ABSTRACT

MEDIA CONSTRUCTIONS OF AFRICAN ATHLETES:
A SAMPLING OF OLAJUWON, LOROUPE, OKOYE, AND HALI

by Munene Franjo Mwaniki

This thesis contains a qualitative discourse analysis of U.S. and western sport media constructions of four African athletes, Hakeem Olajuwon, Tegla Loroupe, Christian Okoye, and Tamba Hali. These athletes were/are among the first and most dominant African athletes to professionally compete in their respective sports on the U.S./western stage. For the length of their respective athletic careers, this project examines the sport media constructions of race, nationalism, gender and sex for each athlete. While utilizing current research to ground the findings, this project focuses on the nuances and complexities in the representations for each athlete in order to gain greater insight into the treatment of African athletes and Africa in general by U.S./western sports media.
MEDIA CONSTRUCTIONS OF AFRICAN ATHLETES:
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Thank you
Media Constructions of African Athletes:
A Sampling of Olajuwon, Loroupe, Okoye, and Hali

CHAPTER 1

Introduction

Sport in the United States is often presented as the ideal institution. Much in line with the ideals of the U.S. culture, sport has been constructed as a meritocracy where the hard working will succeed regardless of social inequalities based on factors such as race or social class (Coakley, 2007). However, scholars, for some time now, have challenged the ideology that sport does not produce/reproduce social inequality. Four decades ago, Harry Edwards claimed, “the black athlete on the white-dominated college campus, then, is typically exploited, abused, dehumanized and cast aside in much the same manner as a worn basketball” (1969, p. 20). Although primarily concerned with the plight of African American athletes, Edwards argued that sport may reproduce, rather than challenge or eliminate inequality. In the decades that followed, concerns about racism in and surrounding sport have led to research on numerous topics such as on positional segregation (Grusky, 1963; Eitzen & Sanford, 1975; Gonzalez, 1996; Woodward, 2004; Sack, Singh, & Thiel, 2005), Native American mascots (Slowikowski, 1993; Springwood, 2004; Staurowsky, 2007), exploitation of athletes (Sack & Staurowski, 1998; Zimalist, 1999; Gerdy, 2006), social mobility (Edwards, 1970; Carrington, 1986; Sabo, Melnick, & Vanfossen, 1993), and, more recently, whiteness (Long & Hylton, 2002; Fusco, 2005; Walton & Butryn, 2006). This body of research suggests that race and racism (as well as social class, gender, age, etc.) historically have and continue to have an impact on the way (western) societies construct and consume sport, giving valuable insight into how societies are created at large.

At the heart of these issues listed above and how societies are created is power, specifically, social power and hegemonic forces. As a starting point, Foucault’s (1980) ideas of power can be used to describe the relationships between various groups in sport. The idea of power in Foucault’s theories is that power is not something which is concentrated to one particular group of people, rather it is something which flows through everyone and everyone possesses power to at least some degree. This means that everyone has the ability to exercise power in one way or another. However, certain
groups gain more power over others through discourses, or ideologies, which become institutionalized (economically, politically, and socially) in what Foucault describes as regimes of truth (Foucault, 1980). Another way to think about these regimes of truth, or ideological domination, and the way in which this thesis will refer to social dominance, is Gramsci’s concept of hegemony. As explained by Sage (1998), hegemony refers to a society where the dominant social, political, and economic groups have seized and control the ability to promote and shape a society’s belief/value structure to serve their own ends and keep said dominant groups in power. Further, as one can imagine, having control over the social institutions is not enough to maintain power, and dominant groups employ the use of force (coercion) and consent to perpetuate their ideas throughout society. Through various tactics such as negotiation, persuasion, compromise, etc., the hegemonic ideologies of dominant groups are able to withstand counter-ideological resistance, often co-opting such resistance into the dominant discourse (Sage, 1998). Thus, through a complex process of dominance, coercion, and consent, hegemonic groups maintain power throughout society.

In western, specifically U.S., societies, the dominant group that has control over the social institutions is, and has historically been, white and male. Through times of resistance, most notably racial and gender resistance, white males have managed to appease and reach reasonable consent with resistance while retaining a large amount of social control. In sport, white men control the major sport leagues throughout western societies—as a group they dominate ownership and management, and also control the media coverage of those leagues. Media are part of the larger entertainment institution white men control and the focus of this project (Sage, 1998). This project reviews research conducted on media representations of African Americans and Africans in U.S./western societies. The findings are indicative of the kind of power and tools of power the dominant social groups in the U.S. have at their disposal to further and maintain their power.

In the past couple of decades much has been written about media representations of race and racial difference. Some authors claim that the media are biased in their constructions of race. For example, in examining sport media, these scholars contend African Americans (men and women) are often represented as “natural athletes,” athletes
whose abilities require little dedication or effort, whereas whites are presented as
motivated and hard-working (Davis, 1990; Davis & Harris, 1998). Lumpkin & Williams
(1991), in a study of *Sports Illustrated* feature articles, found that African American men
and female athletes had fewer and shorter articles than white male athletes, while Cole &
Denny (1994) found that African American male athletes were often portrayed as deviant
and threatening. With media consumption as the most frequent leisure activity in the
U.S., the representation of African Americans, both athletes and non-athletes, in the
media may be consequential to fans’ and viewers’ beliefs about African Americans—
both as athletes and non-athletes.

Representations of race generally, and blackness/whiteness specifically, can be
found not only in discussions of racial groups within the U.S. but also in the ways that the
U.S. media construct “otherness”/racial difference (Freysinger & Harris, 2007) around
the globe. For example, rarely examined are U.S. and western media representations of
Africa and African athletes. Yet, not only may such representations exhibit biases similar
to those found in images of African Americans (specifically, as being natural athletes,
deviant and threatening individuals, and having achievements marginalized/ignored in the
media), but western notions of Africa/African athletes also likely underlie and inform
many westerners’ beliefs about African Americans (or vice versa). Indeed, research by
Denison and Markula (2005), Nauright and Magdalinski (2003), and Bale (2001)
uncovered stereotypes concerning the abilities of African athletes (i.e., “natural,”
effortless, environmentally deterministic, “raw,” etc.) that are similar or identical to those
concerning African American athletes. Further, when examining this research, it becomes
clear that much of the sentiment reinforcing the stereotypes of African athletes originates
from long-held misconceptions of the African continent itself.

