

PREFACE

In Praise of Heresy

My wife, Claire, often makes heretical statements when we watch sports.

Like me, she loves in sports the exhibition of what a human body can do, as well as the revelation sports so often offer that we are in fact one, a body-mind, working in graceful, confident harmony. Unlike me, Claire has not spent her life swimming in the culture of sports. She did not play sports competitively, did not watch them obsessively, did not read sports pages and sports magazines and sports books. Her observation of sports rattles along innocently, unconfined by the well-worn grooves of thought and discourse that experience and repetition have carved into those of us who have spent our lives in sports culture. The combination of her passion for what is going on and her inexperience in the habits of sports culture gives rise, then, as I say, to these heretical outbursts.

For example, a few years ago we were watching a Detroit Pistons NBA game on TV. It may have been a playoff game. A foul was called against the Pistons' forward Rasheed Wallace. Wallace vehemently disagreed with the call, and the referee promptly whistled him for a technical foul for unsportsmanlike conduct. Claire decried the unfairness of both calls. That is not the heretical part. On the contrary, that is a time-honored tradition within sports culture. But then she went to the dangerous place: "Why do they even *need* refs?" I laughed. She flashed, indignant: "*What?*" I laughed more. "I'm serious!" she insisted. I could not stop laughing. I

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laughed in part because I found her earnest outrage completely charming but also because her heresies make me nervous.

They unsettle me because they illuminate the areas of sports culture that I have come to accept as natural and necessary and so have stopped questioning. “Why do we *need* refs?” I might have sputtered, “*Why?* Well, of course, it is quite obvious, you see; if we did not have refs, well, then, why, you know . . .” It is not that there was no answer to the question. There was an answer to the question: I could see it in my mind, but as I stumbled toward it, it began to repel me, so it never quite made it out of my mouth. It is a bit like introducing a spectacular new friend to your family: when you see your family through the eyes of your friend, it may look better in some ways or it may look worse, but it will never look the same. Some of the things to which Claire draws attention, when I think about them under the hot spotlight of her heresy, do stand the test of critical reflection. Others do not. When they do not, I feel a little embarrassed for sports for being that way, and for myself for not having noticed.

More specifically, I feel embarrassed because basketball, in particular, has been my home for all of my life, and the people of basketball are my people. My family put up a hoop in the driveway when I was four, and I was chasing my older siblings around on that court soon after. I was seven when I saw Wilt Chamberlain and Kareem Abdul-Jabbar, Oscar Robertson and Jerry West go head to head at the Dane County Coliseum in Madison, Wisconsin; I was probably around seven, too, when I painted sideburns and a mustache on my face and scrawled “Knicks” on the front of a T-shirt and “Frazier” and the number “10” on the back. I think I was twelve when a classmate procured for me a personally autographed copy of John Wooden’s *Pyramid of Success*. When I was fourteen, I plastered my walls with Magic Johnson posters, made a Magic Johnson scrapbook, and wrote to the Lakers asking for Magic’s home address. (They did not give it to me.) At sixteen, I made room on the wall for Isiah Thomas. I was seventeen when, as the point guard and captain of my high school varsity, I lost a state tournament game in overtime on the same floor where Kareem and Oscar had won a world championship thirteen years before, and afterward I cried in the same locker room. At twenty, I got not one but two pairs of the original Air Jordans.

Years—decades—have passed, slicing not inches but feet off my vertical leap. But time has not dulled my enthusiasm for the game in all its forms. The heroes have changed, but still I watch their games and buy the shoes they hawk. And still I lace up those shoes at least twice a week in my noon pickup run. Moreover, the very myths of the culture of basketball

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that I critique in this book and the values they harbor formed my experience of the game and shaped my personality, even off the court. I believed in them then, and even if I no longer do now, I still feel their emotional pull. So Claire's questions sometimes unsettle my heart and disorient me, as though the rightness of my very being were suddenly thrown into question.

Fortunately, she is a gentle, capacious, and loving heretic, so none of this gets in the way of our continuing to love what we love in sports, just as they are. In fact, I find that her heresies have shown me a way to expand and enrich my encounter with sports, much as any relationship grows stronger and more durable when it expands to flexibly accommodate a variety of types and intensities of feelings such as wonder, doubt, frustration, and disappointment. I am writing this book guided by my wife's spirit of loving heresy and in the hope that my reflections on some of the cherished myths of basketball culture will similarly unsettle my readers, whether they are natives of basketball, long-standing residents, or just passing through. But also, as with Claire's sporting heresies, I hope that, supported by history and enhanced by fanciful inventions, mine will not cause readers to love basketball less, but only to love it better.

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INTRODUCTION

“BALL DON’T LIE!”

