

Making pastel pop on dark skin: How fashion stylists dress Black NBA players

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Abstract

The National Basketball Association is as popular as ever. A league dominated by Black players is in the midst of a fashion renaissance. The purpose of this paper is to explore how fashion stylists dress Black National Basketball Association players. Using a semi-structured interview protocol, the author interviewed 18 fashion stylists to investigate how they service Black National Basketball Association clients. After reviewing the transcripts and going through three rounds of coding, three themes were identified: *The Black Body Is Different, It Should Be This Way, and Dress For Yourself And Dress For Others*. Using Bourdieu's cultural intermediary as a conceptual framework, I demonstrate how fashion stylists link the Black National Basketball Association player with high fashion, making National Basketball Association style more a reflection of middle-class ideology than individual clients.

Keywords

Blackness, cultural intermediary, fashion, NBA, race.

“I respect Bron’s drip. It doesn’t bother Draymond nor myself because we had this idea in 2016, but decided not to attend the ESPYS that year. Fashion is a representation of who we are without having to say anything. I want Draymond’s drip to complement the way he plays on the court: not scared of anything or what people say: but to be effective and remembered.”

—Pierro (2018)

The excerpt above was a response by Golden State Warriors player Draymond Green’s stylist Vick Michel, who delicately downplayed any tension between his client and former Cleveland Cavaliers small forward LeBron James for copying Green’s suit shorts idea. Green publicly rebuked James for wearing suit shorts before Game 1 of the 2018 National Basketball Association (NBA) Finals. While Michel claimed that fashion provides a medium for players to say a lot “without having to say anything,” I would add

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that the clothes players wear say more about race and class than he would care to admit. This will be discussed in detail later but, Michel's outsourcing the suit to a tailor to make it contour nicely with Green's 54 size frame and choosing a gradation of green to complement his client's skin color underlines what fashion stylists do to get players' bodies in harmony with the anti-Blackness in Western fashion. The artistic work of fashion stylists who service Black NBA players provides a unique entry point to articulate "how particular representations of race persist" (Saha, 2018: 118). As the data will evince, fashion stylists reify racial difference by making their clients hyper visible when bedecking them in conspicuous articles of clothing.

Departing from inquiries in representation, this paper turns to cultural production by examining how fashion stylists deploy Black NBA players as avatars for middle-class ideology in a consumerist society. Using Pierre Bourdieu's (1979) concept of the cultural intermediary, this paper explores how fashion stylists reconcile the Black NBA body with the sartorial grammar of high fashion, notions of class morality and anti-Blackness in beauty culture. The timing of this inquiry is important because this fashion renaissance comes after David Stern's imposition of a dress code before the 2005–2006 season. The data will demonstrate how Black NBA players have exploited the slippage of the league's policy. I say slippage because on one hand the dress code demanded that the players capitulate to a policy of racial containment (Leonard, 2012), but on the other hand, "the strategy for formulating a more positive narrative of Black masculinity seemingly went from initial efforts at positioning the league as the primary intermediary of the image of Black players, to relying on the players to convey that message themselves" (Green, 2014: 40). While the media lazily attributes Black creative expression to Stern, Cramer (2019) argued that this was done in spite of the commissioner. This paper will take the work of Cramer a step further by examining the work of individuals who help players navigate Western fashion. Cultural production does not govern representation; however, fashion stylists pull from familiar tropes about the racial "Other" when dressing Black NBA players. This qualitative study answers the research question: How do fashion stylists dress Black NBA players?

In keeping with Kobayashi et al.'s, call for scholars to uncover the "legitimizing practices" (2018: 142) of cultural production, this paper demonstrates how fashion stylists both minimize and emphasize the racial difference of Black NBA clients. Stylists constrict the Black player, impress upon him the importance of choosing an aesthetic that is indexed to middle-class morality, and align the silhouette of his outfit with the sensibilities of consumer society. While fashion stylists assist Black NBA players in expressing their individuality, modern NBA style becomes more a reflection of middle-class ideology than the interiority of the client. What is at stake here is how Black NBA players obscure systemic inequality by becoming proxies for oppressive class ideologies, divorcing them from the plight of racial minorities.

Literature review

Who are cultural intermediaries?

