

# The Construction of Black Masculinity White Supremacy Now and Then

Abby L. Ferber

*University of Colorado at Colorado Springs*

How can a White supremacist nation, which subjects Black men to ongoing racism and demonization, at the same time admire and worship Black men as athletes? The author argues that key elements of White supremacy and the new racism are reinforced by popular representations of Black male athletes. In viewing far-Right White supremacist and sports cultures, two sites representing seemingly opposite ends of the spectrum of contemporary racism, the author examines the continuing significance of the historical image of the buck and the obsession with controlling and “taming” Black male bodies. The author examines four common themes that permeate the contemporary construction of Black masculinity and work to justify color-blind racism and inequality: a continued emphasis on Black bodies as inherently aggressive, hypersexual, and violent; concern with taming and controlling Black males; inequality depicted as a product of a deficient Black culture; and the naturalization of White supremacy and White male superiority.

**Keywords:** *Black men; White supremacy; sport; masculinity*

I know very little about the world of professional men’s sports, but as a sociologist thinking about the connections between sport and White supremacy, the gender and racial dynamics are hard to ignore. In recent years, many athletes have made it beyond the sports pages to the front pages, charged with physical and sexual assaults. Most recently, the Duke lacrosse team made headlines when a number of players were charged with sexually assaulting an African American female stripper they had hired (for a full discussion, see Leonard, 2007 [this issue]). This case in some ways resembles the numerous charges raised against members of the University of Colorado football team in recent years. And as a Coloradoan, I have heard more than I ever wanted to about Kobe Bryant, whose name I was not even familiar with before he was charged with rape by a woman in Vail. And Kobe brings to mind Mike Tyson and O.J. Simpson.

Kobe, Mike, and O.J., of course, are all African American. Although there have been a number of incidents in recent years where Black male athletes have been accused of violent and sexual crimes, it is also true that many White athletes and coaches have faced similar charges. Discussing a variety of specific cases, Jackson

---

**Author’s Note:** The author gratefully acknowledges the feedback and assistance of Jay Coakley, Michael Kimmel, Rich King, David Leonard, and the anonymous reviewers.

Katz (2006) argues that “media coverage seems to increase when black males are the alleged perpetrators” (p. 139). In fact, when I read through the list Katz compiles of White and Black male athletes accused of crimes, I realized that I knew the names of every one of the Black men (and not because of their athletic talent!) but had not heard of a *single* one of the White men! This certainly suggests that the news coverage of such crimes is racially skewed.

Although, on the one hand, White audience members’ worship of Black male athletes may seem a positive embrace of diversity, scholars including Bill Youssman and bell hooks are careful to point out that this should not be equated with antiracism. The mainstream media spectacle of sport does nothing to encourage an interrogation of White supremacy and racism. Poet Essex Hemphill (1992) highlights this paradox in his poem “American Hero”: “I scored thirty-two points this game / and they love me for it / Everyone hollering / Is a friend tonight / But there are towns / Certain neighborhoods / Where I’d be hard pressed / To hear them cheer / If I move on the block” (p. 3). It is this conundrum I seek to examine: How can a White supremacist nation, which subjects Black men to ongoing racism and demonization, at the same time admire and worship Black men as athletes?

Black male bodies are increasingly admired and commodified in rap, hip hop, and certain sports, but at the same time they continue to be used to invoke fear. Black men are both held in contempt and valued as entertainment (Collins, 2005; Leonard, 2004). Yet this is really nothing new. Black men have been defined as a threat throughout American history while being accepted in roles that serve and entertain White people, where they can ostensibly be controlled and made to appear nonthreatening. Furthermore, within the contemporary context of color-blind ideology, the embrace of Black athletes helps White fans to assure themselves that America really is not racist after all. In this article, I will provide a reading of sports popular culture through the lens of historical and contemporary White supremacist ideology. Although seemingly harmless entertainment, mainstream sports culture reiterates the common themes evident in White supremacist constructions of Black masculinity.

In this article, I begin by examining contemporary racial inequality and the contours of what some scholars have called the “new racism.” I will then sketch an historical overview of the construction of Black masculinity that will provide a context for making sense of current constructions. Next, I examine organized, contemporary White supremacist discourse and identify four key themes that have remained relatively constant. Finally, I examine the ways in which these four key themes are evident, to even the most tuned-out observer, in popular cultural representations of Black male athletes. Despite the ways in which Black male athletes may work to subvert the dominant racist discourse, I argue that key elements of White supremacy and the new racism are reinforced by popular representations of Black male athletes.