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It’s kind of like a slave and master or father and son. You’ve got your little son and [you say], “Don’t say nothing back to me”—and to me, that’s totally wrong.—**Rasheed Wallace**

Late in the first quarter of a 2012 NBA game between the New York Knicks and the Phoenix Suns, the Suns guard Goran Dragic stepped to the free-throw line and bricked his foul shot off the back of the rim. As the errant free throw caromed off the iron, the veteran Knicks forward Rasheed (“Sheed”) Wallace called out, “*Ball* don’t lie!” and was immediately assessed a technical foul and ejected from the contest. This was neither the first time that Wallace had received a T nor the first time that he was ejected from a game. In fact, he had received one just moments before, and these two together were numbers 316 and 317 of his career and the ejection, his thirtieth. (Both figures top the NBA’s list of all-time career leaders in these categories.)

However, this was the quickest ejection of his career and the first time he had been ejected for saying, “Ball don’t lie!”—the phrase he had made famous as a slogan of protest against bad calls. For years, when an opposing player missed a free throw, Wallace would call out, “Ball don’t lie!” He would not shout this every time, only when he felt the free throw had resulted from a bad call, although it is true that Sheed seemed often to have felt that way. In any event, the opposing free-throw shooter might clang a brick off the iron, and there was Sheed, shaking his head and laughing or raising his innocently aggrieved face to heaven: “*Ball* don’t lie!” picked up by courtside microphones and broadcast to viewers everywhere.

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But this time, for some reason, though early in a meaningless game played early in the season, hearing “Ball don’t lie!” prompted the game’s referee to assess the second T and eject Wallace from the game.

Most observers view “Ball don’t lie!” as Sheed’s way to assert that higher powers govern the outcome of basketball plays and express their will through the ball, to validate his complaint, and, in effect, to overturn the decision of a referee. “Ball don’t lie!” renders the hapless free-throw shooter a mere pawn in a cosmic tribunal that pits the referee, discredited mundane authority figure, against Sheed, maligned mouthpiece speaking truth to that earthly power in the name of a justice that has not been done. Sheed is a warrior for truth and justice, a soldier for the basketball gods, and “Ball don’t lie!” is his battle cry. In that case, maybe the ref who T’d Sheed for saying, “Ball don’t lie!” hoped to regain the authority whose emptiness Sheed exposed. And perhaps, to those inclined to believe the ref ever had it, he succeeded. But for the rest of us, his petty, vain attempt amounted to a humiliating clutch at empty air and served only to lay all the more bare the despicable true dynamics of power at work in the situation. “Ball don’t lie!” indeed!¹

I feel this. I can even get excited about it. But this excitement runs aground on the reefs of my agnosticism when it comes to the existence of basketball gods and my pragmatism when it comes to issues of truth and justice. “Ball don’t lie!”—at least when interpreted in this usual way—appeals to those transcendent basketball gods and fixed ideals of truth and justice in which I just do not want to believe. No matter how exciting it may be when Rasheed invokes them, transcendent gods and fixed ideals carry too much force in the imagination. I worry about them falling into less judicious hands than Sheed’s. Curiously, when I set aside this conventional interpretation, “Ball don’t lie!” stirs me all the more.

What Is a Foul Call?

Let us look more closely at the kind of situation that might lead Sheed to cry, “Ball don’t lie!” It is common enough, occurring nearly one hundred thousand times over the course of an NBA season: the referee’s shrill whistle pierces the ambient sound cloud of the bouncing ball, murmuring spectators, chattering players, and squeaking sneakers, and, as the movement of players grinds grudgingly to a halt, the referee takes center stage. “Foul!” he calls, before signaling to the scorer’s table the nature of the foul and the identity of the perpetrator.

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Terry Eagleton has explained, "Common sense holds that things generally have only one meaning and that this meaning is usually obvious, inscribed on the faces of the objects we encounter."² Moreover, "common sense" holds that its "obvious" interpretation is "common"—that is, universally shared, independent of perspective and of the particularities of diverse social experiences. What I call "*basketball common sense*" holds that referees have the right to ensure that the rules of the game are followed. Basketball common sense further maintains that, in the event of a foul call, a referee has determined that a player has violated one of the rules and should therefore justly be penalized. This sounds reasonable, perhaps even obviously and undeniably true. But there is another, equally reasonable perspective on the foul call that illuminates issues obscured by basketball common sense, issues that clear the path for understanding the philosophical and, ultimately, political meanings of "Ball don't lie!"

