

Rituals of the African American Domus

Church, Community, Sport, and LeBron James

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It is a story of the public presentation of the black body, a search for the cultural imperatives that have influenced the ways in which African Americans have clothed themselves, styled their hair, and communicated meaning through gesture, dance and other forms of bodily display . . . within the confines of an oppressive social system, African Americans have been able to develop and give visual expression to cultural preferences that were at variance with those of the dominant group (White and White 1998, 2).

African American religious, social, and sports rituals are all interconnected. The Black Church has served as the institutional conduit and transfer-point of cultural ways of singing, shouting, preaching, and testifying, and the phrase “make a joyful noise unto the Lord” has been taken quite literally by many black congregations over the centuries. Given the importance of the Black Church to the black community from slavery through the Civil Rights Movement, it should be no surprise to find that African Americans rework religious ritual into cultural ways of ritualizing in everyday society. Desegregated sport, especially since the Civil Rights Movement, has allowed African Americans like current National Basketball Association (NBA) star LeBron James to succeed at the game while they have embodied the African-American dream of the freedom of cultural expression.

My primary focus in this chapter is on African American behavior patterns and social rituals with deep roots in the Black Church. As such, the bulk of my argument will be to show how ministers, congregants, and choirs forged unique modes of expression in the Black Church that spread into surrounding communities. I elaborate on how “ordinary rituals in everyday behavior” forged in and around urban and rural black churches serve as the framework that informs contemporary athletes, such as James, who ritualize in sport. The new churches of African American expressivity are stadiums and arenas all over America. I will focus on three rituals that flow from everyday life and black religious life into both professional basketball and football—the ring/circle ritual, the call-and-response ritual, and the individual creative expressivity ritual—in the context of research highlighting nascent ritualizing and creative ritualizing.

Though both men and women create and continually rework black expressive rituals in churches and neighborhoods across America, the bodies most prevalent in popular sport are African American males, and as such will be the focus of this chapter.¹ For the sake of space, I will limit my analysis to four examples of these types of expressive rituals that have made their way into popular culture via sport: pregame circular rituals designed to both harmonize and “fire-up” teams before play begins; LeBron James’s ritual powder-toss; slam-dunking as ritual in basketball; and end-zone dancing as professional football call-and-response ritual.²

THE RING AND CIRCLE IN BLACK SPORT

If there was any doubt about the convergence of sport and religion, behold the naming of National Basketball Association (NBA) player LeBron James as “King James” and “The Chosen

One” to whom we all bear “Witness.”³ James emerged into the professional ranks straight out of high school in 2003, and currently plays for the Cleveland Cavaliers. Nike uses the two honorific religious titles (after all, the most foundational translation of the Bible in the Western (Protestant) world was commissioned by King James of England)—in conjunction with “witness”—to promote James (with Kobe Bryant and Tiger Woods, their premier athlete endorsers) in billboard ads, television commercials, and with “branding” on basketball shoes. ESPN, ABC, and TNT—television networks who all broadcast NBA games—highlight James in slow-motion commercials. This combination of media and advertising worship and the phenomenon of Cleveland Cavalier fans who bear “witness” on t-shirts illuminates how James is viewed as much more than a star athlete: in a sporting sense, he is seen as the second coming of Michael Jordan—“chosen” at birth to attain to new levels of greatness.

Ronald Grimes notes in his definition of ritualizing that “ritualizing transpires as animated persons enact formative gestures in the face of receptivity during crucial times in founded places” (1982, 60). If naming “King” James “the chosen one” is any indication, then fans, advertisers, and the media are certainly receptive to the various formative gestures enacted by LeBron James in arenas (“founded places”) around the USA.

Lebron James, Michael Jordan, Kobe Bryant, and many other contemporary black athletes who have achieved success since the rise of boxer Muhammad Ali, have all developed their own individual styles of play. On occasion, some of these performed acts have become ritual, including the ring or circle ritual in which teams engage as they prepare for the game. In a typical such ritual, Lebron James stands in the center of a circle made up of his teammates, and dances, chants, and sings as they all indicate their support of him in the outer-ring. He smiles, snaps his fingers, chants, and gestures. Other teams in professional basketball (the Los Angeles

Lakers, for one) and football (the Baltimore Ravens, among others) also engage in this now-common ritual. Gena Caponi notes the African roots of this black cultural practice:

In the majority of cultures across Africa, group rituals were performed in a circle, dancers danced in a circle, and individuals performed solos in the center before returning to the surrounding circle of community. The circle helped to keep everybody involved, active, and interdependent. In addition to the circle, African rituals used . . . individual improvisation and stylization . . . dialogic interaction or call-and-response . . . Taken together they form the basis of most African cultural expressions—the basis of African aesthetics. (1999, 9)⁴

Ritualizing in the ring and circle is widely practiced in African American culture. At many black wedding receptions, guests initiate a “ring dance” by forming a circle while dancing and singing in unison, and then one-by-one joining the circle, performing an improvised dance move or their own signature move—often to laughter and chants—and then returning to the outer ring. Individuality is supported, and the more exaggerated the dance move or gesture, the more laughter there is, and the more it is support by the group. According to Roger Abrahams:

Each player is encouraged to show off in some way, either through some kind of individualized dance step...or through strutting, teasing, flirting, and wiggling, with everyone else clapping, commenting, and joking in support. This is the point. For while the player is at the center he or she is never alone, rather there is constant commentary and support by the ring. (1992, 104)

Black athletes have transferred common ritualizing in the ring to professional basketball and football games via the circle of community. Athletes are never separate from the team or the crowd; they perform for the crowd and team. This is part of the larger ritual of call-and-response in black culture and, specifically, in the Black Church.

SOME DISTINCTIONS IN THE STUDY OF RITUAL, RITUALIZING AND BLACK CULTURE

Legend has it that former President William Howard Taft—at 300 pounds the heaviest president in history—inspired a baseball ritual quite by accident:

In 1910, as a game between the Washington Senators and the [Philadelphia] Athletics wore on, the rotund, six-foot-two president reportedly grew more and more uncomfortable in his small wooden chair. By the middle of the seventh inning he could bear it no longer and stood up to stretch his aching legs—whereupon everyone else in the stadium, thinking the president was about to leave, rose to show their respect. A few minutes later Taft returned to his seat, the crowd followed suit, and the "seventh-inning stretch" was born. (Emery 2009, 1)

The same thing was done at the following game, until the “stretch” became a ritual across America.

In his early work on ritual theory, Ronald Grimes notes that narrow definitions of ritual tend to concentrate on mature instances—such as Passover or Mass—and tend to overlook emergent behaviors that are nascent ritual, or what Grimes describes as “ritualizing.” Traditional theories of ritual have argued that rites “originated but cannot originate,” which is, Grimes argues, a conservative fallacy. Rather, “we want to call attention to their originative moments” (1982, 61), such as in the case of the seventh-inning stretch. Ritual is not an unchanging given; Grimes suggests that we can engage in “ritual creativity,” which may lead to ritual.

Though African Americans differ regarding the appropriateness of displaying black cultural ways in various milieu (Kochman, 1981), the practice by African Americans of ritualizing in predominantly white public spaces requires that we understand these acts as more than merely acts of asocial behavior (see Jones 1986). What sometimes appear as resistant social acts by black athletes might be ritualizing instances that, if sustained rather than swiftly aborted by traditional rules and norms, could become part of the social fabric—what Grimes loosely describes as “rites of passage, seasonal rites, meditative practices, carnival celebrations, and so on”—rather than snuffed-out as simply “meaningless gestures and cultural symbols” (Grimes 1982, 62).

There is an ongoing visual conversation of gestures and practices of African American life that informs views of the world and speaks into that world with verbal and nonverbal cultural stylings. As John Edgar Wideman notes on African American expressivity, “Our stories, songs, dreams, dances, social forms, style of walk, talk, dressing, cooking, sport, our heroes and heroines provide a record . . . so distinctive and abiding that its origins in culture have been misconstrued as rooted in biology” (1990, 43), hinting that African American rituals get passed on intergenerationally through “stories, songs [and] dreams.”

The African American aesthetic—which informs ritualizing—is a way of being in the world that is passed down generation after generation through “cultural expressions such as dance, religion, music, and play, [where] societies articulate and transmit the ideas, values, and beliefs that bind people together” (Caponi 1999, 7). And though religion is the major temple from which these aesthetic values emanate via bodily and verbal expression, one need not attend church on a regular basis in order to be acculturated.⁵

RITUAL AND THE BIRTH OF THE BLACK CHURCH

The Black Church has long been identified as the one American institution free of white entanglement. As Albert Raboteau (1995) notes, the influence of this black-controlled space was crucial for community development:

As a center for social organization, economic cooperation, educational endeavor, leadership training, political articulation, and religious life, the . . . church exercised unrivaled influence in many black communities. It was . . . the one institution that African-Americans controlled. (79-80)

Today, the Black Church continues to serve a broad purpose for African Americans (see Battle 2006). It often serves as a community center and social gathering place, festival and anniversary site, and a place where baptisms, weddings, and funerals are held. People meet their spouses, raise their kids, sing in the choir, and seek fellowship there. It is the how of doing church that separates this original black institution from its white counterpart, though this

difference was not envisioned by the whites who originally gave Christianity to the slaves. Initially considered a way by which slave-masters could maintain peace on the plantation, Christianity has, as Reverend Calvin Marshall argues, empowered African Americans with its resistant nature:

Long before there was a college degree in the race, there were great black preachers, there were great black saints, and there were great black churches. The [white] man systematically killed your language, killed your culture, tried to kill your soul, tried to blot you out—but somewhere along the way he gave us Christianity, and gave it to us to enslave us. But it freed us—because we understood things about it, and we made it work in ways for us that it never worked for him. (quoted in Holt 1972, 331)

There was no notion among whites of how African Americans would transform church rituals to fit their ends. Later blacks took the “white man’s religion and from within the black church developed routines and variations of form, substance, and ritual to satisfy black psychological needs” (Holt 1972, 332). Raboteau (1995) goes further in his analysis of the black incorporation of Christianity, noting that black Christians rejected the notion that Christianity was a white man’s religion and instead notes that “Christianity and slavery were antithetical. Christianity was not false; the American version of it was” (61). And thus a vehicle for black expressivity and ritual was born.

THE BLACK MINISTER, BLACK STYLE, AND BLACK RITUAL

The identity of the black minister was intimately tied to his (rarely, before the Civil Rights Movement, her) ability to use his creative expressiveness—within the context of the church ritual of preaching—to bring about an emotional release from audience members. Raboteau (1995) discusses the distinctive style of black preaching as “the chanted sermon” (41), and notes that though this style is not inclusive of all black ministers—and indeed, some white ministers follow this style—it is “as much a staple of African-American culture as spirituals, gospel, blues, and tales” (142). Further, the chanted sermon style is discernable among black ministers who can perform it with “. . . skill, fluency, spontaneity and intensity” (142). Grace Holt elaborates:

The ritual begins with the preacher “stylin’ out,” which the audience eagerly awaits . . . “Stylin’ out” means he’s going to perform certain acts, say certain things with flourish and finesse . . . The preacher walks, body swaying from side to side, slightly bent, from one side of the pulpit to the other . . . He waits until he gets to one side, stands straight up, and makes a statement about sin . . . with a strong sense of melody and rhythm. (1972, 334)

If ever there was an original ritual in African American culture, it is the expressive performance of the black preacher in synchronicity with the black congregation. This was not a monologue, but a dialogue between pastor and flock, setting up the cultural aesthetic of the call-and-response:

The verbal exchange between preacher and audience throughout the service is accompanied by a variety of counterpoint. When the preacher makes his charges of sin he may shout or whisper, point a finger, lean on the pulpit, pause, or look long and hard at the audience, letting the words sink in for effect. . . . The white handkerchief, wiping the face, pausing to get a drink of water, and changing to a shaking voice all signal to the audience that the preacher is really going to get down and preach; the spirits of the audience lift . . . (Holt 1972, 336-37)

The pastor's personal expression is grounded in tradition, and his or her own "signature" style involves "moves, gestures, dances, [and] speaking with body as well as voice" (Raboteau 1995, 144). The gestures and movements by the pastor are part of the build-up. The audience is aware of each movement as part of the nonverbal communication, part of the pastor saying "I'm tired, but this is so worth saying that I will fight my fatigue in the name of the Lord."

Given the exalted status of ministers and the church in the black community, it is little wonder then that these call-and-response ways of interaction have flowed from the pastor to the choir, throughout the church, and right down the steps into the black community. There has always been a strong receptivity not only to the message of the healing of earthly wounds, but also to the enactment—the form of delivery that has become sacred ritual in African American culture. As Grimes puts it:

Ritualizing is enactment in the face of imagined, socially experienced, or mythologically construed receptivity. For ritualization to occur, the surroundings must expose a vulnerable (vulner = wound) side . . . in order for ritualizing to gestate. The more deeply

an enactment is received, the more an audience becomes a congregation and the more a performance becomes ritualized. “Sacred” is the name we give to the deepest forms of receptivity in our experience. (1982, 62)

Thus, black ministerial ritualizing is a performative enactment to a deeply receptive congregation steeped in historical wounds. These styles of interactions are sacred on Sundays, to be sure, but they are also sacred rituals in the black community generally. And as there is diversity in American society, so there is diversity in both black and white churchgoing and ritual. Though one might assume that from a common past might flow a singular style of expression in African American culture, there are a range of ways individuals choose to (or are able to) express themselves in any given social situation.