## The New Racism

Racial oppression remains entrenched in the United States. Blacks and dark-skinned racial minorities are 3 times more likely to be poor than Whites, earn 40% less than Whites, and have one tenth the net wealth of Whites (Bonilla-Silva, 2003). Even with the exact same levels of education, people of color are much more likely to face unemployment and lower wages than Whites. Sociologist Joe Feagin has meticulously documented ongoing discrimination in health care, the criminal justice system, housing, educational institutions, insurance industries, employment (including hiring, career advancement, and pay), and in other institutions, leading him to conclude that “being black means living with racial oppression from cradle to grave” (Feagin, 2001, p. 173; see also Feagin, Vera, & Batur, 2001).

The situation for Black males is especially perilous. Recent research reveals that

Black men in the United States face a far more dire situation than is portrayed by common employment and education statistics . . . and it has worsened in recent years . . . the pool of poorly educated black men are becoming ever more disconnected from the mainstream society, and to a far greater degree than comparable white or Hispanic men. (Eckholm, 2006.)

In fact, the number of Black men without jobs has increased, as has the number in prison. Black men are disproportionately arrested, tried, and sentenced, so that today one third of all Black men between the ages of 18 and 39 can expect to be jailed, imprisoned, paroled, or on probation at some point in their lives (Weathersbee, 2006).

The criminal justice system also treats Black women much more harshly than White women. Research finds that in the adjudication process, Black women’s sexual lives are interrogated in ways that White women’s are not (Joseph, 2006). African American women face a double whammy—it is not only as perpetrators that they experience discrimination but as victims as well. Although women of color are more vulnerable to violent crimes against them, “how society responds to the victimization of women is based on that woman’s status in society. . . . Police, prosecutors, and the courts often ignore or lightly punish rape, sexual abuse, and assaults against black women” (Joseph, 2006, p. 304). Black women are less likely to have a rape case brought to trial or to see their attackers convicted (Joseph, 2006, p. 305). Because African American communities are constructed by the White media as violence prone, violence against Black women is often accepted by the criminal justice system as “normal” (Joseph, 2006, pp. 3-4; see also Leonard, 2007).

Nevertheless, many people believe that discrimination against people of color is a thing of the past (Spencer, 2004). For example, White people generally believe that Whites are actually more likely to face job discrimination than people of color. The reality, however, is that few Whites experience job discrimination (Pincus, 2003; Reskin, 1998). Sociologist Patricia Hill Collins (2005) argues that

recognizing that racism even exists remains a challenge for most White Americans, and increasingly for African Americans as well. They believe that the passage of civil rights legislation eliminated racially discriminatory practices and that any problems that Blacks may experience now are of their own doing. (p. 5)

Central to this new racism, as Collins calls it, is the belief in a color-blind society. A color-blind perspective assumes that discrimination is a thing of the past and the playing field has been leveled; therefore, if anyone is not successful, it is a result of his or her own poor choices. It is not racism but cultural differences between racial groups, which is used to explain inequality. Any racial differences that exist are seen as the result of naturally occurring processes rather than the product of social forces (Bonilla-Silva, 2003).

Just how widespread are these views? According to the National Opinion Research Center, more than half of White respondents believe that Blacks are more likely to prefer to live on welfare than support themselves. "A majority of whites still stereotype black people as violence-prone, inclined to live on welfare, and disinclined to hard work, and a substantial majority still stereotype black Americans as unintelligent" (Feagin et al., 2001, p. 188).

Color-blind ideology leads to the conclusion that we've done all we can. Bonilla-Silva (2003) argues that color-blind racism "has become a formidable political tool for the maintenance of the racial order [serving] as the ideological armor for a covert and institutionalized system [of racial oppression] in the post-Civil Rights era" (p. 3). Color-blind racism is part of the defense of a culture of privilege and contemporary White supremacy (Ferber, 2003). This culture of privilege seeks to naturalize inequality and preserve race, gender, and class privilege. This new color-blind racism is less overt and less biologically based than the racism and legally enshrined inequality and segregation of the past. Nevertheless, this new racism shares much in common with the old.