The word "foul" first appears in the *Official NBA Rulebook for 2013–2014* in a description of the powers of the referee: "When a personal foul or violation occurs, an official will blow his whistle to terminate play. The whistle is the signal for the timer to stop the game clock. If a personal foul has occurred, the official will indicate the number of the offender to the official scorer, the type of foul committed and the number of free throws, if any, to be attempted."³ This provides a clearer sense of how the NBA defines a referee—namely, *functionally*, as the person endowed with the power to render decisions concerning an infraction of the rules prohibiting "personal fouls." This is important, as will emerge, but to make it more meaningful, it still requires a definition of "personal foul."

A definition does appear under "Rule No. 4—Definitions," where, in "Section III—Fouls," the very first clause tells us, "A common personal foul is illegal physical contact which occurs with an opponent."⁴ However, it does not explain how one is to distinguish "illegal physical contact" from legal physical contact. That explanation appears in Rule No. 12, which provides a list of all of the prohibited forms of physical contact with an opponent (as well as the permitted exceptions): "A player shall not hold, push, charge into, impede the progress of an opponent by extending a hand, arm, leg or knee or by bending the body into a position that is not normal. Contact that results in the re-routing of an opponent is a foul which must be called immediately. . . . Contact initiated by the defensive player guarding a player with the ball is not legal. This contact includes, but is not limited to, forearm, hands, or body check."⁵ Now it seems we have a clear-cut framework. During a game, players may intentionally or

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unintentionally make illegal contact with an opponent. The rules call this “a personal foul.” They also tell us exactly what the referee is to do when this occurs: render a decision by blowing the whistle and verbally or manually communicating that decision to the scorer. So with all of this defined so clearly and in such detail, it might start to seem hard to see what Sheed used to get so worked up about. After all, it is all just common sense, right?

The problems arise—as with many of the myths in basketball culture—when you look at what is not said. In this case, the rules do not tell you that three other things have to have happened in the situation: the referee has to (1) see physical contact; (2) decide that what he or she has seen is in fact illegal physical contact; and (3) decide to blow his or her whistle and enforce the rule. I imagine that the NBA presumes that it goes without saying that these things happen. Yet any frustrated fan knows that they seem not to happen when they should and to happen when they should not. Even the league seems at least tacitly to acknowledge this by providing rules governing the expression of disagreement and the review of certain calls.

But despite justified concerns about such matters as racial or other biases among officials, fans’ frustration and the league’s attempt to eliminate its causes both miss—and, in fact, obscure—the point of what a foul call really is: *an exercise of the referees’ profound power to bring fouls into being*.⁶ Physical contact is merely physical contact and is neither legal nor illegal until the referee *makes it* illegal by blowing the whistle. In this way, the whistle augurs—like royal fanfare, but more shrill and less thrilling—the referee’s power to bring the rules to bear on the players playing the game. Considering that those rules are backed by the hierarchical administrative structure and authority of the NBA (to fine or suspend players, for example), then whenever the referee blows a whistle to call a foul, he brings not only the rules but also their entire supporting structure to bear on the players and the game they are playing.

To emphasize the depth and reach of this power, it is useful to view a foul call as “a declarative illocutionary speech act” or, more briefly, “performative utterance” or “speech act.”⁷ These are acts of speech (or of non-verbal communication, like hand signals) that bring into being the state of affairs they describe. A commonly given example is a promise: when I say, “I promise to pay you back,” my promise comes into being with the utterance. But a better sense of the power associated with speech acts may be gained by looking at some other common examples:

“I sentence you to fifteen years in a state penitentiary,” whereby a judge brings the criminal sentence into being.

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"This is my body," whereby a Catholic priest effects the transubstantiation of the wafer into the body of Christ.

"Let there be light," whereby God illuminates the cosmos.

"Foul!" works the same way in that by uttering the word, the referee makes it so. Bearing this in mind, then, the causal chain of events the rules prescribe actually reverses what occurs in reality: a foul does not cause the whistle to blow (as the rules prescribe); *the whistle blowing causes a foul to come into being*.

All of this—that the foul call is a speech act, the creative power that this implies, the hierarchical administrative structure backing that power, and the fun-house mirror inversion of reality entailed—is hidden by the rules and by basketball common sense. And so it goes unseen by the average observer who expects the referee will carefully observe the play on the floor; remain unswayed by personal interests or the emotions of players, coaches, and fans; and call "foul" only when physical contact corresponds to what the rules describe as illegal. Even the category of the "bad call"—the erroneous description of legal contact as illegal, or vice versa—persists in making the error of assessing a speech act as if it were an objective description.

By making this mistake and hiding the fact that it has been made, the rules and basketball common sense confine debate to a narrow range of possibility: was the statement true (a good call) or false (a bad call) or evil (a biased call)? But neither the rules nor common sense acknowledge the quasi-divine power to constitute illegality (and to classify players' behavior under that category) that basketball officials wield. Nor, since they do not acknowledge that power, are they capable of challenging it, if they were interested in doing so.