Cultural intermediaries qualify legitimate culture (Maguire and Matthews, 2014: 1). As capitalism has made things more affordable due to mass production, elites needed new

ways to accent their “cultural capital” (Baker, 2012: 624). According to Bourdieu (1986), cultural capital exists in three forms, the embodied state, the objectified state, and the institutionalized state. The cultural capital that Baker (2012) referred to includes the embodied and the objective state as retailers deployed their understanding of high culture (embodied state) to sell retro items (objective state) to individuals seeking to reinforce class distinction. Cultural capital is deployed by cultural intermediaries to align their expertise with consumers who desire to be different. Cultural intermediaries not only qualify what registers as legitimate culture to consumers, they also communicate the desires of the market to producers (Kelly, 2014: 72). As will be discussed later, fashion stylists demonstrate to clients how middle-class notions of restraint and respectability are linked to clothing, making their worldview legitimate.

Cultural intermediaries in fashion and morality

Cultural intermediaries use the process of legitimation to lay claim to a universal humanity (Bourdieu, 1979). When wielding cultural capital, the dominant class subjects the dominated class to symbolic violence because the skills and qualifications of the former “obscure the truth about social relations” (Poupeau, 2000: 71). Bourdieu (1979) demonstrated how the educational system reproduces social classes as elites send their children to the premiere schools, which inevitably reproduces the social structure. Returning to cultural capital, the educational system legitimizes the institutionalized state in the form of degrees, certificates, and awards. When inequality that is manufactured by the state and cultural agents gets misrecognized as natural, the dominated class accepts the “social order” (Poupeau, 2000: 71), making them complicit in class ideology.

Cultural intermediaries have the power to index clothes to morality (Foster, 2005), and map them “on to broader classed relations” (Lawler, 2005: 439). Warner (2013: 384) noted how Sarah Jessica Parker (SJP) of the HBO sitcom *Sex and the City* deploys her cultural knowledge of haute couture to separate herself from celebrities known for excess. While Parker positions herself as the embodiment of the democratization of fashion, her very presence in high fashion “reinforces boundaries of taste” (Warner, 2013: 390). Celebrity status does not automatically lend itself to one being an arbiter of legitimate culture. Betts (2014) noted that while David Beckham transformed working-class clothes into fashion, this affordance escaped Del Boy Trotter, a fictional character on the sitcom *Only Fools and Horses*. Although Trotter wore clothes from high fashion brands such as Yves St. Laurent, Crombie and Nursey of Bungay, his attempt at class passing was soundly rejected by the media because he resembled the “demoralized and frustrated social consciousness” (Betts, 2014: 217) of the working class. The cases of Parker, Beckham, and Trotter demonstrate how fashion is used as a proxy to map morality onto bodies and how some bodies are privileged over others. As will be discussed later, fashion stylists cannot easily get the most coveted European designers to dress Black NBA players because of anxieties about clients not fitting the clothes and even sully the aesthetic.

Cultural intermediaries and the marketplace

Although cultural work is inextricably linked to the marketplace (Cronin, 2004), cultural intermediaries attempt to maintain a distinction between the two. When wielding their

cultural knowledge, cultural intermediaries stabilize the “illusio” (Bourdieu, 1983: 353) of their field, making it appear that they are “indifferen[t] to commerce and the demands of the marketplace” (Partington, 2014: 13). To better understand the work of Bourdieu in the context of fashion, it is necessary to engage Becker (1974, 1982), because “Becker’s art worlds have significant parallels to Bourdieu’s artistic fields” (Bottero and Crossley, 2012: 105). Becker (1974, 1982) challenged the illusio of cultural producers as he argued that works of art are not done in isolation, rather, they are completed within a network of an “art world.” The “art world” makes it possible for the widespread circulation of cultural products because they exist “as symbolic objects only if they are known and recognized” (Bourdieu, 1983: 318). That cultural productions are bound in a cooperating network of individuals compels cultural producers to square with pre-existing conventions as he or she must cede the administration of the work to a “division of labor” (Becker, 1974: 768). With regards to cultural intermediaries, Cronin (2004: 356) demonstrated that in light of brand managers at advertising firms diluting the visual impact of a campaign by saddling it with too many recognizable elements, this conservative approach brings the firm industry awards. Partington echoed Becker’s (1974, 1982) statement about works of art being produced in a web of collaboration, but added that consumption in our late capitalist moment has made consumers co-creators of cultural works.