This thesis was designed to further explore U.S. and western sports media
representations of Africa and African athletes. Through the examination of western
media’s representations of an *illustrative sample* (Mason, 2002) of African athletes
affiliated with professional sport in the U.S./West, this thesis seeks to shed light on how
the African athlete in the U.S./West is portrayed or constructed. Its findings show
linkages with previous research, but also differences and contestations within and
throughout the respective representations of the African athlete.
CHAPTER 2
Literature Review

This literature review covers three main areas of interest to the study purpose. First, there is a section highlighting the battle African Americans have had with (negative societal) representation, race, and racism in the United States. Secondly, the literature review discusses the research concerning the current and historical U.S. political marginalization of Africa, and also reviews the (mis)representations and stereotypes of the continent. In the third section, the review focuses on the research on African athletes, specifically, the representations of the natural athlete, the noble savage (athlete), the *in situ* object, and Africa athletes as being a threat to whites in sport. Finally, the literature review ends by making connections between the previous sections and explaining the purpose and direction of this thesis.

*African Americans: The Battle with Racism in the U.S.*

The first section of this literature review concerns the battle with racism and stereotypes African Americans have gone through in the United States. It begins with a subsection which reviews research done in the area of stereotypes in the media, focusing on the news, entertainment, and sport industries. Following that, there is a more detailed review on the literature concerning the societal stereotypes of African Americans that have become prevalent when talking about the black sporting body.

*Stereotypes in the Media: News, Entertainment, and Sport Bias*

There are a number of avenues for research when studying stereotypes of African Americans in the media. Since this thesis is primarily concerned with media representations in sport, this part of the literature review focuses on sport and, as one might argue, on the industries comprising sport, news and entertainment. This section begins with a review of the literature regarding stereotypes/bias in news coverage of events. From there, the literature next reviews bias in the entertainment industry, and ends with a review on the research done concerning stereotypes in sports media.

*News bias.* Research indicates that the media figure significantly in the beliefs and opinions many hold about people of color (Entman, 1990; Berry & Smith, 2000; Harrison & Esqueda, 2001; Sommers, Apfelbaum, Dukes, Toosi, & Wang, 2006). In most instances, the stereotypes regarding blacks and African Americans are propagated and
sustained today through the media, specifically through news, entertainment, and sports media. Carrying over from the days of slavery, African Americans are still thought by many, according to Smith and Hattery, 2006, to be innately violent and less intelligent than whites, while possessing uncontrollable sexual drives. The result or effect of such stereotypes is seen by Smith and Hattery to fuel the (white) societal “need” to keep (the black body) under constraint and socially controlled. These oppressive stereotypes exist even though some claim they are taboo to mention in most social situations (c.f., Entine, 2001). At the same time, the stereotype of African Americans possessing genetically-based physical athletic ability is seen by many (black and white) as positive and favorable (Harris, 1991).

However, according to Entman (1990), whereas media coverage of blacks prior to and throughout the Civil Rights Movement contained overt racism through the blatant portrayal of the stereotypes mentioned above, in the post-Civil Rights era media coverage shifted to more subtle, covert means to reinforce racist ideology. For example, in a 1990 study examining three Chicago television news stations for their representation of blacks, Entman found that 41% of coverage featuring blacks was dedicated to crime and violence. Of this 41%, Entman (1990) further found that such coverage was more likely to lead the news broadcast and was overwhelmingly reported from a white point of view (for example, whites were more likely to be interviewed). Although white anchors delivered most of the prime-time news, most stations had at least one black co-anchor. Still, the existence of African American co-anchors, according to Entman (1990), represents a kind of contested terrain as their presence may, on the one hand, challenge racist notions of black capability, yet may also simultaneously reinforce the ideology that racism is no longer a problem for blacks. Nevertheless, Entman found that white anchors were still responsible for delivering a majority of the news programs which overrepresented blacks in the areas of violence and crime. While nearly two decades have passed since Entman’s work, subsequent research indicates that little has changed. For instance, in a similar study published in 2000, Berry and Smith found that even while whites committed more crimes than blacks, blacks continued to be disproportionately represented when it came to televised news crime coverage which only reinforces Entman’s findings a decade earlier.
More recent are the claims of racism contained in the media coverage of Hurricane Katrina. Based on their analysis of news stories published shortly after the hurricane, Sommers and colleagues (2006) contend that reports of survivors (mostly poor African Americans) as “refugees” served to draw reference to the images often seen in the U.S. media of black refugees in Africa. Similarly, reports of these African American refugees “looting food” (as opposed to white survivors “finding food”) illustrate the subtle differences that exist when reporting on white and black bodies in the media today (Sommers, Apfelbaum, Dukes, Toosi, & Wang, 2006). Further, it was widely reported that there was a massive crime wave in New Orleans following the hurricane, including reports of survivors shooting at helicopters and numerous cases of sexual assault. Much of this turned out to be untrue: there was no shooting at rescue helicopters, forty bodies were not found in a freezer, and there was only one case of reported sexual assault at the convention center (Sommers et al., 2006). According to the authors of these studies, such racist news coverage only serves to increase fear of blacks and reinforce the dominant stereotypes regarding black deviance and violence (Berry & Smith, 2000; Entman, 1990; Sommers et al., 2006).

Even in the absence of direct messages that blacks are more violent or more likely to commit violent crimes, after seeing repeated images of blacks as violent, many people (even people of color) over the years have reported believing or presuming blacks are the primary perpetrators of such crimes (Berry & Smith, 2000; Harrison & Esqueda, 2001; Sommers et al., 2006). This is perhaps no more evident than in the way blacks are treated by the police, where historically there have been numerous, and well documented, instances of excessive force when dealing with people of color. Examples such as the 1991 Rodney King beating or the shootings of unarmed black men in New York and Cincinnati demonstrate the pervasiveness of negative stereotypes of African Americans and the ability of such stereotypes to impact law enforcement and justice system decision-making (Correll, 2002; Payne, 2006).

