic

Games and the men's Fédération Internationale de Football Association (FIFA) World Cup finals). The sheer number of people who follow sport, not to mention the intensity of their involvement and investment, is almost without compare (Washington and Karen 2001). A second factor involves the unparalleled prominence and prowess of people of colour in the sporting world. At both local and national levels in the USA and all over the globe, sport has stood as a leading arena of opportunity, mobility and accomplishment for ethnic and racial minorities for the better part of a century. And then, finally, there is the way in which sport's emphasis on the virtues of competition, meritocracy and fair play seems to parallel and model liberal democratic visions of social justice and cross-cultural understanding (see Hartmann 2003a, especially pp. 60–92).

The sporting establishment often pats itself on the back for these characteristics and contributions, seeing athletics as an avenue of equal opportunity and a leader in the struggle for civil rights, human rights and racial justice. Sport scholars, however, have long tended to be more critical – emphasizing, instead, the persistence of certain forms of racism and discrimination in the field, the ways in which racial stereotypes are reproduced in and through sports consumption, and how the racial accomplishments of the sports world can serve to rationalize existing racial formations (for a discussion, see Hartmann 2000). Furthermore, the past ten to fifteen years have witnessed the emergence of a vibrant, new scholarly literature on race and sport. This body of work has been informed by and contributed to some of the most cutting-edge, critical theoretical work in ethnic and racial studies: in analysing how ideologies of race and racism itself are made in the popular imagination (see e.g. Cole and Andrews 1996; St Louis 2003); in understanding the power, pervasiveness and complexity of racial formations in the contemporary post-civil rights, post-colonial era (Boyd 2003; Carrington 2010); and in exploring innovative concepts such as colour blindness (Leonard 2004), blackness theory (Andrews 1996; Leonard forthcoming) and critical whiteness studies (King et al. 2007).

In spite of these engagements, however, the significance of sport remains unappreciated among most scholars of race and ethnicity. This situation certainly has much to do with the biases that academics and intellectuals have about athletes and athletics. The sporting arena tends to be ignored or dismissed by scholars, the very folks best suited to properly understand its influence and power (a fact that Pierre Bourdieu (1988) used to characterize the challenges of sport scholarship in his famous *Program for a Sociology of Sport*).¹ But this is a two-way street. The relative neglect of sport in ethnic and racial studies also involves the fact that sport researchers have not conclusively and consistently demonstrated that sport is (or at least

can be) a powerful, even irreducible racial force. Too often, in other words, we sport scholars have assumed the broad racial significance of sport *and* that sophisticated, systematic analyses of this form will speak for themselves.²

My goal is to address this problem head on. It is, more specifically, to insist that sport scholars must go beyond the sporting boundary and treating sport as a mere microcosm of race, and instead (or, really, in addition) work to establish the power and particular roles of sport as a racial force in the contemporary world. This article will advance this argument by drawing upon research from an ongoing, multi-method study of the racially targeted, late night basketball leagues that dozens of American cities began to organize in the late 1980s for purposes of risk reduction and crime prevention – the phenomenon that came to be known as ‘midnight basketball’.

I have been actively and (more or less) systematically studying midnight basketball for over a decade. With various research collaborators and assistants, I have conducted fieldwork with basketball-based crime prevention initiatives in three major metropolitan areas (Chicago, San Diego and Minneapolis). I have done archival work into the history of midnight basketball’s origins and precursors (Hartmann 2001), as well as extensive content analysis of media coverage and commentary in the context of national debates about crime prevention and urban policy (Wheelock and Hartmann 2007). I have been involved in several different efforts to evaluate the effectiveness of these programmes (Hartmann and Wheelock 2002; Hartmann and Depro 2006). Indeed, I have recently finished a book-length synthesis that collects these findings, examines their broader context and significance, and draws out the implications for sports-based interventions under neo-liberal conditions in the USA. I will not attempt to summarize those arguments and analyses here. Instead, I will simply highlight several overarching findings that speak to the unique racial consequence and potency of sport. It is an exercise that will hopefully demonstrate how attention to the racial functions of sport can yield both a better appreciation of sport as a racial force as well as a more sophisticated understanding of the centrality, complexity and staying power of race and racism in the world today.³