Now that it has been established as to what cultural intermediaries do and how they interface with fashion, the next part of this paper is to set the backdrop of how fashion stylists navigate the minefields of anti-Blackness in fashion and commodification in the NBA. Cultural intermediaries negotiate tensions between global and local (Kobayashi, 2012) and Oriental and Occident (Kobayashi et al., 2018). By both minimizing and emphasizing the racial difference of clients, fashion stylists reconcile the Black NBA body with the sartorial grammar and anti-Blackness in fashion.

Anti-Blackness in beauty culture

Blackness has long held a “liminal” (Entman and Book, 2000: 215) position in Western beauty culture. Anti-Black attitudes seep into technology and ways of seeing the “Other.” As photography is the art of light, using Blacks was problematic because they absorbed too much light (Dyer, 1997). This light/White binary also resolved into physiognomy as portraiture was used to accent the wretchedness of Blackness (Dyer, 1997). Bernier’s (2015) work on Frederick Douglass noted how the abolitionist and the man who Miller (2009) described as the most photographed Black dandy had his facial features exaggerated by his publisher. Regarding fashion and photography, Mears (2010) demonstrated how the anti-Blackness in fashion prohibits widespread acceptance of Black physiognomy. One of Mears’ participants commented on problems that stereotypical Black features pose to magazines. The agency director complained, “Black girls have got very wide noses. The rest of her face is flat, therefore, in a flat image, your nose, it broadens in a photograph” (Mears, 2010: 38). The privilege of subject positionality enables Whites to link racialized perceptions to vision (Morris, 2001: 88), making the physical features of the racial “Other” highly visible and subject to disqualification. Wissinger’s (2012: 134) study on models in New York revealed that gatekeepers shunned Black models

because their skin is not photogenic and they also have abnormal bodies. The technical “limitations” of mediums and ways of visualizing the racial other as “different” (Morris, 2001: 88) obscure White bias in promulgating anti-Blackness (Dyer, 1997). The anti-Blackness in beauty culture can better explain how fashion stylists draw from their cultural capital, read expertise, to choose colors that complement dark skin and articles of clothing that constrict the Black NBA body. Having explained anti-Blackness in beauty culture and how fashion stylists navigate it when servicing clients, I now turn to commodification in sport and how it makes Black players hyper visible in the NBA. The repertoire of fashion stylists plays into commodification by making Black NBA style more conspicuous and serviceable to an image-driven consumer society.

Black NBA players in the NBA

Commodification is a derivative of slavery because this dehumanizing institution rendered the Black body as a “fungibl[e]” (Palmer, 2017: 37) commodity. Carrington (2010) documented how the Black sporting body has been shorn of subjectivity, and it continues to be vulnerable to commodification. Whereas before the profitability of the Black body was exclusive to physical labor, Black athletes currently generate profit for people who control their labor and those who commodify it (Collins, 2006). Commodification is undoubtedly a dehumanizing process, however, according to Saha (2018), the racial “Other” can be complicit in commodification because it promises recognition. But as Carrington observed, the irony is that the commodification of the Black athlete belies the real plight of Blacks who “struggle with the material disciplining effects of late capitalism” (2010: 106). In fact, Atencio et al. (2013) noted how racial and socio-economic inequities enable companies such as Nike, Adidas, and Reebok to successfully commodify urban cool.

The Black body being a receptacle for commodification makes it hyper visible and subject to vacillate between desire and disgust (De B’beri and Hogarth, 2009). Because Black players are fungible commodities, it allows the NBA to both celebrate and “pathologize” (Andrews et al., 2011: 76) Blackness. Andrews et al. refer to this as ghetto-centric logic and it is integral to the league’s business strategy as it allows a largely White fan base to identify with White owners. Using memes, Dickerson (2016) explored how fans reproduce ideologies about race and gender by juxtaposing the selfishness of Black NBA players with the selflessness of White hockey players. To manage the disgust of Blackness in the NBA, management renders Black athletes to surveillance and punishment (Hughes, 2004; Tucker, 2003). The post-racial discourse in the NBA obscures Whiteness by masquerading as “normal, natural, or common sense, rather than explicitly racist” (Cramer, 2019: 60). Notions of “civility, respect and appropriate dress are hailed as necessary for the proper decorum which is thought to fuel success while urban styles and dress are devalued” (McDonald and Togliola, 2010: 977). Although the NBA gladly markets Black players as a “safe commodity for mainstream audiences” (Moralde, 2019: 71), Blackness is still a “subordinated masculinity” (Park, 2015: 369). The league selectively broadcasts urban cool to attract mainstream audiences while concurrently restricting Black male individuality to placate Whites (Dunne, 2017).