Entertainment bias. The entertainment world, like the newsrooms, often serves to perpetuate the same stereotypes. In a study concerning network television dramas published in 2003, Nama found that black actors are likely to hold stereotyped roles, such as the role of the threat, problem, or comedian, and to have significantly less airtime as
well as fewer permanent roles than their white counterparts. Such stereotyped roles are often used because they seem “common sense” and “real life,” undoubtedly reflecting the bias of aforementioned news coverage and stereotyped societal beliefs of the black condition (Nama, 2003). Further, blacks are often inserted into scenes simply to give the appearance of that scene being “real” or “urban;” otherwise, Nama found that their presence and actions are usually largely irrelevant to the flow of the television program. Even when television attempts to portray blacks in a “positive light,” many times those roles end up being an unrealistic representation of what it is to be a person of color in America (i.e., that racism has little or no impact on one’s life). Such representations only serve to reinforce ideas that poor blacks are poor because they do not want to succeed (Nama, 2003). A good example of this would be *The Cosby Show*, which is often criticized for its failure to show how race and racism have a large impact on the lives of blacks in America, especially those with upward mobility. That is, the construction of the Cosby’s suggests that anyone can earn an advanced degree and become successful (occupationally and financially) if only she/he is willing to work hard and adopt mainstream (i.e., white or “upper middle class”) cultural sensibilities (Dyson, 2005; Nama, 2003).

*Sports media bias.* Because of the relative success of African Americans (particularly, male African Americans) in sport (especially in boxing then progressing to track & field, baseball, basketball, and football) in the second half of the 20th century, much research attention was, and continues to be, focused on sport as a practice that produces/reproduces/transforms race and racism. As researchers began to examine sports media critically to understand the ways people/athletes of color were depicted, findings indicated that blacks were more likely to be described in physical dimensions (e.g., fast, quick, long) or animal attributes (e.g., gazelle, gorilla, cheetah), while whites were described more in terms of intelligence and hard work (Rada & Wulfemeyer, 2005; Bruce, 2004; Eastman & Billings, 2001). The largely white media’s belief in black’s natural athletic ability trivializes the accomplishments of black athletes and covertly reinforces beliefs of black inferiority in other realms of society because of the mind-body duality that characterizes western cultures. This is compounded media’s representation of white athletes as not natural athletes. That is, to be successful in sport they must work
harder and be more intelligent (something which it is assumed they do and are), thus reinforcing ideas of whites as achievement motivated (i.e., they are capable of and willing to delay gratification) and intellectually superior (Rada & Wulfemeyer, 2005; Bruce, 2004; Eastman & Billings, 2001). Ultimately blacks are allowed (by the white media and society at large) to be genetically superior in a physical dimension, but (again, because of the mind-body duality) at the cost of their intellectual ability, while whites maintain intellectual superiority and retain control over the valued societal attribute of “hard working” (Woodward, 2004).

Bruce (2004) suggests this media stereotyping has lessened somewhat as commentators and writers have become aware of it and are increasingly punished when they let something overtly racist “slip out” of their mouths. However, the tendency for racial stereotyping has not disappeared, and to some extent even the word “athlete” has become synonymous with blacks (especially in sports with high rates of black participation, and even for women). A recent study by Rada and Wulfemeyer (2005) of descriptors used by television crews during intercollegiate basketball and football games found that black athletes are referred to in terms of athletic ability a higher percentage of the time than they are in terms of character or intellectual ability (70% to 30%). The reverse is true for white athletes as they are less likely to be referred to in terms of athletic ability and more in terms of character/intellectual ability (19% to 81%). That is, whites and blacks in the U.S. have been raised in an inherently racist society that propagates or reproduces its racist ideals, in part, through sport (Edwards, 1972; Rada & Wulfemeyer, 2005). This literature review now moves to take a closer look at some of the research focusing specifically on stereotypes in sport.

Stereotyping and Sport\(^1\)

Much like the general stereotypes about African Americans, sports stereotypes emphasize the idea of the black body as being closer to nature, raw and powerful, hypersexualized, untamable, and, of course, not very intelligent (Smith & Hattery, 2006). From initially being denied entry to mainstream sport because of racist beliefs of genetically-based athletic inferiority, the African American rise to athletic dominance in the United States is now based on genetic superiority. Starting with the boxer Jack Johnson and then gaining strength with the emergence of Jesse Owens, Joe Louis, and
Jackie Robinson in the middle of the twentieth century (when blacks started gaining entry into mainstream team sports, i.e., baseball and football), the athletic success of black athletes through the last sixty years has created an illusory correlation between skin color and athletic ability that has become firmly entrenched in the fabric of American西部 societies (Rasmussen, Esgate, & Turner, 2005). Further, taking advantage of western notions of mind-body dualism, some studies throughout the twentieth century claimed to prove the intellectual inferiority and physical superiority of the African American (athlete). The “research” of journalist Martin Kane is a particularly good illustration of the kind of support the genetic/biological athletic superiority stereotype has gotten from researchers.

In an article he published in 1971, Kane outlines the “advantages” science claims African American athletes enjoy over their white counterparts. Among them, Kane includes: longer appendages which make body cooling more efficient; more tendon in the legs which give greater leverage when jumping; the ability to be relaxed under pressure and stay “loose” (presumably because they did not have the same pressures to succeed athletically or socially as whites); and greater bone density and lower body-fat percentage which allows for quicker limb movement and a more durable frame (Kane, 1971). However, Kane also notes that these advantages may hurt blacks in winter sports like hockey where their muscles would get cold quickly, and in swimming, where a dense bone structure and little fat would make them “sinkers.” While these supposed advantages explain black dominance in certain sports and their absence in others for Kane, it is his explanations for how blacks acquired these advantages that is most damning for African Americans. Citing opinions of athletes and scientists, Kane claims the existence of a kind of “survival of the fittest” phenomenon among black populations, especially, African Americans, and this he ties to slavery. His argument is as follows: given the rigors and abject conditions African slaves were subjected to in the journey from Africa to America only the strongest and fittest survived; once in the States slaves were “selectively bred” so as to produce stronger children for slavery; hence, today’s African Americans are physically superior due to selection processes. In a further extension of Darwinian notions of survival of the fittest, Kane also claimed that blacks’ higher infant mortality rate (a “fact” he presents based on a study done in Philadelphia)
means that only the strong black children survive infancy. Clearly such arguments neglect to take into account the impact that factors such as socialization, hard work, and intelligence have on blacks’ sport accomplishments.