## **The Historical Context**

Contemporary White supremacy and the new racism remain bolstered by the historical constructions of race and gender on which this nation was founded. The ongoing discrimination African Americans experience today is often rationalized or justified in the minds of Whites by deeply rooted stereotypes of Black men and women. Historically, African Americans were defined as animals, as property to be owned by White men. Racist imagery took gender-specific forms. "Because black men did hard manual labor, justifying the harsh conditions forced upon them required objectifying their bodies as big, strong, and stupid" (Collins, 2005, p. 56).

This imagery possessed a sexual component as well. Fear of Black men's sexuality remained pervasive, and they were constantly depicted as a threat to White womanhood if not controlled. "White elites reduced Black men to their bodies, and identified

their muscles and their penises as their most important sites” (Collins, 2005, p. 57). This narrative, which defines Black males as hypersexual, animalistic, and savage, is central to White American identity, and, as Houston A. Baker (1993) reminds us, “this scene plays itself out . . . with infinite variation in American history” (p. 38).

Black men were also constructed as inherently violent.

This combination of violence and sexuality made black men inherently unsuitable for work until they were trained by White men and placed under their discipline and control. To explain these relations, White elites created the controlling image of the buck. Unlike images of African natives who roam their wild homelands like beasts untamed by civilization (colonialism), the representation of the buck described a human animal that had achieved partial domestication through slavery. (Collins, 2005, p. 56)

Black men were defined as beasts who had to be controlled and tamed to be put into service.

Black women were also defined as hypersexual and denied any rights to control their own bodies. They were defined as unrapable (Joseph, 2006; see also Leonard, 2007, for a fuller discussion). In the White imagination, both Black men and women have been reduced to their physical bodies. These stereotypes were relied on to justify scores of rapes and lynchings and remain entrenched still. Examining news coverage of contemporary rape cases, Susan Fraiman (1994) argues that narratives about race, gender, and sexuality inform battles between racialized men over the bodies of women. She identifies this “paradigm of American racism, available during slavery but crystallized in the period following Reconstruction and still influential today, in which White men’s control of Black men is mediated by the always-about-to-be-violated bodies of White women” (p. 71).

In the past, these stereotypes were attributed to biology. Today, consistent with the new racism, they are instead attributed to Black culture. In both the old and new variations, they are used to justify inequality as a result of inherent characteristics of Black people themselves, “[pointing] to the damaged values and relationships among Black people as the root cause of Black social disadvantage” (Collins, 2005, p. 180). Think more recently about the images of Willie Horton, thug-like rapsters, or welfare queens. The images have changed very little. Collins (2005) argues that these “controlling images” of Black men and women are so entrenched they have “become common-sense ‘truths’” (p. 151) in many people’s minds.

## **An Intersectional Approach**

As this brief historical synopsis reveals, gender is central to the workings of racism. In this article, I use an intersectional approach that sees race and gender as interacting and inseparable. Gender is constructed through race, and race is constructed through gender; they are intersectional and mutually constitutive.

In response to the advances of women during the past half century, many scholars have observed a “crisis of masculinity.” Because gender identities are relational, masculinity is defined in opposition to femininity. As definitions of femininity have been changing, many men have been left wondering what precisely it means to be a man. It is within this cultural context of struggles over racial and gender meanings that a discussion of contemporary cultural constructs of Black masculinity must be situated.

I examine two specific cultural sites where these battles are taking place: in far-Right White supremacist and sports cultures. These two sites represent seemingly opposite ends of the spectrum of contemporary racism: White supremacist discourse, defined as an extreme form of racism and hatred, and professional sports, fully mainstream and central to American popular culture. Both sites reveal the continuing significance of the historical image of the buck and the obsession with controlling and “taming” Black male bodies. Despite the shift from the old to the new racism, much remains unchanged.

In the following sections, I will examine these common themes:

1. A continued emphasis on Black bodies and essential racial differences. African Americans continue to be defined as aggressive, hypersexual, threatening, and potentially violent.
2. A concern with taming and controlling Black males.
3. Inequality is depicted as a product of a deficient Black culture.
4. White supremacy, and White male superiority, are naturalized.

These four themes permeate the contemporary construction of Black masculinity and work to justify color-blind racism and inequality.

Although more covert, coded, and cultural, the new racism continues to uphold the same White supremacist suppositions of the past, rearticulating and churning out anew the very same constructions of Black masculinity so prevalent throughout American history and cultural expression. Considering mainstream sports culture alongside historical and contemporary White supremacist discourse reveals just how entrenched these images are.