J. L. Hanna comments on what she has observed in relation to dance and the black church, implying that there is neither an essential black church nor a black way of being:

. . . dancing is not innate among blacks; middle-class Afro-Americans (sic) often move like whites. So do Africans who are educated in British or American settings as I discovered in my African fieldwork. Some do not know how to dance. Furthermore, as there are black churchgoers who “feel the spirit,” as their manifest body movement bears witness, there are also middle-class black churchgoers who are as physically restrained as their white counterparts. (1997, 382)

First and foremost, the Black Church provides its congregants with an opportunity to cleanse themselves of worldly pain and suffering, seek forgiveness for sins, and commune with

others. But in ways uncommon in white congregations (white Pentecostals and middle-class blackness notwithstanding), the black church has served as a safe haven for creative expressivity. All of this lived expressivity and the transference into black everyday life is summarized well by rhythm-and-blues guitarist Johnny Otis (1993), who noted:

I never had to instruct my horn players how to phrase a passage . . . The music grew out of the African American way of life . . . the emphasis in spiritual values, the way reverend Jones preached, the way Sister Williams sang in the choir, the way the old brother down the street played the slide guitar and crooned the blues, the very special way the people danced, walked, laughed, cried, joked, got happy, shouted in church.
(117)

The day-to-day practices have forged distinctive ways of living and are ritualized and reinvented with each new generation, adding character to the African American way of life. While reinvention happens in homes, on street-corners, and on playgrounds, ritualization certainly happens weekly in black churches.

BLACK SOCIAL RITUAL AND THE BLACK DOMUS

There are two key social rituals that are learned in the Black Church and transferred into everyday life: the call-and-response nature of interaction between all parties in the church, and the free-flowing acceptance of bodily expressivity by members in the church. The choir is especially important to this process of call-and-response and emotional catharsis. As Mellonee

Burnim (1985) notes, “When the expectations of the black congregation or audience are met, performer and audience merge: they become one. The personal interpretation of a given gospel selection generates a sense of ethnic collectivity and spiritual unity” (157). The verbal and nonverbal individual expressivity by choir members—especially the lead vocalist—provides the personal interpretation. What is the ideal outcome for the congregation?

Olly Wilson (1992) argues that the audience is seeking solidarity, release; “the expected goal is a point in the performance when the expressive power of the performer is so overwhelming that it demands a spontaneous response from the audience” (169). The church “performer” who distances him- or herself from the audience does not gain broad acceptance in the African American religious community; this is also true, to a lesser degree, in sport.

The Sunday emotional release and expressive communion with the body by peers in the sacred space of the church has resonated with the black community since Christianity was introduced to the slaves. The Black Church—with its choirs, usher boards, deacons, ministers-in-training, and musicians—has always served as a community center as well as a place of worship; this was the original black Facebook. This is where its members shared what happened the past week, what they were feeling and where we were going, and where they asked for help in how to get there. Through this portal, this physical space, local networks met once a week, exchanged stories, testified, supported each other, and listened to some preaching and singing.

The notion of the *domus*—developed by Robert Orsi in his analysis of the family-centered culture of Italians in Harlem between 1880 and 1950—provides a useful tool to understand the transfer of African American ideals from church to community. In his work, Orsi sought to understand how this structure influenced all other aspects of local Italian society. In essence, the *domus* was the extended family, but the family—or *domus*—extended its reach

throughout the community. As Orsi illustrates, there was a natural interweaving of the domus and the community:

Life in Italian Harlem was very public. Although there was . . . a strictly maintained core of privacy in the domus itself, the life of the domus spilled out into closely watched streets and hallways. Women leaning out of buildings, men sitting on stoops, children playing in courtyards—all served as a kind of urban chorus surrounding the intimacies of the domus . . . The lines between neighborhood and domus were not sharply defined. People had to be careful how they behaved in the streets because these too were a theater of the domus. (1995, 92)