Methodology

This qualitative inquiry utilized 18 semi-structured interviews with fashion stylists to investigate how they dress Black NBA players. Whereas quantitative methods emphasize representativeness and sample size, qualitative research highlights the lived experiences of participants (Hatch, 2002). While qualitative researchers cannot project results to an entire population, the rich description brings out the unique perspectives of participants. I was able to understand the nuances of styling Black NBA players as it relates to using clothes to conform to normative rules in fashion while also enabling clients to express individuality.

This significance of this methodology is that at the time of this writing, fashion stylists had not been engaged in the academic literature. Due to the lack of academic research in this area, a semi-structured interview protocol was used to provide an in-depth understanding of the cultural work of the participants. Qualitative research is optimal because it elicits a “subjective truth in the form of structures, patterns, or theoretical stances” (Florczak, 2017: 296).

The participants included current and former fashion stylists. The participants signed an informed consent document prior to participating in the interview and were sent the transcripts for member checking. The participants were given pseudonyms to protect anonymity and any identifying information was removed from the manuscript. I followed them on social media, then sent direct messages inviting their participation. I used my university email address to explain the purpose of the study, answer any questions about confidentiality, and send the informed consent documents. I conducted 18 in-person and over-the-phone interviews from December 2014 to November 2017. The interviews were recorded using a digital recorder, took no longer than one hour and were transcribed verbatim. The interview protocol was based on the literature in fashion studies, cultural intermediaries, and race in sport.

The data went through three rounds of coding for analysis. The first round of coding, *In vivo* coding, was employed to use the words of the participants (Saldana, 2009). After *In vivo* coding, I used sociological construct codes to cite the concepts and ideas that are germane to sport studies. The last cycle was selective coding (Blair, 2015). After three rounds of coding, I used thematic analysis for the generation of themes that will be discussed in the next section (Grbich, 2007).

Findings and discussion

In this section, the themes will be discussed in reference to the research question: How do fashion stylists dress Black NBA players? Through an analysis of the data, three themes were discovered: *Black Body Is Different, It Should Be This Way*, and *Dress For Yourself And Dress For Others*.

Theme 1: Black body is different

The participants react to and socially construct the racial difference of clients. The participants inveigh against anti-Black stereotypes, the muscularity of NBA bodies, and the

inconvenience of making certain colors complement darker skin. The participants “leve[l] out” (Kobayashi et al., 2018: 142) the racial difference of clients when bedecking their bodies in haute couture. Coincidentally, the participants also emphasize the racial difference of clients as their repertoire plays into the hyper visibility of the Black athlete. Whether it is darker skin not complementing select colors or stereotypical Black attributes making the adornment of particular styles prohibitive, the participants visualize and socially construct the difference of their clients. Harlem, whose clients want to wear skinny jeans, noted that the Black NBA body forecloses this possibility. Harlem complained, “We can’t put skinny jeans on you even though you want to wear them, because you have hips and thighs, things that are considered stereotypical Black attributes.” Harlem’s comment about “stereotypical Black attributes” stems from the belief that Blacks trend on the side of being too big. For example, although one model in Wissinger’s study had textbook measurements of 34–24–35, one casting director believed she was a “little round” (2012: 135). European designers are often stumped by NBA bodies. Jersey noted, “I’ve sent measurements for designs for XXX in Italy, and they have gone back and forth because they cannot believe he’s made like that.” Just as the advertisers in Kelly’s (2014) study had to communicate to clients on behalf of consumers and vice versa, the participants must be the interlocutor of their clients and designers. They temper the expectations of clients who want to wear skinny jeans, but they also emphasize the uniqueness of the NBA body to designers.

The participants not only counter the physical limitations of putting clothes on a point guard who wears a 44-long suit, they also have to negotiate with designers who choose not to have their brand associated with the Black NBA body. Astoria spent several years trying to get her clients to be accepted by elite designers. She commented:

It took me four years just to convince them to even dress these guys. Just because. “Oh by the way, you’re not model size. You’re not 5’8 skinny. Models can wear a size 40 suit. You’re a big ass Black guy with shoulders, with booty with thighs. You know with all of this height. You don’t represent my aesthetic. You don’t represent my brand. You don’t represent what I want my client to look like.”