What Sheed Says When He Says, "Ball Don't Lie!"

Sheed, however, understood, exposed, and challenged that power. In fact, his 317 career technical fouls roughly gauge his success in conveying to referees his intent to do so. It may seem at first glance that, like basketball common sense, "Ball don't lie" also mistakes the referee's speech act as a descriptive statement, one with which Sheed (or, actually, "Ball") merely disagrees. But the outraging power of "Ball don't lie!" goes beyond disagreement. "Ball don't lie!" outrages by challenging and posing an alternative to the philosophical, cultural, and political underpinnings of the

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foul call, basketball common sense, the NBA, and the broader societal dynamics of power these rely on and uphold.

Where foul calls are concerned, basketball common sense (and referees) adopt two fairly common, and commonly interrelated, philosophical positions: one, called “generic realism,” about the nature of reality, and one, called “the correspondence theory,” about the nature of truth. Generic realism holds that real things (such as tables) and the thing-ness that makes them what they uniquely are (such as table-ness) exist independently of anyone’s belief, statements, or conceptual schemes.⁸ As I argued above, basketball common sense believes that a foul is a real thing (made what it is by an intangible essence we might call “foul-ness”) that exists prior to and independently of the referee’s whistle. In this sense, the belief is a species of generic realism. The correspondence theory, meanwhile, defines truth as a relation between thoughts (or statements) and an independently existing reality to which these thoughts or statements faithfully correspond (or match, reflect, or mirror). When thoughts or statements correspond to reality, according to the correspondence theory, they are “true” (and, of course, when they do not, they are “false”). Our passionate arguments about whether a foul call was a good or bad call are, in effect, arguments over whether the ref’s manifest belief that physical contact was illegal faithfully corresponds to reality. We are all—in this behavior, anyway—“generic realists” and “correspondence theorists.”

Whatever the merits of generic realism more broadly, I have already argued that as applied to the foul call it entails a logical error. Far from existing independently, the foul by definition comes into being only when the referee blows his whistle and calls a foul. In doing so, he transforms physical contact into illegal physical contact and actually *causes* the foul to come into being. Given this, it makes little sense to speak of a correspondence between his belief and reality, since the latter is dependent on the former. Moreover, because of the circularity constituting the nature of fouls and the powers of the referee (and quite apart from league rules restricting protest), it is logically impossible for players to contest official rulings, at least from within the parameters of generic realism and the correspondence theory of truth that govern basketball common sense.

“Ball don’t lie” eludes this trap by dissenting in a way that avoids both generic realism and the correspondence theory of truth and targets not only the particular call but also the entire structure undergirding the call’s claim to legitimacy. The philosopher William James defined “truth” as “what it is better for us to believe.” More precisely, he argued that those ideas or statements that help us to get a practical handle on the world

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are—so long as they do so—the ones we tend to call “true.”⁹ Sure, reality may be “out there,” existing independently of our experiences and beliefs and statements about it (as generic realism maintains). But we cannot *know* anything about it without experience, belief, and language, so we cannot measure the truth of our experience, belief, and statements about reality *directly* against reality.

Because human beings do not have the standard of pure, unmediated reality by which to measure the validity of these experiences, beliefs, and statements, according to James, they measure them by the standard of what it is most practically useful to believe, and “truth” is the name given to that practical value. Truth, it follows, is not a thing or substance or essence that inheres in true ideas or statements. Instead, “truth,” as James put it, “happens to ideas” through a process called “verification” (which means, etymologically, “truth making”).¹⁰ That complex process can occur in a variety of ways, but all involve definite situations governed by specific rules and criteria that are either explicitly or implicitly agreed on by the parties involved (or imposed forcefully by one party on another). In the NBA, as we have seen, the verification process for a foul call is circular: a referee calls “foul,” which brings the real state of affairs “foul” into being, which in turn makes the call “foul” into a true description of the real state of affairs that the call initially brought into being.

“Ball don’t lie!” offers an alternative verification process. It proposes that other powers, greater even than that of the referee, are weighing in, as well, which may implicitly remind us of the referee’s powers. Indeed, the very absurdity of the ball making a call may draw our attention to the fact that the referee was not objectively describing a play but exercising what, within the universe of basketball, are quasi-divine powers to bring a foul into being. Sheed is not just disagreeing with the call; he is exposing the operation of these quasi-divine powers and, in doing so, calling into question the hierarchical structure of the sport whereby a referee is uniquely endowed with the powers to create and define reality. Perhaps the ejection with which I began this chapter occurred because Sheed, in applying “Ball don’t lie!” to a technical foul call, challenged the referee’s authority to enforce conformity with his decisions.