In the African American community, the Black Church is the domus, and the larger community is the “closely watched streets” and the “urban chorus” surrounding the domus.⁶ Indeed, church culture shapes a variety of community and voluntary association patterns in black society (see Pattillo-McCoy 1999), and all manner of issues are discussed therein, including community issues, politics, family matters, unemployment, crime, and drug usage, making it the extension—or “theater”—of the domus. Catherine Bell (1997b) notes that involvement in a “highly ritualized community is often based on an interest in ethnicity as a framework of community, identity, and a sense of tradition and belonging” (270). And whereas Orsi’s Italian family-centered domus saw priests as outsiders—since they do not have families and thus are not central—the black domus sees the pastor as exactly the opposite: the center of life, culture, history, and hope. The Black Church’s expressivity and its influence on black culture in the greater community are intimately connected.

THE TRANSITION FROM CHURCH TO SECULAR BODILY EXPRESSION

Regular church attendance has diminished among African Americans (Hunt and Hunt 2001), especially among poor (Clemmitt 2007) and black youth (Ramirez and Brachear, 2006). Given more social choice since desegregation, African American society might be experiencing a higher degree of secularization and individualization. Bell (1997a) notes this would not be the first time secularization gave way to different affiliations, arguing that “In a secular society, people have many more choices about what to believe, how to act, and where to affiliate and devote their energies.” This has the effect of putting “greater emphasis on the individual as the basic unit of the society and less on the family or clan or group as a whole” (199). So, while some have analyzed the effect on religion of the increasing intermittent nature of modern black church attendance (Hunt and Hunt 2001), others—following Bell’s argument that it “secularization does not entail the progressive demise of religion in general but a transformation of its form” (1997a, 202)—have examined how African Americans have found many other public spaces in which to enact ritual behaviors, including corporate functions, picnics, bowling leagues,⁷ and, as we shall see, in professional sport.

What is the connection, then, between the black body performing in church and the black body performing in stadiums and arenas? The expressive minister and congregation can certainly influence the domus of the church and greater community, but there still has to be a motivation to perform black ritual in white spaces. Perhaps the Civil Rights Act—an official statement of desegregation made by the ruling elites—was the official social blessing African Americans

needed to begin socially expressing years of denied freedom in public spaces. African Americans began an association with the body as alive, expressive, and as divine temple:

In a society chronically split between body and spirit, African American ritual exemplifies embodied spirit and inspired body in gesture, dance, song, and performed word. In worship the human becomes an icon of God . . . the person is of ultimate value as image of the divine. (Raboteau, 1995, 190)

Raboteau implies that inspired black creativity and individuality with the body somehow speaks to being in touch with something deeper and spiritual and—if someone is very good at expressing—something divine.⁸ In church, our verve and inspired singing or testifying translates into being in touch with not only ritual but a spiritual force. That same spark of embodied spirit that flows into creative ritualizing with the body in the black domus is carried into collegiate and professional sport by black athletes.

Black bodily expressivity in integrated settings can carry costs as well as individual and group rewards. Many African Americans learn that homogenized bodies in tune with white social ritualizing in institutional settings controlled by whites might be more apt to be promoted (Gordon 1964).⁹ But in a heavily commodified and commercialized marketplace, sometimes the opposite is true for black bodies. It is the complexities of African American ritualizing in the context of professional sport to which we now turn.

LEBRON JAMES RITUALIZING: THE POWDER-TOSS AND THE SLAM DUNK

There are two ritualized acts in which LeBron James engages that embody the call and response of the black church and community: the powder-toss to the crowd before the game, and the slam dunk. Although Kevin Garnett, currently with the Boston Celtics, was the first to throw powder, James has taken the powder-toss to an entirely different level; to ritual form. Before play begins, he takes a hand-full of baby powder (used to keep hands dry during the game) and walks in front of the scorer's table, faces the crowd, and then tosses the powder high into the air. With feet and legs together, arms spread wide at right angles to his body, with palms upward and head tilted back, he appears every bit as Jesus might have on the cross. Is he blessing the sacred space? Is he sprinkling holy water? Or is he offering himself up as "chosen" to entertain? In keeping with his anointed status, he might also be calling out: "This I do for you."

To be sure, it is baby powder; but it is the symbolism of the act that is important. The powder-toss is highly suggestive of a religious ritual and is so loved by Cleveland fans that they have also, at times, been given confetti to join in the act: as James releases the powder high into the air, fans toss up their handfuls of colorful bits of paper. This acknowledgement of the crowd as part of the game is call-and-response behavior that breaks down the "fourth wall" between audience and performer (see Goffman 1959), akin to what black ministers do when they interweave congregants' life-dramas and look to the audience for cues.