Midnight basketball in the USA

The midnight basketball concept was initiated by G. Van Standifer, a retired systems analyst and town manager in Glenarden, Maryland in the late 1980s.⁴ Standifer had become convinced that key to the problems of poor, inner-city young men was the absence of safe, constructive activities during what he believed to be the high-crime, late-night hours. His solution was to organize a basketball league that

would operate in his Washington, DC area community between 10:00 p.m. and 2:00 a.m. Standifer's basketball-based programme was intriguingly simple and inexpensive. It operated only during summer months and had three core components: (1) that the target participant group was young men between the ages of seventeen and twenty-one; (2) no game could begin before 10:00 p.m.; and (3) that two uniformed police officers had to be present and visible at each game. The basic idea was that a sports programme would provide an alternative to the non-productive or even destructive activities of 'the street'.

With statistics and support from local law enforcement, Standifer claimed great success for his programme: a 30 per cent reduction in late-night crime in his community in its first three years of operation. A Maryland County corrections chief, for example, claimed 'I haven't seen a single one of these basketball players back in my jail' since the programme began. After seeing a story about the programme in the *New York Times*, public housing officials in Chicago began planning a league of their own. It was this league that brought the midnight basketball concept to much broader national attention.

In autumn 1989 the Chicago Housing Authority (CHA) – with a matching grant of \$50,000 from the Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD) under the direction of Jack Kemp, the former Congressman who had made his reputation as a professional football star and cheerleader for the Reagan administration's supply-side economics – organized leagues in two of its notoriously troubled housing projects (the Rockwell Gardens and the Henry Horner Homes). Within weeks, the Chicago leagues were featured on American Broadcasting Company (ABC)'s *Good Morning America*, one of National Broadcasting Company (NBC) television's national National Basketball Association (NBA) broadcasts, and in dozens of newspapers and magazines across the country. On the strength of the public support of and widespread attention to the Chicago project, Standifer created Midnight Basketball Leagues, Inc. and began to sanction affiliate programs all over the USA. Within three short years, the organization became the National Association of Midnight Basketball, Inc. and included some 38 official programmes in major metropolitan areas all across the country. Each chapter, according to the parent organization, was a non-profit, community-based organization adhering to formal training, rules, and regulations based upon the original Standifer model. Over the course of the following decade, dozens more communities adopted midnight basketball programmes and hundreds of copycat programmes appeared.

Racially targeted, sports-based social intervention has a long history in the USA (not to mention elsewhere). It goes back at least to the playground movement of the progressive era (1880–1920) in which reformers tried to use athletics and physical recreation to socialize

poor and working-class immigrant and minority children (cf. Cavallo 1981).⁵ There are at least three characteristics of midnight basketball that stand out as historically unique and analytically significant in the context of such traditions. One is its unique funding structure and organizational model. Not only were midnight basketball programmes inexpensive relative to other social programmes, they were typically supported and administrated through public–private partnerships of one sort or another. In Maryland, it was Standifer working with local recreation and a beer supplier as sponsor. In Chicago, the CHA collaborated with the HUD and a hodgepodge of private supporters. In the programme I observed in San Diego, it was an evangelical Christian group; in Minneapolis, it was the city’s Department for Children and Families partnering with entrepreneurial grass-roots community organizers with a background in sports and community work.

A second unique characteristic is the combination of underlying liberal *and* conservative political ideologies. The former is perhaps most obvious. Midnight basketball played off of sport’s traditional claims to being an avenue of mobility and opportunity for people of colour as well as a long-standing history of social development through self-discipline, character-building and empowerment. To that idealist orientation, midnight basketball added a more conservative element as well, one that was less interested in development than in controlling and/or containing populations that were seen as either ‘at-risk’ or socially disruptive (for related analyses, see Hargreaves 1986, pp. 187–97; Coakley 2002; Carrington and McDonald 2008). While much is noteworthy about this unique combination of ideologies (including its broad-based consensus about the dangers of young urban black men), this unique synthesis of liberal and conservative ideas about risk and risk prevention made midnight basketball not just palpable but popular across a wide spectrum of political orientations and interests.