One may think that such flaws would dismantle the natural athlete debate however, and more recently, a book by Jon Entine (2001) echoes sentiments similar to Kane’s. Entine claims that it should be obvious, based on what we see in sport today, that black athletic ability is natural, part of their essential nature. To Entine and those writers similar to him in thinking, “blackness” and race are uncomplicated biologically-based categories that determine athletic ability and potential. Further, Entine and others follow a belief that every black child has a “sporting chance” (Kane, 1971) to succeed in sport when other doors are closed.

Conversely, and often in response to the “theories” advanced by Kane, Entine, and others like them, many researchers have refuted genetic theories and sought alternative explanations for black athletic dominance. As an example, the work of David Hunter (1998) indicates that any claim of a genetic advantage (or disadvantage) based on race would need to meet two criteria to be true: first, there would have to be a set of identifiable variables that dictate superior performance in a sport and said variables would have to be present in all athletes regardless of race; and second, the prevalence of said variables would have to be associated with race. At the time of Hunter’s research no such variables had been found, and it is unlikely, if not impossible, that such variables ever will be discovered (Hunter, 1998).

Another strong argument against claims that African Americans are genetically and biologically advantaged in terms of sport performance has to do with the notion or concept of race itself. Social scientists, particularly those within sociology, anthropology, and cultural studies have been critical of the notion of race as a biological fact. As early as the 1930s, W. Montague Cobb (1936) argued that supposed anthropometric measures establishing African American physical superiority in fact did not hold true across race. Cobb’s observations of race and track athletes found no distinct anthropometric characteristic that linked African American track athletes, even in skin color, which ranged from very light to dark. Furthering this line of thought in his response to Kane’s 1971 article, sociologist Harry Edwards argued that, in addition to numerous other
methodological errors in Kane’s conclusions, more biological variation exists within any given race than between races (Edwards, 1972). Additionally, other critics of biological constructions of race have raised questions about how racial classifications can explain athletic ability when there is an increasing number of ‘racially mixed’ individuals, a fact that inherently negates the arguments posed by Kane and Entine (Begley, 1995). As Edwards (1972) concluded, categorization has actually been “racial stratification” in America; a stratification that has historically denied people of color equal opportunities to attain valued resources. At the same time, sport (along with entertainment) has been one of the few doors to success open to racial minorities. However, this doorway is limited as to be an athlete adds another whole set of stereotypes to the beleaguered social presence of blacks in America.

Research over the years indicates that these athletic stereotypes may impact not only the views fans have of African American athletes, but also the treatment black athletes receive by sports personnel (e.g., coaches, general managers, scouts, and so forth). The effects of this differential treatment are most prevalent in the area of stacking. For instance, Loy and McElvogue (1970) found that blacks were more likely to be placed (stacked) in what are considered peripheral positions (positions with lower teammate interaction, e.g., wide receiver) or positions which require the greatest athleticism. Such positional segregation leaves what are seen as central positions (positions with high teammate interaction, e.g., quarterback) open for whites to occupy. As noted by Loy and McElvogue, the practice of stacking is based on the assumptions that blacks are not intelligent enough to play central (decision making and communicative) positions and that blacks are physically predisposed to play positions which require “athleticism.” As Woodward (2004) observes, however, these assumptions also presume that, for example, quarterbacks and catchers are positions that do not require one to be athletic. The intersection of these ideas produces a system that feeds into stereotypes of blacks, which serve to influence the opinions of coaches, players, and managers, and place black athletes into peripheral roles. Individuals who occupy these positions tend to have shorter careers as they are most susceptible to age-related changes and injury, and are associated with low levels of advancement into management positions after retirement (Eitzen & Sanford, 1975; Grusky, 1963; Sack, 2004). Though research suggests that stacking is less
prevailing today (Woodward, 2004), it also makes clear that athletic stereotypes have real consequences for the sport-related opportunities available to blacks and non-blacks. Further, these stereotypes, by lumping all those with darker skin together, ignore the ethnic diversity—and the diverse interests, skills, and abilities—of the black population in America. In addition, race-based stereotypes of athletic (and other) abilities trivialize African Americans’ accomplishments both on and off the playing field. This history and on-going experience of racism and stereotyping in American sport and society faced by African Americans may be both rooted in, and influence by, beliefs about Africa. It is to these groups—Africans and African athletes—that this literature review now turns.

Africa: Battle with Representation and Relevance

Similar to the end of slavery in the United States, the end of colonialism on the African continent was only the beginning of a long fight for African countries to gain equality with the rest of the world. In order to better understand the situation Africa and its countries are in, this section reviews the literature regarding Africa’s problems with stereotypes and political relevance. It begins with reviewing the general stereotypes of the continent, continues with a look at some of the past and current (U.S.) political policies towards the continent, and ends with reviewing the research on African athletes.

Stereotypes

In ways both similar and contradictory to the representation of African Americans, Africa and its diverse people have faced, and continue to face, numerous stereotypes from non-African countries. Frequently, Africa is referred to as the “Dark Continent” or as a continent of “Third-World” countries, statements that mystify and marginalize the continent and its people. Throughout the world, and even by African Americans, the people of Africa are constantly portrayed as and believed to be backward, half-naked, and tribal warriors/savages (Bollig & Heinemann, 2002; Kratz & Gordon, 2002; Traore, 2003). Popular movies such as Coming to America and Barbershop are good examples of such stereotypes in that they portray their African characters as inarticulate and inelegant (Adebajo, 2004). However, much of this (mis)representation occurs through media news coverage which focuses primarily on the wars, corruption, famine, and AIDS epidemic occurring in various African countries—but does so in
simplistic analyses which only reinforce stereotypes of the continent as primitive (Gordon, 1998).