Lebron James also loves the slam dunk. His style is to clutch the ball in an arm outstretched far behind his head, before crashing the ball home into the basket—an emphatic slam dunk over the opposition. James, like others in the NBA, watches the crowd go wild and then stops for a brief moment to scream at the top of his lungs in response to the crowd. Thus, his call (the slam), the audience's thunderous response (cheers), and James's reaction (the scream); the slam dunk itself has become a ritual in American sport.

Basketball's slam dunk is the single most individualistic and expressive act of "performance while scoring" in any American sport, while football's end-zone dance (to be examined shortly) is the most individualistic and expressive act "performed after scoring" in America; African American athletes have taken slam dunks and end-zone dances to ritualistic heights. But, notes Gena Caponi, "the 'in-your-face' style" of these moves is "so intimidating that rules were changed to eliminate it." As she describes it:

The NCAA banned the slam dunk in 1967 because of Kareem Abdul Jabbar's (then Lew Alcindor) performances for UCLA, and the move didn't return until Julius Erving ("Dr. J") and others helped popularize it in the American Basketball Association (ABA) of the 1970s. Likewise, professional football has banned "excessive celebration" after touchdowns, a rule scholar Joel Dinerstein ironically terms "illegal use of black culture" (1999, 4).¹⁰

The slam dunk is an important ritual in ways that still elude explanation. When a slam dunk is performed with individuality and creativity it is the ultimate in expressive brilliance in the black community, akin to a great sermon ending on a high note or a jazz band reaching their conclusion with a swirling crescendo. It is a moment of truth—the one play that can send the crowd over the top in ways that no other sporting moment can. In these moments of elevation, time can stand still. Lasting only a split-second or so, there is a stoppage of time in that one moment of brilliance that many have witnessed elsewhere with choirs, musical performers, and ministers.

The brilliance and resonance of these acts are what transfer expressive ritualizing to the next generation. The epitome of this expressive moment is embodied in the Nike logo for “Air Jordan”—the silhouette of the outstretched arms and legs of Michael Jordan leaping to the basket for a slam dunk in mid-flight that adorns Jordan’s clothing line and many of Nike’s basketball shoes.¹¹ Since 1984, there has been a slam dunk competition before the NBA All-Star game.

John Wideman (1990) describes a player’s brilliant slam dunk as executing a “move so spectacular that glory reflected instantly on all of us because he was one of us out there in the game and he’d suddenly lifted the game to a higher plane . . . he needed us now to amen and goddamn and high-five and time-out” (395). What is key in Wideman’s quote is the “amen,” as it implies the spirituality in the moment the act is conceived and performed. Likewise, Caponi reflects what composer Olly Wilson calls the “soul focal moment” in black music performance, where the player performs the unexpected to such a level that he or she “elevates the community through his or her individual effort, and the community bursts into spontaneous applause, responding as one body” (Caponi 1999, 5). This is classic Black Church call-and-response. Caponi notes that athletes and individuals can create “moments of transcendence and fusion for all involved; transcendence of the ordinary, and of the boundaries between community and individual” (ibid.).

Grimes advises practitioners of ritual studies to look to gestures as significant to ritual enactment, noting that “social values can penetrate ritual gestures” (1982, 66). He notes that “formative gestures” need to be attended to, such that we look at the “style and rhythm of the dance’s gestures. . .” (ibid.), making a distinction between form (which assumes models and archetypes) and “formative” (the flowlike, verblike qualities) inherent in ritualizing. Things flow and change and take new shape, and have no obvious “intent.” The formative gestures have no

deep or hidden religious meaning to athletes who perform them; rather, the ever-changing use of gestures is symbolic of a dialogue and interaction with black expressive practice that flow from neighborhoods, homes, playgrounds, and the Black Church. The nonverbal culture and symbolic significance in African American gestures require that scholars reconceptualize them as “possible symbols rather than toss them away as ‘meaningless’” (Grimes 1982, 66; see also Andrews and Majors, 2004).

THE END-ZONE DANCE AND TRADITIONAL RULES AND RITUALS IN SPORT

African American bodily ritualizing in traditionally white collegiate and professional sport has not been without contestation. There were always subtle codes of conduct—referred to as “sportsmanship”—that were in play before blacks ever entered the top levels of sport in America; white middle-class ritualistic codes of conduct formed in England and repackaged in various ways in United States sporting codes (Abe 1988). These “sportsmanship” codes conflict with many African American expressive codes and interaction norms (Andrews and Majors 2004; Andrews 1997; Andrews 1996; Dyson 1993; Nelson 1992; Ashe 1988; Kochman 1981).