The third distinctive feature about midnight basketball was its popularity with political leaders, policy makers, sports providers and the general public. Widely recognized as an exciting and cost-effective policy innovation, midnight basketball received attention and accolades far beyond its actual programmatic scope, level of funding or even record of proven effectiveness. Precisely because of this, sport scholars Robert Pitter and David Andrews (1997) described midnight basketball as the ‘catalyst and template’ for the whole ‘social problems industry’ (p. 93) that emerged in American sport provision in the 1990s.

More could and should be said about these unique qualities and characteristics, especially with respect to how they have been implemented and adapted in other parts of the world (see Hartmann and Tang unpublished). In this piece, however, I want to develop the

claim that midnight basketball played a significant if often overlooked role in racial politics, policies and representations all across the USA. In the following sections I highlight several specific phenomena that speak to the more general, independent racial force of sport. These include: (1) how the programme was predicated upon and thus reproductive of deeply rooted stereotypes about African American men; (2) the broad legitimization functions of midnight basketball as revealed in publicity and media coverage; and (3) the direct impact the programme – or more precisely, debates about the programme – had on the landmark American crime bill legislation of 1994.

Racial imagery and policy innovation

Although the race of the targeted participants was almost never mentioned explicitly in programme literature or press coverage, there was never any doubt that midnight basketball was designed to appeal to young, inner-city African American men. In previous articles and book chapters I have discussed the deep connections between blackness and basketball in American culture as well as the racially coded ways in which midnight basketball was talked about and the visuals used to depict the program (Wheelock and Hartmann 2007). Here, I want to highlight a more basic and fundamental point: the particular character and complexity of the racial imagery underlying midnight basketball as a policy innovation.

The idea that having young black men throw balls at metal hoops would reduce crime draws together two of the most prominent images/representations of African American men in contemporary American culture: namely, that they are either superstar athletes or, alternatively, super-predator criminals (or would-be criminals). Indeed, the fundamental premise of midnight basketball – that having black men play basketball late at night will be a deterrent to crime and perhaps even a step towards more constructive alternatives – not only plays off of both the positive and the negative stereotypes of African American men, it actually puts the valorized images linking black men and sport in service of addressing the perceived pathologies and dysfunctions.

These connections are neither incidental nor insignificant. Indeed, the linkages between the ostensibly positive images of African American male athletes and perceptions of African American males as pathological criminals or deviants have been the focus of recent sport research. Some scholars have focused on the marketing of ‘deviant’ or somehow subversive African American athletes such as Charles Barkley, Dennis Rodman, Mike Tyson, or later Allen Iverson (cf. LaFrance and Rail 2001; Cashmore 2005) or an entire league like the NBA (Hughes 2004; Andrews and Silk 2010; Leonard forthcoming), or the phenomenal success of the Public Broadcasting

Service (PBS) documentary *Hoop Dreams* (Cole and King 1998). Others demonstrated how quickly and decisively the discourse about star African American athletes such as Michael Jordan, Magic Johnson or Kobe Bryant shifted from celebration to condemnation once certain problematic aspects of their personal lives emerged—gambling for Jordan (Andrews 1996); HIV infection for Johnson (Cole and Denny 1994); and charges of sexual assault for Bryant (Leonard 2004). Still others explored the public obsession with allegations of violence and delinquency among athletes (Benedict 1997; Lapchick 2000), or the policing of racially marked behaviours such as end zone dances in athletic arenas themselves, and the concomitant establishment of formal codes of conduct and sportsmanship (Andrews 1998). Perhaps the best extended treatment of the cultural dyad that links the fear of black violence and social disorder with our fascination with African American male athleticism can be found in Cole's (1996) analysis of how Nike used the images of inner-city dissolution and the icon of Michael Jordan to launch a social movement and advertising campaign advocating for athletic activities for inner-city communities (for an overview, see Hartmann 2001, pp. 361–5).