A particularly damaging myth is that of “tribalism,” or the perception that the ethnic conflict in Africa is a result of traditional tribal rivalries. According to Gordon (1998), with rare exceptions, the ethnic conflict seen on the continent today is a recent occurrence and is very similar to the types of conflict one would see on any continent (e.g., Nazi Germany or Bosnia). Analyses indicates that many of the reasons for these conflicts are due to colonialism and modernization. Gordon (1998) gives the example of Nigeria, where the conflict between the major ethnic groups of the Ibos, Yorubas, and Hausas is partly the result of European colonialism (the drawing of national boundaries) and partly the result of modern-day competition for resources. In this instance, the colonial creation of Nigeria’s borders and national institutions forced different ethnic groups into communication and competition with one another for scarce national resources (i.e., power, education, wealth, etc.). This in turn spurred the manipulation of ethnic symbols (pride), and was exacerbated by an emerging western-educated middle class (consisting of educators, clerks, traders, contractors, soldiers, etc.) that conflicted with the poor and uneducated (Gordon, 1998).

Similar causes for ethnic conflict can be seen with Rwanda, where colonial/historical discourses ignored cultural complexity and uncomplicatedly elevated the Tutsi as superior to the Hutu. These discourses served to reinterpret the origin of Rwandan conflict from being concerned with clan/royal authority to a civilizer (Tutsi) versus savage (Hutu) dichotomy (Eltringham, 2006; Newbury, 2001). According to Eltringham (2006), it was these discourses that were internalized by both the Tutsi and Hutu during Rwandan independence and helped spur political conflict (and eventually genocide). However, as also noted by Eltringham, one cannot simply reduce the violence in Rwanda to colonial discourses as, through the years, external forces such as Belgium/French involvement, intra-Hutu conflict, events in neighboring Burundi, and the manipulation of external threats (*inyenzi* and the Rwandan Patriotic Front, two Rwandan groups with military origins that, at different time periods, existed outside of Rwanda) factored into the violence. Thus, according to Gordon (1998), suggesting that ethnic conflict in Africa is the result of long standing tribal conflict only feeds into racist
stereotypes many non-Africans have of “the savage” and ideologically separates such conflicts from similar ones in Europe/America. In fact, countries such as the United States have played a seminal role in some of the ethnic conflict that exists on the continent of Africa, as discussed next.

Political Past

World (specifically, U.S. American) policy regarding Africa has often been neglectful, neo-colonialist, and racist (Adebajo, 2004). During the Cold War, America’s policy and concern about containing communism encouraged the continuation of a European presence in former colonies, including military bases for strategic positioning against communist powers (the Soviet Union and China) (Gordon, 1998). For this reason, substantial U.S. funds, including 80% of the funds spent on international aid to Africa in the 1980s, went to the dictators of Zaire (Mobutu Sese Seko), Sudan, Liberia (Samuel Doe), and Somalia (Siad Barre). These countries/dictators, and other leaders such as those in Kenya and Angola, simply claimed to be (anti)communist and were willing to do America’s (or Russia’s) bidding in order to increase their power (Adebajo, 2004; Gordon, 1998). Unfortunately, this quickly led to African political leaders framing their agendas (whether for power, wealth, or both) in Cold War terms, when the basis for their agendas actually revolved around local and personal struggles for power (Adebajo, 2004; Gordon, 1998).

For example, in Kenya during the 1960s a political rivalry broke out between Oginga Odinga and Tom Mboya, the top political allies of President Jomo Kenyatta. Mboya (a trade unionist and pro-capitalist) went to the United States to meet with President Kennedy and convince the American Federation of Labor and Congress of Industrial Organizations (AFL-CIO) to establish a scholarship program that would be run by Mboya. Not to be outdone, Odinga (a Marxist pro-communist) went to Russia and succeeded in gaining its leaders’ financial assistance to counter the “pro-capitalist” Mboya (Gordon, 1998). Thus, while politics were often framed in Cold War terms, they were often merely a front to play out personal and local conflicts/rivalries, indirectly supported by outside powers that stood to benefit such as the U.S. and Russia (Gordon, 1998). This example illustrates a practice that could be seen across Africa as both the
U.S. and the Soviet Union often gave money, as well as weapons, to leaders who were ideologically opposed to them the day before (Adebajo, 2004; Gordon, 1998).

According to Adebajo (2004), in the 1990s, during the Clinton administration, the U.S. continued to make poor judgments and bad policies towards African countries. Based on a policy to “increase democratization,” the U.S. supported (with thirty million dollars in 1996 alone) four “warlords”—Yoweri Museveni (Uganda), Isais Ifwerki (Eritrea), Meles Zenawi (Ethiopia), and Paul Kagame (Rwanda) who subsequently started wars among themselves (Adebajo, 2004). Eritrea and Ethiopia fought each other in a border war, and Rwanda and Uganda became involved in the Democratic Republic of Congo’s (DRC) civil war, eventually falling out with each other over strategy and ultimately fighting one another. Notably, one of the main reasons for U.S. military assistance in these countries to begin with was to keep together the anti-Sudan coalition (Sudan having been labeled a terrorist state by the U.S. in 1993 under the Clinton Administration) (Adebajo, 2004).