To alleviate the anxieties of designers, Astoria’s clients wore fitted jeans, cashmere sweaters, and hard-bottom shoes. What is particularly instructive about Astoria’s histories with helping clients navigate the world of fashion is how she was hampered by the canons of a particular aesthetic. Whereas Beckham could move upward by transforming working-class clothes into fashion because of his “openly admired body” (Betts, 2014: 217), Black NBA players seemingly move downward when wearing haute couture.

The participants use fashion to counter stereotypes that Whites have of African Americans. Invariably, the participants inveigh against commodification as its fungible nature makes the “hyper-visible” (De B’beri and Hogarth, 2009: 95) Black body vulnerable to both positive and negative images. Ice noted, “Instead of putting a guy in a baggy pair of trousers, I slim him down. Two-button suit instead of a four-button suit ... You are not looking like a pimp.” Due to stereotypes of Black athletes being pretentious, Ivy directs clients to play down excess. Ivy commented:

If we are talking about ice [jewelry]. Not only does it have negative connotations, but for people that might not know you. It might just look like a waste of money. Or it might just look like he is trying to be flashy. There have been times where I kind of advised him to be more low key.

Interestingly, the participants deploy notions of class to make the Black NBA body worthy of aesthetic value. In her study on the cultural intermediaries in the modeling industry in New York City, Mears (2010: 24) noted that what makes the Black body unattractive to editorial fashion is that it skews toward excess, thereby going against classed notions of restraint. Ice's slimming down clients and Ivy's directive for them to be more "low-key" underlines how notions of class are deployed as a corrective measure.

Some participants play into the hyper-visibility of Black athletes and how their bodies are "disarticulate[d]" (De B'beri and Hogarth, 2009: 99) from White players. Returning to Saha (2018), commodification makes visibility a fait accompli. Scotland's styles for Black clients are more conspicuous. He commented:

For the Black player, I wouldn't do the seersucker, but I like the check (checkered). I would do a blue or a forest green check for the Black player. And that is just the blazer. As far as the bottom (shoes), just plain or blue. Or whatever the main color is in the suit. For the White player, I'd do a less subtle check, one that you really couldn't see. Like a navy with White check. With white lines in it. Something simple. It is not going to be really out there.

Corona echoed Scotland's statement about giving their White clients less details. Corona noted:

Of course, he wears jeans tighter because he is a White guy. ... Just probably a little cleaner, maybe. Not as much detail. Won't be as flashy. At the end of the day, he can wear motorcycle boots, jeans and a leather jacket and a t-shirt. I probably wouldn't dress one of my Black players in something like that.

Dressing the White player in a "cleaner" look is reminiscent of Dickerson's (2016: 311) comment about White athletes being seen as everyday citizens. Corona's comment also speaks to the hyper visibility of the Black body and the invisibility of her unassuming White clients. Although commodification brought on by the representation practices of the media or the cultural production of a stylist generates visibility, its interchangeability racializes the Black NBA athlete.

The legitimizing practices of the participants stabilize the invisibility of White positionality (Morris, 2001). With regards to the color wheel, Stylez admitted that one hue does not complement darker skin. He noted:

Personal shoppers would tell a guy you can't wear green. Bull shit, do you know how many shades of green there are? No he can't wear Kermit the Frog green, but he can wear green. I'll tell you the one color that is tough with darker Black men is brown ... So if you think about it, the colors you use, if you are Black and you got on brown, it almost washes you. If you got any little yellow in your skin it gives you a little jaundice. If you got too much of a brown suit, it almost looks Black.

Stylez's comment locates darker skin in a marginal role within beauty culture because while White "absorbs all color" (Morris, 2001: 88), Black absorbs all light (Dyer, 1997). While he tempered the personal shopper's advice about green in general not complementing dark skin, offering a caveat in none other than Kermit the Frog, his alternative calcified the anti-Blackness in the color wheel. In fact, his comment that Darker men look "washe[d]" in brown reifies the need for light to show (Dyer, 1997). Whether it be stereotypical attributes like hips and thighs, the hypervisibility of the Black athlete, or the invisibility of White positionality, the findings within this theme underline racial difference—to which the participants emphasize and minimize.