In midnight basketball, we see a similar structuring cultural logic. The incongruous, seemingly opposed positive and problematic images of African American men are actually linked, rooted in and thus reproductive of stereotypical perceptions of the differences (and pathologies) of black culture and family life where crime represented the capitulation to these risks and dangers, while sports embodied its most visible, socially sanctioned alternative. As with the best of recent sports-based scholarship on the topic, this understanding of midnight basketball helps us better appreciate the power and complexity of racial imagery in the contemporary, post-civil rights moment. We see, more precisely, how racial ideologies and indeed racism itself are not only the result of prejudice, bias, fear, subjugation and surveillance (as traditional social science would have it), but also constructed in and through images that would otherwise appear to be productive, pleasurable or even progressive.

Publicity and legitimization

A second and (for my purposes) more fundamental point about the racial significance of midnight basketball has to do with the broader symbolic functions the programmes served, or were intended to serve. Midnight basketball programmes were used by political elites at both national and local levels to publicize and promote their policy reforms, programme initiatives and general, overarching approaches to government intervention. There is, really, no better example of this

phenomenon than the first President Bush's enthusiastic embrace of midnight basketball. I have already shown how HUD-supported midnight basketball programmes were written up in dozens of stories nationwide and featured in other national media outlets. The programme proved so appealing to Bush and his administration that in the spring of 1991 the President proclaimed Standifer and his programme one of his official 'thousand points of light' (number 124), eventually making the programme one of the three highlighted in national publicity campaigns and including start-up grants for late-night basketball leagues in the Cranston-Gonzalez National Affordable Housing Act passed in the final year of the Bush Presidency.

This pattern of promotion was exhibited in every locale in which I have seen midnight basketball instituted. In Chicago, for example, where midnight basketball first went national, the programme was championed by a newly appointed housing official with designs on completely revamping the city's notorious public housing projects (and fuelling his own, larger political ambitions). In Minneapolis, programme officials, who had no interest whatsoever in basketball or any other athletic activity, explained their support of midnight basketball from a variety of urban initiatives as resulting primarily because the leagues received more positive publicity than all of the other dozen or so initiatives sponsored by the new Mayor's office the previous summer. (The other reason was because no other programme was as successful at recruiting and retaining the target population of young, at-risk men of colour.)

Focusing media attention on midnight basketball served several important functions. First and most basically, midnight basketball was used by public officials – often not so much those who ran the programmes as those who funded them or helped cobble together the resources to make them a reality – as a public demonstration of their concern for the social needs of cities and for those in urban areas. These programmes were great publicity devices both because the midnight basketball innovation was intuitively appealing to many people, and because of the positive energy and goodwill associated with sports in general. Also, in contrast with other, more punitive urban programmes and expenditures (more policing, for example, or funding for more prisons), midnight basketball had that more constructive, development-oriented dimension so that it appeared to serve and perhaps even empower young people. Midnight basketball, in short, was not just reactive, it was also proactive. This 'positive publicity' applied to both a general voting public as well as members of the specific urban communities targeted and served by midnight basketball.

The publicity accorded to midnight basketball programmes also pulled attention away from the deeper, more fundamental transformation of urban policy and social programmes of the period. The late

1980s and early 1990s were, after all, an era marked by tremendous cutbacks in and reorganization of programmes for the poor and powerless, including especially with respect to shifting responsibility away from the state to local, non-profit organizations in metropolitan areas and serving communities of colour (Beckett and Western 2001; Brenner and Theodore 2002; Wacquant 2008). Having midnight basketball leagues to hold up and highlight – especially with the limited funding they required and the private, non-profit administrative structure they typically operated under – allowed leaders to divert attention from these neoliberal transformations (cf. Harvey 2005) and focus instead on exciting and seemingly cost-effective ways to address urban problems and ‘serve’ impoverished and disempowered communities. Midnight basketball accomplished these symbolic ends in a way that made its racialized underpinnings – as well as those of neoliberalism more generally (Goldberg 2008; see also Soss, Fording et al. 2008; Soss, Sanford et al. 2009) – obvious without being blatant, easy to see yet also not hard to avoid talking about.