To highlight other ways that U.S. policy has been simplistic, uninformed, and self-serving, most U.S. development money is funneled towards the oil-rich countries of Gabon, Nigeria, Angola, and mineral-rich South Africa. According to Adebajo (2004) the Gingrich Congress cut development spending on the continent by two-hundred million dollars, and American troop withdrawal from the continent was instrumental in the tragedies within Somalia and Rwanda. In the case of Somalia, U.S. peace troops were pulled out before achieving peace and also where the “Black Hawk Down” debacle occurred, leaving nearly a thousand Somali citizens killed (including women and children) by only eighteen American soldiers. Rwanda is where the U.S. forced withdrawal of United Nations troops that may have been able to prevent the 1994 genocide (Adebajo, 2004). The unbalanced U.S. investment in countries with oil and neglect of the espoused democratic and development ideals of the U.S. are only further evidence that U.S. policy is primarily driven by a country’s strategic importance, historically, in terms of the red peril of Russia (regarding the rebuilding of Europe after World War II) and more recently in terms of what Owusu (2007) calls the green menace of Islam (regarding the support of oil-rich nations and nations which will help contain “terrorist states”) (Adebajo, 2004; Owusu, 2007). That is, while often presented in
altruistic terms, the reality is that, at its roots, the U.S. government’s interest in Africa is also about resources and ideology.

Further limiting U.S. understanding of Africa, is the fact that the African population in the U.S. does not have a powerful social voice or political lobby and is dependent on that of African Americans (Adebajo, 2004). Power is perhaps relative here as it is more difficult for lobbyists to argue for an entire continent than one country, as is the case with the Jewish-American lobby for Israel, the Cuban lobby, and the Mexican lobby (Adebajo, 2004). The responsibility of lobbying for Africa, a continent of forty-seven countries falls on African Americans and the Congressional Black Caucus (CBC). While historically, African Americans have supported and pushed for better policy towards Africa, dependence on the voice of African Americans is problematic for a number of reasons, according to Adebajo. First, many African Americans do not care or know about Africa or do not claim their African heritage. Second, as noted previously, African Americans are still battling with representation and equality in America themselves. Finally, among the leadership of the CBC there is often insensitivity and conflicting opinions on the course of action to take towards Africa (Adebajo, 2004). Adebajo provides the following example: the CBC had great success in imposing sanctions on apartheid South Africa in the 1980s; however, the organization was greatly ineffective in its attempt to impose sanctions on Nigeria and the regime of General Sani Abacha during the 1990s. In this instance, Donald Payne (CBC member and House Representative) offered the Nigeria Democracy Act, a policy that would have frozen American investments in Nigeria and imposed an oil embargo because of alleged human rights violations. However, some members of the CBC felt that the Act was unneeded; among them were Senator Carol Mosely-Braun and Louis Farrakhan. These two individuals were invited by and visited the Nigerian dictator General Sani Abacha, a leader who had hired lobbyists and a public relations firm to combat U.S. sanctions as well as threatened American oil investments with retaliation. Upon their return, Mosely-Braun and Farrakhan called for “constructive dialogue” with Abacha, Farrakhan specifically said that only through the military can a nation like Nigeria rise up and get going. Analysts note that this was surprising, even for Farrakhan (who is often seen as being radical in his approach to Black Nationalism) perhaps, since the regime had just
executed nine activists fighting environmental destruction (Adebajo, 2004, p. 98; Wilkins, 1996). Needless to say, with the oil companies fearful of retaliation and key members of the CBC speaking out against sanctions, Payne’s proposed act was defeated (Adebajo, 2004).

More recently, according to Owusu (2007), while it was the plan of the G.W. Bush administration to ignore African countries without geo-political importance (basically all of sub-Saharan Africa), the events of 9/11 forced the administration to change its isolationist ideals towards Africa. While certainly not new (it also dominated governmental ideology during the Cold War when it was thought that poverty bred discontent and would lead to the spread of communism), the belief that poor societies are potential breeding grounds for terrorism and related activities seems to have re-emerged. Indeed, Owusu (2007) has found that this view is supported by both the current Bush administration and other world leaders. To wit, the Bush administration has implemented the Millennium Challenge Account (MCA) that allows poorer countries to receive aid based on a judgment of whether the country’s government has “good policies.” These good policies reference the country’s judiciary system, investment in its population, and economic freedom (capitalism). While this might be seen as better way to decide who should receive aid than simply throwing money to dictators, as noted by Owusu (2007), the premise of the MCA is not without its own complications.

First, the link between poverty and terrorism shifts the focus of ending poverty for poverty’s sake to one of ending poverty out of fear of poor people. As Owusu (2007) points out, there is no evidence that Africa is increasingly becoming a bed for terrorist organizations. Moreover, Africans have also been victims of terrorist attacks (e.g., the U.S. embassy bombings in Kenya and Tanzania) and most terrorist activities are not a response to poverty but to other existing political conditions/inequities. This latter contention is supported by the finding that many terrorists are well-educated and middle-class (Owusu, 2007). Secondly, Owusu argues that the MCA is a merit-based program while poverty is need-based; that is, the MCA is designed to help those countries which are seen as “helping themselves.” This distinction is significant because it allows the MCA to ignore some of the poorest people in Africa, those who reside in so called “failed states” such as Burundi, Liberia, Somali, Sudan, and others, because their governments
cannot (perhaps will not) follow the “good policies” necessary to receive aid. As Owusu argues, if the MCA was truly worried about terrorism coming from poor societies, it would seem to make sense to target these failed states and even states which may pose terrorist threats most urgently. Lastly, and related to the previous point, disbursement of monetary funds through the MCA goes exclusively through national governments. This method hinders the ability of the MCA to bypass governments and utilize, for example, nongovernmental organizations to directly help impoverished peoples. In essence, Owusu found that the MCA has started from scratch in a number of areas regarding poverty-alleviation, largely failing to take advantage of or work with established organizations. This practice, in many ways, complicates the world poverty-alleviation picture. Certainly any aid to help alleviate poor areas in Africa may be beneficial but one has to wonder if shifting the focus from ending poverty to a fear of the poor becoming terrorists is a positive step forward or if it is an ideologically sound plan for the future.