Theme 2: it should be this way

The participants ascribe classed-based notions of morality and self-presentation to clothing. The participants' attempts at legitimizing their ideas about a common humanity are indexed to their habitus. Through the participants' legitimation of particular types of clothing, including but not limited to, sport coats, American power suits, and bespoke wear, "domination is thus inscribed in the most everyday of practices" (Poupeau, 2000: 72). When cultural capital is successfully exploited, this leads the person's habitus, which is a "socially constituted cognitive capacity" (Bourdieu, 1986: 56) to recognize it as a natural skill. Bedford believes clients have a responsibility to dress above their station. He complained:

These gentlemen used to come out into arenas and they'd have on du-rags and your grandfather jeans and shit like that. How are you sitting here saying that you are making all this money and you dress like some common folk out of you know the streets?

Bedford's "common folk" is illustrative of how aesthetic has become code for "morality" (Lawler, 2005: 441). Bedford also implicates his clients' "failed attempt[s] at class passing" (Betts, 2014: 221), which signals that social class says less about social origin than performance. As the participants exist in a field with its own rules, an individual on the periphery but who is no less one of the most powerful men in sport could be impressed by their expertise. At an event hosted in 2004 by music mogul Jay-Z and LeBron James, Kevin was complimented by David Stern. Kevin, remembered:

This guy walked into me and I turned around and it was Commissioner Stern and he said "Look at this guy right here ... This is how our guys need to look." I was like wow that's awesome ... I gave him my card.

While Kevin was not trying to get Stern's attention, being in his environment dressed as he was, the exchange with the commissioner "legitimize[d]" (Cronin, 2004: 350) his expertise. Tiger wants all clients to dress like aristocrats. He noted, "If I ever get invited to the Grammys. I'm going to be suited and booted. You understand me? I have no problems wearing a tuxedo anywhere. And that is what I try to tell my clients." The universality of the tuxedo speaks to the ways in which the dominant class believes there is a common humanity, wherein "the properly human is marked out by its ability to

appreciate beauty” (Lawler, 2005: 439). That a tuxedo could be worn anywhere, not just at the Grammys is not only indicative of the universality of this item, but it also speaks to how elites create value “from the display of tasteful” (Baker, 2012: 626) clothing. What is universal is not so universal. What gets encased in the presentation of self and an aesthetic being a proxy for morality is the way in which NBA players are emulated by “common folk.” Astoria cited a *GQ* article, which stated that the second biggest influence for the reemergence of fashion after the Great Recession was NBA players. Astoria expressed:

They (men) are really like focusing in on honing their own personal style. One of them was the economic downturn in 2008, like guys had to get their shit together because they had to get a job. But the second biggest influence was NBA players. That was the second biggest influence across the country of why men pay attention to what they wear. I couldn’t believe it.

Men getting their “shit together” points to a specific aspect of morality and self-presentation wherein dress is indexed to someone’s character and readiness for the job market. This stabilizes the ideas of the dominant class by positioning clothing as a surrogate for morality, in turn, obscuring the violence of capitalism. The gratuitous burden being placed on men to purchase fashionable clothing to increase their lot in what was a slow recovery could lead some to look within themselves for “self-improvement” (Bourdieu, 1986: 48). The participants’ decision to bedeck the client in high fashion is a delicate balance between catering to clients’ proclivity for flaunting status and “legitimizing their own tastes” (Baker, 2012: 636). Rose commented:

It is my job to not necessarily convince him. But to convince him, you know what, instead of doing this blue window pane suit, why don’t we go with a different smaller pattern. Or if it is a color, then it becomes, how about we stay with this color family but tone it down some? Because the last thing you want is your client to be out looking crazy ... It is about me helping him grow. And helping him see what else there is.