## **Organized White Supremacist Movement**

The number of hate groups in the United States has been rising steadily. According to the Southern Poverty Law Center, in 2005 there were 803, a 33% increase since 2000. (Although this number includes all groups classified as hate groups, they count 179 KKK, 157 Neo-Nazi, 56 racist skinhead, 56 Christian Identity, and 99 Neo-Confederate.) White supremacist organizations increasingly turn to the Internet to spread their hate, through bulletin boards and World Wide Web sites such as Stormfront or White Aryan Resistance. The Internet has become a

valuable new tool in the White supremacist arsenal. It is easy, cheap, instantaneous, and highly accessible. It provides international connections and virtual anonymity for its participants and audience. The rise of the Internet has allowed organized White supremacy to permeate mainstream culture. According to Don Black, creator of the Stormfront Web site, they are now able to reach potentially millions of people whom otherwise would never have attended a meeting or rally or subscribed to a racist publication (in Swain, 2002, p. 155). The Southern Poverty Law Center (2006, p. 59) documented 522 U.S.-based hate Web sites in 2005.

Contemporary White supremacist discourse relies on both cultural and biological justifications for racial inequality. The emphasis on essential racial differences has remained unchanged over time. According to David Duke, in an interview conducted for *Contemporary Voices of White Nationalism in America*,

Science has been uncovering these differences dramatically over the last few decades. They exist in physiological areas, cultural areas, and in actual physical areas. We have these great differences between the races, and knowledge of these differences has been suppressed. (Swain, 2002, p. 173)

In this discourse, the White race is seen as responsible for civilization. *The Thunderbolt* (1975) proclaims:

The White Race has created and developed most of the world's present and past civilizations . . . responsible for almost all of the scientific, engineering and productive know-how that has raised the world's standard of living . . . the only race which has been able to maintain a free democratic government. Liberty, justice and freedom only exist in White nations . . . [as do] culture, art, humanities. . . . The charity and goodness of the White Race have time and again saved the non-White peoples of the world from famine and plague. The White Race in the past has established moral codes, rules and laws, and educational systems for the advancement of society that have been unsurpassed by any other race in the world. (p. 8)

On the other hand, African Americans are depicted as responsible for most crime in the United States. For example, an article entitled "Never Blame the Genes" warns, "Even when the other minorities are on the same or lower economic level, blacks still outkill, outrape, outassault and outburglarize other nonwhites three or four to one" ("Never Blame the Genes," 1997, p. 19). If racial and gender differences are inherent and immutable, then it is fruitless to attempt to change them, and this is precisely what organized hate groups argue.

In *White Man Falling: Race, Gender and White Supremacy* (Ferber, 1998), I examined the White supremacist obsession with interracial sexuality. For example, *The Turner Diaries*, a futuristic novel considered the blueprint for the Oklahoma City bombing, presents a picture of society where White women and young girls are constantly raped and attacked by Black men. The novel depicts the case of Elsa, a

young White girl harassed and attacked by the Black boys in her integrated school. As the narrator explains, “Even when gangs of Blacks took their children away or raped their women before their eyes, they offered no significant resistance . . . many of them seem to be convinced that any effort at self-defense would be ‘racist’” (Macdonald, 1978, p. 152)

Later in the novel, once the race revolution is under way and the military and police are out in full force, Turner describes the following scene: “Two grinning Black soldiers forced their way through the throng in front of the tent and went inside, dragging a terrified, sobbing White girl about 14 years old between them. The raping queue moved forward another space” (Macdonald, 1978, p. 187).

The image of a White woman with a Black man has been relied on throughout White supremacist discourse to motivate White men to join the movement. It is the threat of Black masculinity that they mobilize against. A *Thunderbolt* (no. 297) article proclaims, “Let us warn our young White women of the great danger inherent in socializing with black males” (p. 3). And another article asserts, “Lust . . . may be too gentle a word for the maelstrom in the black male’s brain” (*National Vanguard*, 1979, p. 11).

This ideology has led to continuing violence aimed at interracial couples and mixed-race families (Anti-Defamation League of B’nai B’rith, 1988). The construction of White masculinity is central to this obsession. Continuing the historical construction of White male entitlement, to be a male in this discourse is to have control over women and other men. Interracial sexuality represents the loss of this control. White men are assumed to have natural rights to White women. The threat to this right is summarized in this White supremacist article:

White men are discovering that some of their rightful biological partners are becoming hideous to behold. The skin of these women still gleams like ivory, their bodies as voluptuous as ever. The hideousness comes from the male hand intertwined with one of theirs. The hand is black. (*National Vanguard*, 1979, p. 11)

This discourse suggests that interracial sexuality threatens White masculinity and privilege.