Summary. This section has tried to detail some of the political history revolving around the continent of Africa and its peoples. Though it seems the past history of near complete neglect is giving way to programs providing more aid, one must question whether anti-terrorism objectives unnecessarily paint a continent of black people as potential terrorists. One may easily draw parallels between the ways African Americans are represented in the U.S. media and the ways African Americans have historically been stereotyped (i.e., as violent, a danger/threat). These portrayals, and most westerners’ limited exposure to the continent, results in many Americans (white and black) knowing relatively little about the complexity of what occurs in Africa (as on any continent) and, American policies toward, and the treatment of, African countries. At the same time, Africa as a continent is receiving increased exposure through sport and sport media, with the rise of African distance runners and increasing numbers of African-born and African descendents (first generation Americans) making an impact in sport. Given the representational power of the media, it thus becomes important to examine how African athletes are presented by the U.S. and western sports media, and how Africa and these athletes’ African identities are constructed. The next sections of this paper address these topics.
The extant research that has examined the representation of Africans in sport has found four images that dominate. These are the African athlete as “natural,” as someone whose physical abilities are a threat to whites (especially white male athletes in “white” sports), as the “noble savage” (or “noble athlete”) whose exoticism is also a factor, and as an “object in situ.” The research documenting these representations is discussed next. It should be noted that this research has focused on African male athletes.

The natural runner. Not surprisingly, African athletes are represented in ways both similar to and different from African American athletes. Particularly prevalent is the stereotype of the natural runner. Runners from Africa, specifically those from Kenya and Ethiopia, are very popular among not only whites, but African Americans as well (Walton & Butryn, 2006), and hence, often are a reference point for what it means to be an African athlete. For example, Steve Holman, a top African American runner in the 1990s, says of African runners that, “. . . their bodies seem to have been designed for distance running” (Walton & Butryn, 2006, p. 9). This discourse frequently follows good performances of African runners with media commentators making statements such as “casually crushing the competition” or “loping like a sightseer” and “neither broke a sweat.” Such commentary reproduces the stereotype of African runners’ athletic ability as being natural and simple (requiring little thought) (Walton & Butryn, 2006, p. 9).

However, not only are their athletic talents inherent, their physical prowess also gets represented in more oppressive ways as well. For example, journalists Kenny Moore and Heinz Kluetmeier (1990, p. n/a), in an article entitled “Sons of the wind,” wrote:

> Africa can be seen to be a sieve of afflictions through which only the hardy may pass. The largest, fastest, wildest, strangest beasts are here. Every poisonous bug, screaming bird and thorned shrub has arrived at this moment through the most severe environments. . . Sport is a pale shadow of the competitive life that has gone on for ever across this high, fierce, first continent. Is it any wonder that frail European visitors feel threatened?

That is, African athletes are not only naturally physically skilled, but that physicality also holds potential danger and presents a potential threat to whites—on and off the playing
field. Research on the threat that African athletes are seen to pose to white athletes is presented next.

*Threat to whites.* The discourse of African athletic physicality and skill as a threat to white athleticism is congruent with the many discourses surrounding the athletic ability of African Americans. These discourses serve to marginalize their achievements and maintain the victimized stance whiteness has taken in the sports arena. This victim stance emerges from an overall societal backlash towards “race politics:” that is, one way for whites to undermine or avoid addressing racism is to make the victims of racism (blacks) the perpetrator or cause of racism. In the realm of sport, according to Kusz (2001) and Walton and Butryn (2006), the victim stance results not only from the larger societal backlash to race politics but also from whites’ feelings of physical inadequacy which comes from the rise of African American and African athletes and the (imaginary) decline of the white athlete. To justify these feelings, discourses have been constructed to belittle the achievements of black athletes (e.g., their results and successes are not from their hard work or superior effort), as well as problematize them (their athletic physicality poses a potential threat to whites), while giving whites an excuse not to do well in sport and the ability to look towards other areas (e.g., business) where they still maintain superiority (Walton & Butryn, 2006).

Research has found that especially with regard to distance running, African athletes are sometimes despised by (white) Americans not only because of xenophobia but also because of racism. Walton and Butryn (2006) found evidence of a racial/ethnic bias among white American (recreational) distance runners when looking at the decline of white distance runner’s success and the recent dominance of runners from African countries. Walton and Butryn’s research, which examined public discourses of the whiteness of male U.S. distance runners in U.S. newspapers, running magazines, and popular internet sites from the 1970s to the present, indicated that a racial bias among white runners towards African American and naturalized African citizen runners took precedence. That is, white Americans would rather cheer for a foreign white runner than a fellow American who was African American or a naturalized black African. To a running website which asked if people (inherently those who visit the website) would be
concerned about the lack of U.S. distance running success if elite races were being won by white Canadians, Walton and Butryn (2006, p. 20) noted the following responses:

The poster “Connection?” challenges: “While we may not be overtly racist, race and skin color surely play a role in our criticisms. Plus, admit it, you would rather see Alan Webb on the Olympic podium than an ex-Kenyan U.S. immigrant runner.” One poster responds, “Heck yeah I’d rather see a homegrown American on the podium stand, but that’s cause I like homegrown Americans more so then [sic] naturilezed [sic] Americans, not cause I hate Blacks or whatever.”