Aside from her directives to temper the client’s wont for excessive patterns and color to stay in line with “notions of middle-class respectability” (Warner, 2013: 390), Rose’s comment also underlines her license to qualify something as “crazy,” making it illegitimate. In another vein, although her clients are handsomely rewarded for their hardwood exploits, Rose uses her intimate knowledge of sartorial grammar to help them “grow.” Just as the retailers in Baker’s (2012: 629) study instructed upward mobile professionals how to demonstrate character when trying to accent their homes with expensive items, Rose does the same when helping clients experiment with high fashion. Fashion is a vessel to transport one to the apex of self-actualization as the participants delicately merge their clients’ old identities with improved versions of themselves. Rose’s comment is emblematic of the distinction between cultural capital and economic capital. Rose’s clients, who make 15 times her salary, clearly have the economic capital to buy items that are above the station of most Americans, but she holds the “legitimate competence” (Bourdieu, 1986: 49). In working in a space that is native to them, the participants deploy their cultural capital to legislate a desired aesthetic and a class-specific permutation of morality. The participants cleverly use clothes to demonstrate to clients the universality

of a common aesthetic, read humanity, however, this aesthetic obscures state-sanctioned middle-class privilege and the ravenous capacity of capitalism.

Theme 3: dress for yourself and dress for others

The participants reconcile the clients' penchant for individuality and self-expression with the sensibilities of a larger audience. The self/other duality is particularly relevant on game day as a contest on national television or a regional sports network can generate millions of viewers and countless more on social media. This mediation between the individuality of the client and tastes of a larger audience contradicts the creativity thought to abound in fashion. Because regular men look to NBA players for fashion tips, the participants interpolate clients as "intertextual references" (Partington, 2014: 15). On this duality, Abby said:

I'm all about reintroducing yourself, the dualities and all of that. I also think you have to be a role model. You have to adhere to some rules in every profession in life. I mean I understand. I worked with XXX.

Abby positions herself as the intermediary between the "good corporate athletes" (Carrington, 2010: 109) and young consumers. The role model that Abby wants her clients to be lubricates the "engine of consumer spending" (Moralde, 2019: 71). As an example, after LeBron James appropriated the 90s-prep style of putting a hoodie under a blazer to comply with the dress code, Bogage (2019) noted that students at an elite high school in Hyattsville, Maryland did the same to comply with their own dress code. Dubbed as the "DeMatha Look," the hoodie under the blazer was conveniently put into production by retailers such as Public School NYC and Rag & Bone (Bogage). The "DeMatha Look," I argue, divorces Black NBA players from the struggles of young men who cannot afford to attend an elite high school, or sport coats to cover the hooded sweat shirt. As Atencio et al. argued that corporations cleverly re-purpose the "hood and its artifacts" (2013: 168) to cater to a White audience, the juxtaposition of urban cool with "nerd chic" (Cramer, 2019: 67) obscures the plight of racial minorities who endure systemic inequality and surveillance because of this very hooded sweat shirt.

Because the television camera adds about 10 pounds to the client's frame, the participants consistently stated that the sketch for game-day begins with the silhouette of a trim fit, which can include a traditional suit, a trim leather jacket, and a trim jean jacket. They then add accoutrements that reflect the client's personality. These include sneakers, screen-print shirts, and fitted hats. Paris noted:

You know you want to have as many people as possible like your outfit. But you have to respect yourself. If it is not you, don't wear it ... I go with a standard formal suit, mixed with some accessories that will reflect who my client is. You want to dress for others and you want to dress for yourself.

When combined with items associated with urban cool like fitted hats, sneakers, and graphic t-shirts, the trim silhouette, which is "intelligible and even palatable for mainstream consumption" (Atencio et al., 2013: 169) lends itself to "as many people as possible"

identifying with the outfit. Not surprisingly, the participants become constrained by the existing practice of having the clients dress for themselves and a larger audience. While clients are individuals with a style that is unique to them, the mainstream audience is not as peculiar. Essentially, the self/other duality invariably leads to sameness among Black NBA players as some participants recycle ideas. Ivy commented:

I don't want to say you can't dress like this because of where you grew up. And it is about not necessarily selling out as an individual. But it is difficult. You could easily go quote unquote get them white washed. And get them all in the same clothes. But I think that is why you see so many NBA players wearing the same shirt. Like oh, this is so cool, this is so this. And they all wear the same one. [laughs]

White washing players and the result being clients wearing the same shirt reflects the conservatism within cultural production. Ivy drives a wedge between her pedigree and her contemporaries who default to getting clients "white washed." Cronin (2004) demonstrated how creative directors produce campaigns for clients that are no different from their competitors. If the foundation to every outfit starts with a suit and because of players having to go custom by necessity, how can anyone expect players to not look alike? The conventions in fashion can explain the suit shorts snafu between Green and James. What is most telling about the suit shorts innovation is that it kept key "elements of convention" (Becker, 1982: 307), meaning the traditional suit. With the "illusio" (Bourdieu, 1983: 353) of their expertise unchallenged, the participants stabilize the artistic field, not in the least because clients "all wear the same shirt."