Despite the seriousness of this threat in White supremacist ideology, Black men are still ultimately seen as capable of being tamed by White men; the only impediment is the Jew. Almost every discussion of race mixing, whether it is school busing or intermarriage, attributes the problem to Jews. A multitude of articles, found throughout all of the various periodicals, attempts to demonstrate that Jews are responsible for race mixing and interracial sexuality. For example, *The Thunderbolt* has published articles with titles such as “Jewish Leaders Supporting Race-Mixing,” “Jews Finance Race-Mixing Case,” and “Why Do Jews Support Race-Mixing?” According to the *NSV Report*, Aryans are facing “an organized mutiny of biologically inferior people, led by the Jews against the White race” (*NSV Report*, 1983, p. 5).



According to this ideology, Jews are trying to race mix Whites out of existence, and Black men are their most dangerous tool. Because Jews are consistently presented as the driving force behind race mixing, it is assumed that if Jews were out of the picture, White men could tame Black men and ensure the separation of Blacks and Whites. Jews are repeatedly depicted as puppeteers, controlling the Black men's actions and using their natural violence, hypersexuality, and aggression against Whites (Ferber, 1998). As an article in *The Thunderbolt* explains, "When misled liberals and Jews constantly tell negroes that they are equal to (or better) than Whites, hatred and violence erupts when they are unable to compete" (*The Thunderbolt*, 1979, p. 8). Although the Black man is frequently presented as a dangerous threat, whether as a criminal or a rapist of White women, it is often suggested Black men could be brought under the control of White men and tamed if Jews were out of the picture. Relentless anti-Semitism and the underlying focus on Jews as the driving force behind threats to White male hegemony are perhaps the greatest differences between White supremacist ideology and more mainstream forms of racism. However, the construction of Black masculinity is remarkably similar. The depiction of Black men as inherently inferior, violent, and hypersexual and the need to control Black men remain common and central across the spectrum. Does the success of Black men in the arena of sports challenge this White supremacist construction of Black masculinity?

### **Mainstream Constructions of Black Masculinity**

Sport is a particularly powerful institution, "a cultural text" central to American identity (Leonard, 2004, p. 285). According to Mary Jo Kane (1996), "Sport consists of a set of ideological beliefs and practices that are closely tied to traditional power structures. . . . Sport has become such a bedrock of our national psyche that sport figures often come to symbolize larger pressing social concerns" (pp. 95, 97). Sporting events are more than simply entertainment; "they're also sites where racial and ethnic relations happen and change" (Coakley, 2006, p. 282).

Successful women and Black athletes may be seen as potentially threatening to the notion of White male superiority (Duncan & Messner, 1998; Kane, 1996). However, depictions of African American athletes may also reinforce the traditional hierarchy by reifying stereotypes of their animal-like nature, emphasizing their sexuality, aggressiveness, and physical power. Just as we observed in far-Right racist ideology, there is a similar naturalization of racial difference in sports discourse, where Black men are often assumed to be naturally more athletic. This assumption follows from the historical stereotype of physically aggressive Black male bodies. Despite much evidence to the contrary, the myth that Blacks have more natural athletic ability is hard to dispel (Coakley, 2006; Graves, 2004). To understand how widespread this view is, just recall the recent claims of the Air Force Academy coach

who rationalized his team's loss as a result of the disproportionate number of Black men on the opposing team. As Collins (2005) argues, the actual work of Black male athletes is made invisible—so that they are constructed as naturally athletic.

Although one might hope that the success of Black male athletes might help to undermine racism, sports represents an arena where Black men have historically been allowed to succeed—in the entertainment and service industries (Coakley, 2006). Although African American men have been very successful in certain sports, they are rarely found in positions of power and control—as coaches or owners. Within the industry, they are largely under the control of White men. Success in the field of athletics also does nothing to undermine the historical propensity to reduce Black men to their bodies. As Jay Coakley (2006) argues, Black men's talent is often attributed to nature, whereas the accomplishments of White athletes are instead characterized as “fortitude, intelligence, moral character, strategic preparation, coachability, and good organization” (p. 288). Thus, the success of Black men in sports is entirely consistent with White supremacist ideology.