“Ball don’t lie!” comes from the culture of recreational or “pickup” basketball. In such settings, without referees, players referee themselves, calling their own fouls and violations.¹¹ Of course, as in any formal game, disagreements may arise. Often, these are settled by one of the disputants taking an uncontested shot from the top of the free-throw circle. If the ball goes in, the claim is upheld; if it does not go in, the claim is rejected.

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Either way the dispute is definitively settled because, well, as everyone on the playground knows and accepts: “Ball don’t lie!”

In this sense already, even prior to an analysis of the racial dynamics of playground ball or the league, Sheed has made a stand in favor of autonomist (or horizontalist) politics.¹² By introducing a phrase from this setting into the NBA, Sheed reminds us that players can and do play basketball without refs and their transcendent powers. This, perhaps obviously, would be intolerable to refs and to the hierarchical regulatory structure they embody on the court, which may also contribute to the technical fouls against Wallace. Viewed from this angle, “Ball don’t lie!” does not, as in the conventional interpretation of the phrase, invoke a transcendent power *higher* than that of the referees. It rejects the very idea of transcendent, ethereal power (including that of “basketball gods”). Instead, it invokes a *lower, material* power. More accurately, it invokes a power that circulates *horizontally* among equals rather than vertically from the top of a hierarchy to its bottom—that is, *the immanent, self-organizing autonomous power of basketball players*.

However, within the culture of basketball, pickup basketball is more than just “informal” play outside the sanction and control of hierarchically organized institutions such as the NBA. Identifying the historical, material, and symbolic specificity of pickup is crucial to grasping the racial dimensions of the politics of “Ball don’t lie!” for while pickup occurs in a wide variety of settings hosting individuals of diverse racial, ethnic, and socioeconomic backgrounds—any of whom today might shout, “Ball don’t lie!”—the phrase originated in games played on inner-city playgrounds, primarily by African American men who (or whose parents or grandparents) migrated to the core of America’s northern cities beginning around the middle of the twentieth century.¹³ This particular manifestation of pickup basketball has come to function, materially and symbolically, as the NBA’s “supplement” or “Other,” meaning that the NBA simultaneously depends on pickup basketball and the black men who play it and suppresses its dependence on pickup basketball through strategies that have emerged historically in response to specific changes in the sport and society.¹⁴

The NBA tends to treat “blackness” and its stereotypical signifiers as a kind of fluid cultural currency it wants flowing into the NBA in the form of talent and marketable cool, but it wants to control the tap.¹⁵ “Ball don’t lie!” unleashes this flow, as if uncapping a city fire hydrant on a hot summer’s day so that everyone can enjoy the water. Sheed injects the racialized urban playground of white American fantasy directly back into

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the white middle-class mainstream of American culture—as a kind of overdose of the reality of urban black culture. In this way, “Ball don’t lie!” resists the NBA’s erstwhile defusing appropriations of blackness by directly challenging its regulatory authority and, in so doing, brings it to crisis. Simultaneously, “Ball don’t lie!” affirms the autonomous self-governance of intersecting populations (basketball players, the poor, urban dwellers, African Americans in general, and young black men in particular) whose capacity for self-governance both public policy and popular culture attempt to hamper and then disingenuously pretend does not exist.

All of this has important consequences for language and for how we shape it into stories. The call “Foul!” is, after all, a piece of language and a miniature narrative about what just happened that claims to be true. In addition, the foul call’s claim to be a true story depends on an interrelated group of beliefs, many of which themselves take the form of stories, though most are so commonly held that they go untold most of the time. In this particular case, the beliefs in play may be framed as a narrative proposition: “Referees are necessary, desirable, and qualified interpreters and enforcers of the rules of basketball, which rules, in turn, are necessary and desirable to ensure order and the highest possible quality of play. Without referees the game would disintegrate into an unwatchable, chaotic and possibly violent mess.” I call this narrative proposition (and other examples like it throughout this volume) a “myth,” by which I mean a kind of story that “accomplishes something significant for its adherents” and that, furthermore, may express a conviction that—though it may be true or false—is held tenaciously by its adherents.¹⁶

This particular myth primarily serves the purpose of justifying the present state of affairs, including the power dynamics therein. It does this by speculatively evoking a frightening state of affairs that must be avoided at all costs and presenting the refereed game as the only bulwark against the state of affairs. It holds that referees—competent or not—guard the line between basketball order and basketball chaos. And this myth implies another myth expressing the conviction that players cannot regulate their own play and arbitrate their own disputes. Both of these, finally, rest on other more complex myths prevalent in the culture of American sports and in American society more generally that express political convictions about the indispensability of hierarchical structures of power as well as about the nature of athletes and of African Americans and, in particular, about the nature of African American athletes.