Aside from the aesthetic conventions there is also an element of standardization, which prevents the "decreased circulation of one's work" (Becker, 1974: 773). Juelz presents clients with preconditions before negotiating a retainer. Juelz noted:

Let's say I am going to meet up with a NBA person. I will inform them that if they are going to be my client, I would really appreciate them to dress their best during games. You never know, if you end up having an amazing game, then you are going to get pressed and you don't want to be wearing a button down shirt and a pair of pants.

Juelz's comment about "dress[ing] their best" is an attempt at "position taking" (Bourdieu, 1983: 312) within the field as it increases his stock as a stylist. That business casual and not a button down shirt and a pair of pants is the only route to looking "your best" underscores the participants' deployment of cultural capital. McDonald and Toglia noted how the business casual mandate "reproduce[s] white and middle-class norms, promoting the need to dress for success" (2010: 977). Just as Becker (1974) referred to the musical works having replay value past the site of cultural production, the routinization of clients following Juelz's advice lends to an outfit becoming recognizable and compatible with the tastes of legions of people.

While cultural producers attempt to maintain a distinction between their work and the marketplace, playing to the standards of being television-ready prohibits them from doing "art for art's sake" (Bourdieu, 1983: 318). Moralde (2019: 63) noted that the NBA dandy uses success on the basketball court as a hook to lure fans into his closet. Short of

a successful game, the client may not get any press and if he has an “amazing game” and does not come television-ready with a “standard” (Becker, 1974: 774) silhouette, all will be for naught. As “dress[ing] for others” makes uniformity all but certain, the client’s individuality gets subsumed by the need to be a “role model” for a larger, predominantly White audience.

Conclusion

This paper highlights the role of fashion stylists who service Black NBA players. The participants educate clients on what is the appropriate look as well as allay the anxieties of designers who cannot fathom the measurements of NBA bodies and do not want players to soil their aesthetic. Participants reconcile their client’s proclivity for individuality with the class-based notions of morality. The participants legitimate clients by slimming them down, toning down colors, and pruning excess. When using clothes to hide stereotypical Black attributes, participants attempt to minimize racial difference. The participants also emphasize racial difference by making clients hyper-visible when choosing clothing to accent details.

The NBA’s fashion renaissance neatly comports with the desires of the former commissioner and the needs of an image-driven consumer society. Skyrocketing salaries give NBA players access to the world’s most coveted designers, enabling them to compete with each other for originality. But the irony is that just as the average consumer purchases the same mass-produced shirt as other shoppers, the NBA players mimic each other’s styles because their stylists are constrained by conventions. Because of clients’ dalliances with high fashion, “the dress code’s intent to suppress threatening displays of hip hop and black youth culture is thus partially fulfilled” (Moralde, 2019: 71).

Future scholars should talk with players to better understand their aesthetic vision for themselves. Granted, the tastes of the participant are heavily inflected in the Black NBA player’s outfit, the client may internalize the final product as an example of “freedom and subversion” (Carrington, 2010: 114). Fans may still be attracted to his sneakers. Blackness in and of itself is a challenge to the West and although it is vulnerable to rationalization, its very presence still has “magic” (Saha, 2018: 52).

Scholars should also explore how fashion is used for varying types of athletic Black bodies, specifically, football and baseball players. In football where bodies can range from obese to lean, the stylist may be challenged with the helmet blocking the marketability of clients. The stylist may inveigh against the controlling practices of the National Football League (NFL), where players have little agency compared to NBA players. NBA players have longer careers, sign guaranteed contracts, and play in five times as many games. Because of the “diverse fan base within the NBA” (Giannoulakis and Drayer, 2009: 466) and the current commissioner, Adam Silver, who believes that athletes should not “just stick to sports” (Putterman, 2018: 1), it is no surprise that NBA players purportedly have more power than NFL players. Although there are very few Black players in Major League Baseball (MLB), and baseball players wear obstructive gear, they play longer and in twice as many games as their NBA counterparts.

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