Collins (2005) argues that there is a traditional family script in place in sports that works to minimize the threat of Black masculinity. The coach is similar to the White male father figure, whereas Black male athletes are like the children, under the father's control and subject to his rule. It is only when they accept and play this role that they are fully embraced and accepted and seen as nonthreatening. Their bodies can be admired as long as they are perceived as controlled by White males. These athletes are then defined as the “good Blacks.”

At the same time, the demonization of certain Black male athletes as “bad boys” is used as a tool to exert control over those men who do not so easily submit to White male authority. According to Collins (2005), “The contested images of Black male athletes, especially ‘bad boy’ Black athletes who mark the boundary between admiration and fear, speak to the tensions linking Western efforts to control Black men” (p. 153). The negative depiction of bad boys works to reinforce efforts to tame their “out of control” nature.

When Latrell Sprewell choked his coach in 1997, Collins (2005) argues that Sprewell's media coverage symbolized the larger depictions of Black masculinity as overly physical, out of control, prone to violence, driven by instinct, and hypersexual. The disproportionate media coverage focused on violent or sexual assault charges brought against Black male athletes, compared with similar charges against White male athletes, reifies this stereotype of Black men as inherently dangerous and in need of civilizing. The message is that all Black men are essentially bad boys but that some can become “good guys” if tamed and controlled by White men.

Collins (2005) notes that fans display a certain amount of ambivalence toward Black male athletes, whom many fans seem to “love to hate” (p. 155). Sprewell, Allen Iverson, Charles Barkley, Dennis Rodman, Barry Bonds, and Terrell Owens are all seen as unruly and disrespectful, but at the same time, this bad boy image may enhance their reputation and media coverage. As Coakley (2006) argues,

Many whites in the United States have grown up fearing the power of Black male bodies, being anxious about their sexual capacities, and being fascinated by their movements. Ironically, this aspect of racial ideology has created circumstances in which black male bodies have come to be valuable entertainment commodities . . . on athletic fields. (Coakley, 2006, p. 296; see also Spencer, 2004)

Collins (2005) argues that athletes like Sprewell and Iverson are examples of Black males who refuse to assimilate and play by the rules, unsettling “prevailing norms of race and gender” (p. 156). At the same time, however, they reinforce the stereotype of Black men out of control and feed into racist White supremacist definitions of Black masculinity.

The stereotype of Black men as sexual predators, especially as threats to White women, is central to the good-bad dichotomy (Leonard, 2004). The White supremacist obsession with the dangers of interracial sexuality is relied on and reinforced by the mainstream media as well. This historical narrative informed perceptions of the O.J. Simpson arrest and trial. The darkening of Simpson’s face on the cover of a popular magazine reinforced the correlation between blackness and danger, and a Gallup poll found that 39% of White respondents and 43% of African American respondents claimed that they would be less interested in the Simpson case if it did not involve an interracial relationship (or, we might surmise, if the man were White and the victim an African American woman).

Katz and Kimmel discuss an interesting exception in the Bryant case, where Lakers fans gave him a standing ovation after he had been charged with raping a White woman in Vail, Colorado, in 2003. Rather than attacking Bryant, White fans came to his defense. What made this case different?

Clearly race is a central factor, but not in the way some might assume. Kobe Bryant’s trial offers a revealing glimpse into one of the historical characteristics of White American racism. Try a little experiment. Suppose that instead of Kobe Bryant standing accused of sexual assault, it was Allen Iverson or Latrell Sprewell. Would there be a comparable outcry in their defense, and a comparable unleashing of rage against their alleged victims? It seems unlikely, because Iverson and Sprewell are already seen by much of White America as caricatures: street thugs who happen to be talented basketball players. (In fact, both have been involved in assaults, and neither got anything close to the public expressions of sympathy that Bryant has received.) Now, try a different example. Imagine if it were Reggie Miller or Allen Houston in the defendant’s chair. Millions of fans—including millions of Whites—would instantly rise to their defense. Why? Because in the eyes of many White fans, they’re not like those “other” Blacks. They’re “our” Blacks, “good” Blacks, the kind of Blacks that White fans love to cheer for. (Kimmel and Katz)

On the other hand, David Leonard (2004) argues that White fans have not continued to come to Bryant’s defense, and he sees Bryant now moving from good guy to bad boy in many White people’s minds. Leonard demonstrates that the “discursive

field surrounding the rape allegations has transformed Kobi Bryant from Uncle Tom to Gus, from an acceptable, harmless ‘Negro,’ to a dangerous ‘nigger,’ [who] now embodies a hypersexual brute accused of raping a young White girl” (p. 298).