Cheap, innovative, privately based and carefully targeted – midnight basketball did not just parallel neoliberal ideologies and realities in the USA; it was a near perfect model of them, a template that was almost ideal-typical on all of the key dimensions that defined neoliberal social policy. All of which is to say, that at both local and national levels, the publicity surrounding midnight basketball served to establish the legitimacy and necessity of neoliberal approaches to crime, welfare and urban policy in an era of reformulation and retrenchment.

The extent to which various programme funders, operators and supporters were self-conscious about using midnight basketball to legitimate racialized neoliberal principles and policies in particular is difficult to gauge. However, analyses of media coverage and commentary in these sites make manifest that these effects were achieved. What is even more evident is that midnight basketball was being mobilized for general political purposes. In this regard, Bush’s successor to the Presidency, Bill Clinton, is, as reported in Wheelock and Hartmann (2007), another great case study.

President Clinton’s first public mention of midnight basketball came during his weekly radio address on 16 April 1994 when, after talking about problems of crime, he outlined a plan whereby Housing Secretary (Kemp’s successor) Henry Cisneros would be provided with emergency funds for ‘enforcement and prevention’ in gang-infested public housing in Chicago. As part of this package, the President assured: ‘... we’ll provide more programs like midnight basketball leagues to help our young people say no to gangs and guns and drugs.’ Clinton made the racial images and connotations manifest when he spoke about midnight basketball on 17 June 1994 at a housing project in Chicago where he told his predominantly African

American audience that midnight basketball was a programme designed to assist 'people just like you'. A week later, this time at a park in a mostly African American neighborhood in St Louis, Clinton deflected questions about the Racial Justice Act by talking instead about prevention programmes such as midnight basketball. Finally, the President gave one of his most emphatic, public defences of the crime bill – again replete with an extended discussion of recreation and midnight basketball – in front of an African Methodist Episcopal Gospel Church in Atlanta, Georgia.

Symbolic politics are notoriously challenging, and Clinton's efforts were not entirely successful. In fact, as I discuss below, the symbol of midnight basketball actually worked against the efforts of liberal Democrats to prioritize social intervention and crime prevention over more punitive-, punishment- and policing-oriented approaches. But clearly midnight basketball in the American context played a symbolic role that went well beyond that of a small, experimental programme.

Politics and crime policy

Bill Clinton's support for midnight basketball marked an important turning point in midnight basketball history. What is crucial about 1994 is not just that midnight basketball became the 'darling' programme of another American President but that that President was a Democrat and that this Democrat touted midnight basketball as part of his larger push for new federal crime and criminal justice policy. Used as such and situated in a highly partisan context, the bipartisan support midnight basketball had enjoyed earlier in the decade broke down. In fact, even as Clinton was mentioning midnight basketball as a symbol for prevention-oriented aspects of the crime bill, conservative Republicans – including radio talk show host Rush Limbaugh – began to hold up midnight basketball as an example of everything that was *wrong* with Democratic crime policy.

I have analysed both media coverage of and Congressional debates over midnight basketball in some detail with my colleague Darren Wheelock (Wheelock and Hartmann 2007). Our analyses have yielded several relevant points. The first is that discussions of midnight basketball were at the centre of political debates about the crime bill. To give just one example: references to midnight basketball appeared in 30 per cent of national magazine articles on the crime bill, despite the fact that its projected \$30 million dollar allocation was a mere fraction of a per cent of the overall \$33 billion dollar bill. We also demonstrated that midnight basketball served as a code for talking about race and African American men in particular in the context of the crime bill debates. This analysis highlighted the use of photographs and other visuals as well as underlying racial imagery in the discourse.