There has always been an undercurrent among many blacks that public displays of expressivity might confirm whites’ thinking of African Americans as “primitive” and only capable of communion with the body, rather than as complex and conscious individuals (Dubois 1903), particularly given historical criticisms of black behavior and prevailing images of the “Sambo,” “Coon” and “Happy Darkie” by whites (see Riggs 1986; Weisenfeld 2007). Many white objections center on the usefulness of the action (“Is that necessary?”) and the lack of humility (“Why don’t you act like you’ve been there before?”). The policy of the National

Football League (NFL) toward expressivity by (primarily) black players echoes the above sentiment and notes the ring component of end-zone celebrations and individual expressivity:

The Committee is unanimously opposed to any prolonged, excessive or premeditated celebration by individual players or groups of players. Antics such as unrestrained dances, wild flailing of arms and legs, simulated dice games, 'high-five' circles in the end zone, imitations of gun-fighters, and similar behavior are deemed to be contrived exhibitionism that has no place in the sport and should be penalized five yards for unsportsmanlike conduct. (in Pierson 1991, 8)

Further, there are codes of conduct in collegiate sport that have been in place for a number of years and that look at individual creative expression (whether by white or black athletes) as a gesture of poor sportsmanship. The National Collegiate Athletics Association (NCAA) ruled in 1995:

Players will express excitement over a great play but must never address remarks or gestures to opponents or spectators, nor may they spike the ball or throw it into the air. Choreographed or delayed spectacles have no validity in football and detract from its honored traditions. (NCAA 1995, 10)

While at some point in time everyone involved might have agreed on behavioral norms—such as in the 1930s and 1940s when teams were all white and black athletes were banned—collegiate ranks and the NFL are now heavily populated with African Americans, many of whom

are not steeped in similar traditions, norms, rituals and ritualizing. Bell (1997a) argues that groups with oral traditions (such as African Americans) are much more flexible than textual-based “literate” societies, and that this can cause conflict. Despite the rise after the Civil War in access to education and firmly established written traditions, African American culture continues to refer to—and reflect—an oral tradition more than a written tradition; change in language and slang is constant, playful, and in a dialogue with those oral traditions of the past. It could be said that not only does African American society dance to a different beat than white society, but that African Americans dance with the English language in ways far more flexible than traditional white normative ways, given the resonance of rural and street-level oral traditions. As Bell notes, “In an oral society...”

the embodiment of tradition can flexibly change to keep pace with the community and win people’s assent as remaining true to tradition and appropriate to the current climate. Ritual can change without necessarily being very concerned with change as such. In literate societies with written models, however, change itself easily becomes a problem that is viewed as a threaten (sic) to tradition and authority. . . . In other words, in literate societies change can be very untidy. (204)

Black athletes may well be ‘untidy’ while working within a community aesthetic that diverges from traditional white normative values; many African Americans (and many whites, also) might well contextualize end-zone celebrations as normal emotive behavior, as reasonable, and as acts that draw attention to themselves as part of a larger ritual of community-in-the-round that need not provoke opponents. Religion scholar Jonathan Smith (1987) notes that “Ritual is a

means of performing the way things ought to be in conscious tension to the way things are” (37). When we oppose one set of norms in favor of another set of values based primarily in “tradition” and without any critical analysis, we reaffirm (in this case) white privilege: the way things are.

Thus, rather than view black creative bodily expression in the end zone as embarrassing, arrogant, or stereotypical, the expressive freedom athletes initiate and ritualize might show us how limitless the body’s capability for joy and spirituality in the moment can be. Maybe expressive calls to the audience are not intended to alienate teammates or embarrass and humiliate the opposition, but rather an outcome of different historical ways of knowing the body and different cultural rituals. The global transmission and acceptance of African American music (Raboteau 1994) in addition to dance styles, youth slang, and clothing style speaks to the resonance of black culture. Caponi (1999) notes with dignity a broader vision of the crowd’s actions and reactions to black performers:

From another perspective, while the slam-dunking and one-on-one competitions may temporarily distract attention from a team organization, they nevertheless take place within a larger organic community that is following every nuance, a community that in each action, each comeback is being resurrected, strengthened, and dignified. (1999, 6)

The notion of a black organic community is pivotal as it points to ritualizing as a process of becoming something altogether different from the neatly-trimmed formality of institutional America, especially as found in American sport and perpetuated by rules and traditions. In truth, ritualizing by African Americans in black churches and communities was no problem for

American society until the ritualizing began to creep into professional sport and white public spaces after desegregation.