When Sheed calls out, “Ball don’t lie,” he exposes these myths and thus challenges various forms of power embodied in the referee’s foul call—

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and in ways consistent with his outspokenness on league politics in other areas.¹⁷ But the “truth” Sheed speaks to power is the truth of the pragmatist. “Ball don’t lie,” as pragmatist truth, simply refuses to tangle with the ruse that refs’ calls are inherently true *or* false descriptions of events that have occurred. “Ball don’t lie!” does not really contend with the call, or try to plead that *truly*, reality is different from what the referee said. “Ball don’t lie!” is not a petition at all. “Ball don’t lie!” does imply a counter-truth, but it is of another category than the truth it would counter.

The key to the categorical difference lies in the *manner or form* of that counter-truth—the way it says what it says. Simply disputing a referee’s call and asserting that it was blown would not carry the additional philosophical, political, and narrative force conveyed through the form of the phrase “Ball don’t lie!” That form, in addition to subtly invoking playground scenarios and the politics of race in the basketball culture, also emphasizes the arbitrary, made-up, fabricated, or invented character of all calls and, in the process, with that final word “lie,” hints that all of this involves traffic in fiction, fabrication, or invention of one sort or another. Moreover “Ball don’t lie!” prioritizes the elementary, physical materiality of basketball by making the basketball itself the agent of discourse about the game. And it is not just the “ball” (as in the ball that clangs off the front of the rim) that points to the materiality of the game. It is also that “ball” metonymically means “basketball,” as in the played game itself. So when Sheed says, “Ball don’t lie!” the phrase echoes broadly, indeed. It affirms something like, “Regardless of whatever may be said about the game or its players (say, by referees or other purveyors of myth), the game itself—the play itself—does not lie.”

Ball Don’t Lie!—The Book

“Ball don’t lie!” summarizes well my concerns, aims, and methods in this book. To begin with, it defines the topic of the book—the intersection of basketball and language—stakes a position within that intersection, and reminds us that this intersection involves dynamics of power. It exposes how cultural and philosophical convention conspire to stack the odds in favor of institutional authority and against players and that this process runs along racial and class lines, discriminating prejudicially against African Americans and the poor. It offers an alternative to this arrangement in affirming the capacity for autonomous self-governance among those same populations. It frames this alternative in an ironic and fanciful way that eludes the trap of a pseudo-objective debate between two equally

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plausible positions. And it invokes the disruptive force of the bodies at play in the game itself.

From its beginnings in 1891 and over the course of basketball's subsequent history, changes in society and in the sport have sparked sometimes contentious discussion of the nature of basketball, as well as of the techniques and tactics that ostensibly best embody and convey that nature. Investigating these discussions, I have identified clusters of recurrent stories, metaphors, and images arising around key events and personalities. These clusters make up the objects of study of my work, which I call "myths." I refer to them as myths not so much to lay bare their failure to correspond to reality as to emphasize that they have become tenaciously held, largely unexamined and influential "truths" within the culture of basketball. Speaking generally, the myths of basketball culture give narrative shape to a collective struggle with changes—particularly related to race—taking place in basketball and in society. Typically, they fabricate an idealized, timeless essence of the game and project it onto a succession of moments, individual players, coaches, and teams or, conversely, fantasize that a contrasting succession poses a destructive threat to that essence. Sometimes, the same myth simultaneously hails an embodiment of basketball's essence and decries an imagined threat to it.

In their proposal for critical sports studies, Mary McDonald and Susan Birrell formulated the basis for the approach I follow here. "The methodology of 'reading sport,'" they suggested, would involve "finding the cultural meanings that circulate within narratives of particular incidents and celebrities," as well as "uncovering, foregrounding, and producing counternarratives, that is alternative accounts of particular events and celebrities that have been decentered, obscured, and dismissed by hegemonic forces."¹⁸ In my case, I excavate the "cultural meanings that circulate" within the myths of basketball by adapting Friedrich Nietzsche's historical method, which he called "genealogy."¹⁹ The philosopher of sport William Morgan has described genealogy succinctly as "a way of trying to understand, explain, and evaluate a cultural practice by telling a story of how it came about or might have come about."²⁰ In telling this story, my genealogy looks not to understand the history of a myth *as it is given* but, rather, to expose *the conditions under which it came to be given*, or accepted as natural.