We also found that a number of other sports-based prevention programmes (such as Olympic training centres and after-school activity programmes) were included in the bill and actually more expensive than the midnight basketball initiative that received the bulk of the public scrutiny.

Using systematic content analyses of the Congressional debates, we further examined how racially coded midnight basketball references functioned in these political contexts. On the quantitative side, we found that when midnight basketball appeared in media coverage and commentary, it was associated with three distinctive patterns in the framing of federal criminal justice policy. First, it allowed racial images and threats to be more explicit and concrete. Second, pieces that included references to midnight basketball exhibited heightened fears of crime and more threatening portrayals of criminals and would-be criminals than others. Third, when midnight basketball appeared, the more liberal, prevention-oriented aspects of the bill tended to receive more criticism. Qualitative analyses of both the media coverage and political speeches themselves not only confirmed these findings, they helped us ascertain how these effects were achieved. On the one hand, critics of the crime bill seized on cultural stereotypes about sport as frivolous, trivial and unimportant to denigrate prevention-oriented approaches to criminal justice; literally, they used midnight basketball to poke fun at prevention. On the other hand, as soon as conservative attacks on midnight basketball took hold, Democrats were put in the position of either having to acknowledge the racial underpinnings of their rhetoric and policy (something quite taboo in American politics – indeed, why the racially coded midnight basketball was embraced in the first place) – or soften all of their claims about what made the leagues (and prevention more generally) so innovative and potentially effective. It was an incredibly difficult and ultimately untenable position.

The final result of all this on criminal justice policy was significant. By the time the crime bill was passed in autumn 1994, \$3 billion dollars worth of programming, almost all of it prevention-oriented, had been eliminated. In other words, debates about this small, experimental sports-based programme had a clear and decisive impact on the federal legislation that still governs American criminal justice policy now, a criminal justice regime that is among the most racially biased and punitive in the industrialized world today. It is only one case, to be sure, but one that clearly illustrates the political impact that racially coded sports phenomena can have.⁶

Conclusion

In recent years a number of sophisticated studies have conducted case studies of sport as a microcosm of contemporary racial dynamics. These works have been inspirational for scholars of sport, and have further shown how sport can be utilized to better understand the complexities of race in the contemporary era. But, for a variety of reasons, they have not broken out of the sport studies ghetto to compel mainstream race scholars to recognize the power of sport as a race-making force in the contemporary world. It is the project of breaking out of the usual sporting boundary that I have tried to jump-start in this paper, drawing upon my research into the politics surrounding midnight basketball in the USA. Specifically, I have tried to show the powerful, independent role that late night basketball programmes (and discussions about them) played in various social developments and political processes – specifically, in terms of inspiring programmatic innovations, legitimating neoliberal urban transformations, and shaping American criminal justice policy itself. What is at stake in such a project, I believe, is not just an appreciation of the dynamics of race as they operate in sport; it is also an understanding of the complexity, centrality and staying power of race and racism broadly in the contemporary world.

In terms of advancing general race scholarship, work on sport and race has several broad implications. One involves re-emphasizing the importance of popular practices and the mass media as sites for the construction of contemporary racial formations, and encouraging case studies and comparative work that puts these institutional domains on par with the more usual social scientific studies of social policies, discrimination practices, work on racial attitudes and identities, and the like. This is not a new insight. In the 1990s, inspired by the work of Stuart Hall, scholars such as George Lipsitz (1990), Tricia Rose (1994) and Herman Gray (2004) began to stake out this terrain and it became a force in cultural studies and humanities circles. Perhaps the study of sport could reignite this project in the social sciences. The race-based study of sport and popular culture has the additional and more specific capacity of contributing to a more sophisticated understanding of the subtle and multi-vocal nature of racial formations in the contemporary neoliberal, post-colonial world. I am thinking here of how racial images and ideologies and racism itself are not only rooted in bias, fear and the desire to dominate and control, but also motivated by interests and forces that appear to be far more positive and progressive: sites of celebration, voyeuristic identification and fascination. There is perhaps no aspect of race theory where mainstream social science has more to gain from an engagement with critical, culturally oriented analyses, and where the study of sport

presents an empirical object to facilitate meaningful multi-method, cross-disciplinary fertilization.