GAINING OUR RITUALS, LOSING OUR RELIGION

It is possible that the dispersal of African Americans away from each other and their churches in urban neighborhoods threatens the continuity of stories passed down, the traditions and the ritual of black life (Hunt and Hunt 2001); that indeed those rituals and rites and ways of behaving and talking and walking—all those good and bad qualities that come from being raised within an enclave similar to Orsi's Italian domus—might be slipping away. This is an unforeseen consequence since 1965 of obtaining equality of movement in American society. African Americans—like previous ethnic groups that slowly saw their American enclaves dissolve—want to preserve culture while at the same time take full advantage of new avenues toward social mobility (see Steinberg 1989; Hraba 1994). Until recently, scholars have argued that part of what gave rise to black creativity was the community's underdog status and 'lot' in life. What happens when the future for African American culture looks brighter? What happens when middle-class status and movement away from the black domus shifts the color and ethnicity of our neighborhood friends, our co-workers, our spouses, and even our pastors? What happens to the underdog status when the occupants of the White House are black? This growing diversity of black culture and ways of seeing ourselves in the world might mean a shift in how black culture is expressed verbally and physically in the future. Rituals will surely live as they are needed or die as they lose resonance.

For now—and into the near future—a variety of cultures will continue to resonate with black athletes’ calls to the audience in many sports. Before black expressive rituals become obsolete, we can continue to enjoy athletes communing in the ring-circle with one another before games as they build camaraderie; we can enjoy slam dunks and end-zone dances; and we can reflect that, though times have been tough and the road difficult for African Americans in obtaining expressive freedom, long-suffering humility has its rewards. If we are lucky, we can catch a glimpse of the giddy embodiment of black joy in a local church, a local black barbershop, or on a sacred playing field in any city in America.

NOTES

1. For examinations of African American women and expressivity, see Fordham 1993; Andrews and Majors 2004. On not defining the male sphere of ritualizing as normative for women, see Sered 1996.
2. A broader study might include greeting and congratulatory rituals, such as the fist-bump made famous by (then-Senator) Barack Obama and his wife, Michelle, as he accepted the Democratic nomination for President. For a discussion of other gestures, see Andrews and Majors 2004.
3. The very titles—Lebron “The King” James and “The Chosen One”—are reminiscent of Ray Allen’s portrayal of Jesus Shuttlesworth in Spike Lee’s He Got Game (1998), a critique of basketball—and collegiate and professional sport in general—and its exploitation of African American athletes.
4. Anthropologists, black nationalists, sociologists, historians, and geneticists have debated the presence of Africanisms in African American culture at least since the turn of the

- 20th century. See Herskovits 1941 / 1958; Thompson 1966; Rickford and Rickford 1976; Thompson 1983; Floyd 1995; Gilroy 1993; Holloway and Vass 1993; Caponi 1999; Glazier 2001; and Capone 2007). For African ritual in Amsterdam, see ter Haar 1995.
5. By way of analogy, a child of Catholic parents need not be Catholic him or herself—nor have ever been to a Catholic church—in order to have had Catholic ways of being infused into his or her life processes.
 6. For a discussion of religion and culture in the context of a black barbershop—another center of the black domus—see Braxton 1998.
 7. The growing secularization of society has led scholar to investigate what may have replaced church-going rituals and rites. For a discussion of how boys and girls fashion their own rites of passage, see Stephenson 2003. For a discussion of the ritualizing of dance and music and the influence of DJs on youth, see Takahashi and Olaveson 2003.
 8. Ernest Olsen notes: “The Pentecostal church has an exuberance of music, preaching, and prayer that clearly demarcates the denomination’s presence in the Tongan Islands” (2001, 14).
 9. Milton Gordon defined cultural assimilation as a “change of cultural patterns to those of the core society” (1964: 71).
 10. For an extensive discussion of “transgressions and the attempt to control them,” see Stallybrass and White 1986 (160).
 11. During the 2009 NBA Playoffs, media commentators even suggested on-air that the “Air Jordan” slam-dunk leap be made the association’s new “logo,” replacing the iconic 1960s image of Los Angeles Laker Jerry West.

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