Although my genealogies partly inform the "alternative accounts" I subsequently offer, I do not counter the myths of basketball culture by replacing them with a story that I claim corresponds more faithfully to "what really happened." After all, historians and sociologists have already

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provided such accounts with little effect on the grip these myths hold on the culture of basketball. Though indispensable, historical and sociological research alone cannot dislodge the power of myth, because myth speaks to affect and imagination and such research speaks to reason. Destabilizing the power of myth requires storytelling that, while informed by the reason of scholarly research, also operates via affect and imagination. Therefore, I submit my “alternative accounts” in the form of what I call “inventions.” Inventions tell a different story about the subjects of basketball myths by combining elements excavated by genealogy with close readings of the on-court phenomena that I find distinctive and compelling in those subjects.

I devote each chapter of *Ball Don't Lie!* to a key myth pertaining to a different era in basketball's history, with a specific date of symbolic importance to that myth identified in the chapter's title. Within each chapter, I first employ literary analysis to identify the key elements of the myth in question. I then draw on existing historical and sociological research to situate this myth in and against the overlapping contexts, in basketball and society, in which it emerged. Finally, I propose alternative narratives of the phenomena in question that attend to the specific tactical and stylistic innovations of particular players and the ways in which these might carry meaning beyond the boundaries of the basketball court and thereby disrupt the more confining myths that have crystallized around them.

I have organized the nine chapters that follow into three parts. Part I, “Myths of the Basketball Republic,” examines myths that arose between 1891, when basketball was invented, and 1949, when, in the wake of its astonishingly rapid global spread, the NBA was formed. For much of this period, basketball underwent nearly constant change in terms of play, rules, and equipment; the demographic characteristics of players; and play venues. Moreover, although a few organizations emerged with aspirations to national scope toward the end of the period, most basketball was played in and between small, locally defined groups with the minimum organizational structure needed to foster competition. It is because of the primarily decentralized, locally based nature of the emergent and rapidly growing sport that I characterize this as the period of “the basketball republic.”

The myths of this period, which appear in rulebooks, instructional manuals and promotional guides, institutional documents, and personal memoirs, as well as in popular and scholarly histories, maintain that basketball has a fixed and static athletic, moral, and aesthetic nature, born at the moment of the sport's invention, and that this essence is safeguarded by self-appointed institutional stewards who protect the game against

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chaotic forces of change wrought by entrepreneurs, spectators, and, most of all, players. These myths, which I examine in Chapter 1, "The Myth of Creation, December 21, 1891," and Chapter 2, "The Myth of Foundation, June 6, 1946," established a normative paradigm of basketball culture that equates tactical elements of game play (passing the ball and moving without it, defending aggressively and hustling cleanly after rebounds and other loose balls) with moral qualities (unselfishness, cooperation, hard work, humility). This complex was then naturalized as inherently pertaining to the white, Anglo-Saxon, Protestant, mostly middle-class men by and for whom the game was originally devised.

As the game rapidly grew in popularity and spread across the globe, played by women, foreigners, African Americans, Native Americans, ethnic immigrants, and the working class, anxieties about change intensified even as change was not only inevitable but also profitable and desirable to those whose sense of identity was threatened by it. The resulting tension gives rise to what I call the "white basketball unconscious" to indicate a hypothetical repository of psychological and cultural fears and fantasies arising from the fraught feelings that accompany these changes, the desires they stimulate, and the threat they appear to present to the stability of whiteness as a privileged identity. Because they remain unconscious, these fears and fantasies frequently express themselves subtly between the lines of basketball culture. In this sense, *Ball Don't Lie!* provides not so much a comprehensive history of basketball culture as site-specific critical analyses of—and alternatives to—the cultural productions emanating from the white basketball unconscious, with the proviso that "white" here refers to the race not necessarily of any individual but, rather, of the social group that stands to benefit from the widespread acceptance of the beliefs conveyed by the myth in question.

In Part II, "Myths of the Modern Basketball State," I take up a forty-year period from the middle of the twentieth century to 1991. By the beginning of this period, the major contemporary institutions of American basketball (state high school associations, the National Collegiate Athletic Association [NCAA], and the NBA) had emerged, consolidated regulatory power over basketball play, and achieved relative stability, forming what I call—to indicate the arrogation of resources, rights, and powers by these institutions—the "modern basketball state." During this period, whose beginning coincides roughly with the Civil Rights Movement and desegregation in American society at large, basketball at its highest levels of play experienced, first, desegregation (beginning at the professional level in 1950), then an influx of elite African American

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players who transformed the techniques, tactics, and style of basketball and its attendant cultures until, by the late 1970s, roughly 80 percent of the NBA's players were African American. For this reason, the history of the modern basketball state necessarily centers on race. The culture of basketball—invented as an instrument of white Anglo-Saxon Protestant social reform, institutionalized on the foundation of segregation, and buttressed by complex myths correlating techniques and tactics with moral qualities and these, in turn, with class, gender, and, especially, race and ethnicity—manifested its conflicting attitudes toward racial integration in a set of influential myths that unfolded from the late 1950s through the early 1980s.