In drawing out these broader potentials, what is perhaps most revealing is how race and culture really operate together. In the 1970s, the American anthropologist Clifford Geertz introduced a concept he called 'deep play'. Geertz borrowed the phrase from classical utilitarian theorist Jeremy Bentham who defined it as 'play in which the stakes are so high that it is irrational for men to engage in it at all' (quoted in Geertz 1973, p. 432). For Geertz, however, such play is intriguing and revealing precisely because of this fact. Geertz (1973), p. 443) wrote: 'Such play is less a measure of utility . . . than it is a symbol of moral import perceived or imposed.' It 'renders ordinary, everyday experience comprehensible' (p. 433) – and, I might add, achieves its effects even or especially when no one thinks anything is going on. Geertz's descriptions have guided at least a generation of popular culture and sport scholars. In my view, the insights of the deep play concept can be usefully applied to the complexity and challenge of grappling with race in contemporary culture. Like many otherwise disavowed popular pursuits, race is both hyper-visible and invisible, everywhere around us and yet nowhere to be seen. Thus, the paradox of deep play feeds into the problems of race in contemporary culture – how the dynamics of race and racism are often perpetuated even when nothing else seems to be going on and even when we try to embrace racial fairness and justice. Much as Ben Carrington (2010) recently argued with respect to modernity, sport is a powerful place for the ongoing production of race precisely because many of its multifaceted dynamics are clearly on display, and yet so many people fail to even see or apprehend what is right in front of their eyes. There is clearly a role for social analysts to play in such contexts – but only if we realize the import of what is going on in front of us.

Notes

1. Of particular interest for readers of *Ethnic and Racial Studies*, Bourdieu used a parable about African American athletes in prestigious American universities in the early 1970s to make this point. Despite their seeming public prominence and importance, Bourdieu (1988) explained, these student-athletes found themselves in 'golden ghettos' of isolation where conservatives were reluctant to talk with them because they were black, while liberals were hesitant to converse with them because they were athletes. So, too, according to Bourdieu, for sport sociology: how, on the one hand, sport is not taken seriously by the intellectuals and researchers best trained to analyse and dissect it; and how, on the other hand, those most likely to take sport seriously as a social force, tend to lack the skills and critical orientation necessary to really make proper sense of its social structure and power.

2. I see myself and my own work as part of this problem as well. In previous contributions to this journal, for example, I have tried to use the case of the 1968 African American Olympic protest movement to illustrate the importance of sport as a site for racial resistance (Hartmann 1996) and have analysed C. L. R. James's masterpiece *Beyond a Boundary* to

explicate a more theoretically sophisticated understanding of the relations between sport and race in the contemporary world (Hartmann 2003b). Much to my chagrin, these articles appear to have had broader impact and visibility among sport scholars than in race and ethnic scholarship.

3. Given the international readership of this journal, let me make clear that the theoretical points about racial images, ideologies and political impacts developed herein are intended to have general applicability and use. I should also add that even some of the most specific points about crime, social intervention and risk prevention should have fairly direct parallels in other countries and contexts. I say this for two main reasons: (1) because of the recent proliferation of 'development' in international sporting circles, especially for underprivileged and at-risk populations (cf. Coalter 2010; Darnell 2010); and (2) because midnight basketball itself was imported and adapted by countries including Australia, Germany, Great Britain and Switzerland in the decade following its initial emergence in the USA (Hartmann and Tang unpublished).

4. The basic background information on midnight basketball is drawn from my archival research, interviews and oral histories, and my own previous writings (Hartmann 2001) as well as Carter (1998).

5. For the parallel 'rational recreation' movement in Victorian Britain, see Holt (1989), pp. 136–48).

6. For a more optimistic, programme-level analysis of the (mostly) symbolic impacts of midnight basketball on crime policy and prevention, see Hartmann and Depro (2006).

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