This division between the good guys who have been tamed and know their place versus the bad boys who refuse to submit to control reflects the historical and ongoing construction of Black masculinity in White supremacist culture and limits the ways in which Black men are seen in our culture. It reinforces the old presumption, widespread as slavery declined, that Black men are safe and acceptable only when under the control and civilizing influence of Whites. However, they have an inherently violent, aggressive nature lying just beneath the surface, threatening to spring forth at any time. At the same time, the good guy space reinforces color-blind racism. By embracing the successful good guys, Whites can tell themselves they are not racist, and they can blame African Americans for their own failures (Leonard, 2004).

## Conclusion

The four racist themes evident in both cultural sites produce the illusion that White male supremacy is the natural result of Black men’s inherently inferior, violent, aggressive, and hypersexual natures. Black men are defined as responsible for their own failure to succeed, and they must be controlled for their own good and that of society. These four themes directly support and reinforce the new racism. They underscore the assumption that we now live in a color-blind nation and that racism is a thing of the past. Any inequality is now seen as the result of natural and cultural differences or African Americans’ own poor choices. Although the construction of Black masculinity has remained virtually unchanged from slavery through the present, it has been malleable enough to reinforce both the old and new racisms.

These steadfast images of Black men naturalize and reinforce racial inequality. They reinforce the message that Black men are naturally aggressive, are violent, cannot succeed on their own, are not suited for professional careers, are not good fathers, and need to be controlled by White men. This imagery justifies in many people’s minds the disproportionate imprisonment of Black men today. Black men continue to be reduced to their physical bodies and defined as inferior to White men.

Images of successful Black athletes also provide a “bootstraps” story, sending the message that these Black men have succeeded; therefore, there is no reason other Black men can’t. This story allows White folks to see themselves as nonracist and imagine that we now live in a color-blind nation. As Leonard (2004) argues, “One of the most powerful discursive spaces in which colorblindness is employed and deployed is the arena of sports” (p. 287). The vast reality of discrimination and institutionalized racism is erased from view. Athletics and entertainment are the two primary realms in which we actually see Black men presented as successful in our culture, and they are consistent with the historical stereotypes and limited opportunities

available to Black men. Furthermore, these images continue to limit the aspirations and role models for young Black boys. According to Collins (2005), "Most Black American boys will never achieve the wealth and fame of their athletic role models through sports. Keeping them mesmerized with sports heroes may actually weaken their ability to pursue other avenues to success" (p. 157). As Yousman (2003) argues, White adoration of Black entertainers "allows Whites to contain their fears and animosities toward Blacks through rituals not of ridicule, as in previous eras, but of adoration . . . [nevertheless] the act is still a manifestation of White supremacy" (p. 369).

As poet Hemphill argues, the fact that White Americans accept Black men on the court has not lead to a similar acceptance off the court. Although White folks may be willing to embrace Black men as athletes, they still do not embrace them as neighbors. Segregated housing and schools result in many White people having very little opportunity to get to know people of color in their daily lives. Only 2% of White people have a Black neighbor (Williams, 1997).

Clearly, the success of Black men as athletes does little to challenge the systematic and institutionalized system of White supremacy. Instead, within a White supremacist culture, even this success is manipulated and rearticulated to support White supremacy and hegemonic White masculine privilege.

The sheer pervasive nature of this imagery means that more extremist forms of White supremacy will be more likely to resonate when encountered by White folks. In today's high-tech world, where children and adults are likely to stumble on White supremacist Web sites at some point, it is more important than ever that we interrogate our more mainstream discourses of race and present a conscious antiracist agenda. Instead, the range of racist imagery to which we are all exposed normalizes racism and naturalizes inequality.