The chapters in Part II address these myths as they crystallized first around Bill Russell and Wilt Chamberlain, the game's first black superstars in the late 1950s (Chapter 3, "The Myth of the Rivalry, November 7, 1959"); then around the racially diverse NBA champion New York Knickerbockers, who were lauded for their unselfishness, cooperation, and defense and celebrated as "the perfect team" in the early 1970s (Chapter 4, "The Myth of the Garden, May 8, 1970"); and finally around the rookie superstars Earvin "Magic" Johnson and Larry Bird, one black and one white, who purportedly saved the NBA from the perception that it was too black and, with their emotionally expressive love of the game, too cynically professional (Chapter 5, "The Myth of the Amateurs, March 26, 1979"). Throughout this period, the myths of basketball culture enabled the white basketball unconscious simultaneously to accommodate itself to a reality in which most basketball players and most of the best basketball players in the world were black while preserving the fantasy that the essential values constituting the sport were intrinsically associated with whiteness.

Part III, "Myths of the Basketball Empire," includes four chapters on myths that arose from the global cultural and economic expansion of basketball—the "basketball empire"—in the context of the end of the Cold War, the growth of multinational capitalism, new forms of mass media, and the widening and increasingly racialized gap between rich and poor in the United States during the Ronald Reagan years and beyond. In the basketball universe, this period is marked by four interrelated phenomena: (1) the globalization of basketball, sparked by the mega-celebrity of Michael Jordan and the NBA brand; (2) the infusion into basketball of cultural forms that originated in late twentieth-century African American urban communities; (3) the emergence and growing influence of international basketball players in the NBA; and (4) a growing entrepreneurial

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assertiveness on the part of players, amateur and professional. Chapters 6–9 identify and critically examine the key myths that have emerged around these phenomena.

As Jordan's career unfolded, a consensus formed around the claim that he was the greatest player of all time. I argue that this unverifiable claim presupposes that history, in a specific sense of the word, is over and that the global capitalist order, like Jordan, who is its metonym, is the greatest (social order) of all time, capable of bridging all differences and resolving all conflicts (Chapter 6, "The Myth of the Greatest of All Time, June 13, 1991").

Even as Jordan boosted the NBA to unprecedented levels of popularity and lucre, a new generation of African American players unapologetically displayed the cultural markers of their urban upbringing (tattoos, cornrows, baggy shorts, hip-hop) while building on and raising to new levels technical and tactical innovations first developed in urban playgrounds in the 1950s and 1960s. The NBA sought to coopt this so-called hip-hop invasion in basketball by both capitalizing on the new markets it helped the league penetrate and carefully regulating the presentation of these players to the league's traditional white male consumers (Chapter 7, "The Myth of Blackness, March 12, 1997").

This rise to preeminence in the United States of this so-called hip-hop generation coincided with a dramatic improvement in the talent of basketball players abroad, who over the course of the 1990s gradually narrowed the gap between their teams and those representing the United States in international competition. Thus, in the wake of the U.S. men's national team's first loss in international competition in 2002, a new myth arose reasserting a tactical essence to basketball (called "playing the right way" and widely associated with the Hall of Fame coach Larry Brown) and equating it with moral virtues (Chapter 8, "The Myth of the Right Way, June 15, 2004"). This myth claimed that white foreign players better embodied the morally virtuous "right way" from which the deviant "hip-hop generation" had strayed, resulting in national disgrace in the context of a more general, post-9/11 insecurity concerning America's place in the world.

Finally, in 2010, LeBron James, the NBA's Most Valuable Player and a free agent, decided to leave his hometown Cleveland Cavaliers to join two other superstars (both also African American) with whom he had consulted before making his decision. This entailed, in effect, the players' exercising powers of team formation conventionally reserved for team owners (almost all white in the NBA) and general managers (still mostly white).

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The subsequent racialized public backlash (Chapter 9, “The Myth of the Man, July 8, 2010”) invoked a normative, hypermasculine fantasy figure (“The Man”) to discipline James and so police the autonomy, mobility of, and interaction among black male bodies in the NBA, on and off the court.

Ball Don't Lie! thus critiques existing popular myths concerning the history of basketball, contextualizes them in relation to historical accounts that encompass developments internal to and beyond the world of basketball, and presents an alternative history of the sport grounded in innovations in play on the court. It emphasizes the creative prerogative of players and the ways in which their innovations are shaped by, and shape, broader cultural and social phenomena, ultimately disrupting the myths that would feed off and confine them. *Ball Don't Lie!* shows that basketball cannot be reduced to a single, fixed or timeless essence but, instead, is a continually evolving exhibition of physical culture that flexibly adapts to and sparks changes in American society.