## References

- Anti-Defamation League of B'nai B'rith. (1988). *Hate groups in America: A record of bigotry and violence*. New York: Author.
- Baker, H. A. (1993). Scene . . . not heard. In R. Gooding-Williams (Ed.), *Reading Rodney King/reading urban uprising* (pp. 38-50). New York: Routledge.
- Bonilla-Silva, E. (2003). *Racism without racists: Color-blind racism and the persistence of racial inequality in the United States*. Lanham, MD: Rowman and Littlefield.
- Coakley, J. (2006). *Sports in society: Issues and controversies*. New York: McGraw-Hill.
- Collins, P. H. (2005). *Black sexual politics: African Americans, gender, and the new racism*. New York: Routledge.
- Duncan, M. C., & Messner, M. A. (1998). The media image of sport and gender. In L. A. Wenner (Ed.), *Media sport* (pp. 170-185). New York: Routledge.
- Eckholm, E. (2006). *New York Times: Plight Deepens for Black Men*. New York: New York Times.
- Feagin, J. R. (2001). *Racist America: Roots, current realities, and future reparations*. New York: Routledge.

- Feagin, J. R., Vera, H., & Batur, P. (2001). *White racism* (2nd ed.). New York: Routledge.
- Ferber, A. L. (1998). *White man falling: Race, gender and white supremacy*. Lanham, MD: Rowman and Littlefield.
- Ferber, A. L. (2003). Defending the culture of privilege. In M. S. Kimmel & A. L. Ferber (Eds.), *Privilege: A reader* (pp. 319-330). Boulder, CO: Westview.
- Fraiman, S. (1994, Spring). Geometries of race and gender: Eve Sedgwick, Spike Lee, Charlayne Hunter-Gault. *Feminist Studies*, 20, 67-84.
- Graves, J. L. (2004). *The race myth: Why we pretend race exists in America*. New York: Dutton.
- Hemphill, E. (1992). American hero. In *Ceremonies: Prose and poetry* (p. 3). San Francisco: Cleis Press.
- Joseph, J. (2006). Intersectionality of race/ethnicity, class, and justice: Women of color. In A. V. Merlo & J. M. Pollock (Eds.), *Women, law, and social control* (pp. 292-312). New York: Pearson.
- Kane, M. J. (Spring, 1996). Media coverage of the post Title IX female athlete: A feminist analysis of sport, gender, and power. *Duke Journal of Gender Law and Policy*, 3(1), 95-127.
- Katz, J. (2006). *The macho paradox: Why some men hurt women and how all men can help*. Naperville, IL: Sourcebooks.
- Kimmel, M. & Katz, J. unpublished paper.
- Leonard, D. J. (2004). The next M.J. or the next O.J.? Kobe Bryant, race, and the absurdity of colorblind rhetoric. *Journal of Sport and Social Issues*, 28, 284-313.
- Leonard, D. J. (2007). Innocent until proven innocent: In defense of Duke lacrosse and White power. *Journal of Sport and Social Issues*, 31, 25-44.
- Macdonald, A. [pseudonym of William Pierce]. (1978). *The Turner diaries*. Hillsboro, VA: National Vanguard.
- Never blame the genes. (1997, September). *Instauration*, p. 19.
- (1979, May). *National Vanguard*, p. 11.
- (2006, March 20). *New York Times*.
- (1983, April/June). *NSV Report*, p. 5.
- Pincus, F. L. (2003). *Reverse discrimination: Dismantling the myth*. Boulder, CO: Lynne Reinart.
- Reskin, B. (1998). *The realities of affirmative action in employment*. Washington, DC: American Sociological Association.
- Southern Poverty Law Center. (2006, Spring). *The year in hate. Intelligence report*. Montgomery, AL: Author.
- Spencer, N. E. (May, 2004). Sister act VI: Venus and Serena Williams at Indian Wells: "Sincere fictions" and White racism. *Journal of Sport and Social Issues*, 28, 115-135.
- Swain, C. M. (2002). *The new White nationalism in America*. Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press.
- The Thunderbolt*, 297, 3.
- (1979, August). *The Thunderbolt*, p. 8.
- (1975, May 30). *The Thunderbolt*, p. 8.
- Yousman, B. (2003). Blackophilia and Blackophobia: White youth, the consumption of rap music, and White supremacy. *Communication Theory*, 13, 366-391.
- Weathersbee, T. (2006, May 16). Putting Blacks in prison is the latest legacy of slavery. *Florida Times Union*.
- Williams, P. J. (1997). *Seeing a color-blind future: The paradox of race*. New York: Noonday.

**Abby L. Ferber** is an associate professor of sociology and director of women's studies and of The Matrix Center at the University of Colorado at Colorado Springs. She is the author of *White Man Falling: Race, Gender and White Supremacy* and *Home Grown Hate*, the coeditor of *Privilege: A Reader*, and coauthor of *Making A Difference: University Students of Color Speak Out*.