These and other responses to the website’s question continue to demonstrate not only an American backlash towards African runners, but a backlash towards people of color (i.e., blacks) in general, as the term “homegrown American” usually refers to white Americans only (Alan Webb is white) and certainly does in the context of this response (Walton & Butryn, 2006). As alluded to previously, much of the backlash one sees in the sport context likely draws from the white male backlash against the gains minority groups have made overall in the U.S. from the 1960s. According to scholars, this backlash primarily focuses on white male masculinity and the struggle white males have with maintaining the historically fixed meanings surrounding what it means to be a white male, specifically the privilege that comes with such status (Brayton, 2005; Kusz, 2001). The programs designed to help minority groups gain socioeconomic equality have been the target of this conservative backlash as it has linked such programs to the decline of the economy and subsequent loss of white jobs among whites (both domestically and internationally). Ironically, such programs were present and helped drive the economy during the country’s biggest economic growth periods (Kusz, 2001). Thus, by compelling working class whites to focus on retaliation towards minority members for their declining prestige only hides the global corporate and capitalist policies which may bear more of the responsibility for their condition. As Kusz (2001) notes, this condition has been created and legitimizied to stem white-on-white class-based conflict, and effectively constrains the mobilizing power of the poor against the wealthy. The illusion many whites have of losing their privilege to minority members is a powerful force which often leads to the retardation of ameliorative programs and maintenance of the status quo.
In the case of sport, this backlash and its accompanying white anxieties are also evident among the media and American race organizers in the form of ignoring the performances of Africans. Walton & Butryn (2006) found that African runners (even those who were naturalized U.S. citizens) were reported on less and had little made of their accomplishments compared to white runners, who would frequent magazine covers and go on publicity tours after record-breaking performances. This is similar to Lumpkin and Williams’ (1991) finding that black athletes received less coverage than white athletes in *Sports Illustrated*. Further, there is some evidence that rewards now differ for African and American runners. For example, to challenge what has come to be viewed as African hegemony in distance running, some race organizers now award separate prize money for American runners in domestic races while they have ceased to award prize money altogether in other races. A few examples may illustrate this practice: (1) Organizers for a race in Florida ceased providing prize money after the race was won by African runners a few years in a row; (2) at the elite Boulder road race in Colorado, a three-runners-per-country rule was initiated to limit the dominance of African runners; and (3) the New York City marathon offers the Alberto Salazar award to the top American finisher (Walton & Butryn, 2006). While the practice of awarding separate prize money is designed to encourage U.S. runners, it is also indicative of a backlash against African runners who seem to disproportionately win races (Walton & Butryn, 2006). This is part of the larger argument that whiteness is trying to maintain privilege and power (through setting racist rules that limit African runners) in a traditionally white space (sport, and in particular, distance running) against the external threat of African running dominance (Walton & Butryn, 2006).

*Noble athlete and exotic African.* Previous research has also focused on the perception of African athletes by (western) sports media. One study involved a media analysis of the discourses surrounding an African athlete, Eric Moussambani, who had competed in an Olympic swimming event. The researchers found that the media discourse surrounding Eric Moussambani sought to frame him as backward, exotic, and child-like, while positioning western countries and their athletes as developmentally and technologically ahead of non-western countries (Nauright & Magdalinski, 2003).
According to the researchers, the most dominant themes from this research are the positioning of Eric Moussambani as a “noble athlete” and as the “exotic African.”

In their analysis/discussion of media coverage surrounding Moussambani’s performance, Nauright and Magdalinski (2003) note that the noble athlete stereotype is an abstract way for western societies to critique themselves and what they have become. The idea of the noble athlete has historically been applied to Native Americans (the “noble savage”), drawing up images of the “proud chief,” meaning one who has an aura of dignity and integrity around himself, yet is still unsophisticated and uncultured (a savage) (Denison & Markula, 2005). In Nauright and Magdalinski’s article, Moussambani was constructed as representing the “lost innocence” of the Olympics. He is further posed as an object to learn from, as he captures the goodness (the innocence) sport once possessed. For example, fellow swimmers were quoted as saying that Moussambani represented what “the Olympics are all about.” A comment in ‘Letters to the Editor’ stated that a public “jaded, frustrated and just plain tired of the commercialised [sic] jingoistic, over-exposed coverage,” was grateful to Moussambani for “restoring [their] faith in the true spirit of the Olympics.” The British ITV website reported that, “While the Sydney Games continue to be embroiled in controversy over drugs–at least this humble Olympian truly epitomizes the theme of ‘it’s not the winning, it’s the taking part’” (Nauright & Magdalinski, 2003). This commentary is critical of the state of sport in “modern” society, through positioning Moussambani in an era of sport nostalgia. This nostalgic era is one in which it is believed that people played purely for “the love of the game,” a concept which many believe has been forgotten due to commercialization and high player salaries. Despite the positive overtones of such banter, the noble athlete stereotype belies any genuine interest in the subject or his/her origins because it is essentially paternalistic and reductionistic. That is, such commentary basically says that no one expected Moussambani to be able to compete because of his country of origin (backward and underdeveloped) and his black skin color (as out of place, an outsider, in the swimming world) (Nauright & Magdalinski, 2003).

Nauright and Magdalinski’s study found that Moussambani was also presented as and “exotic African.” This theme highlights how media reports sensationalized Moussambani’s upbringing and training in Africa as exotic and extraordinary. Reports
claimed that Moussambani grew up swimming in “crocodile-infested rivers” (a similar report claimed that fellow Equatorial Guinean Paula Boropa trained in those same waters, her coach armed with a shotgun), that the trip to Sydney was only Moussambani’s second time seeing the ocean, and that Moussambani had only begun swimming in January of 2000 (in reality Moussambani grew up on an island city and frequently swam in the ocean) (Nauright & Magdalinski, 2003).

Similar exaggerations are prevalent among the narratives surrounding African (specifically Kenyan and Ethiopian) distance runners, where how far they had to run to school (a fate thought to be incongruous with citizens of western/modern nations) is often mentioned, but very little is mentioned about them running on tracks, which are believed to be lacking/absent in African nations. Such narratives situate Moussambani and others as uncultured and primitive, thus creating a “culture vs. nature” (West vs. Africa) theme which further validates alleged western cultural superiority (Nauright & Magdalinski, 2003). These two ideas, noble athlete and exotic African, are not expressly mentioned in the next image of Africans, the in situ object, yet they remain related and are fully applicable.

Object in situ. In the work of Denison and Markula (2005), which involved observing press conferences of the legendary distance runner Haile Gebrselassie, how the media react to a well established African celebrity athlete was explored. Their findings indicate that western sports media positioned Gebrselassie as an object in situ; that is, as an actor out of his cultural context of Ethiopia, the western media looked at Gebrselassie as a representative of all of Ethiopia or Africa (Denison & Markula, 2005). Denison and Markula used this label because inherently, an in situ object is metonymic and mimetic. By metonymic the researchers mean that Gebrselassie is part of an absent whole, the whole in this case being Ethiopian culture that may or may not be able to be interpreted through a single object, Gebrselassie in this case. Gebrselassie is mimetic in that he is accepted for his fragmentary nature (being only a part of the Ethiopian culture/context) and that fragmentary nature actually enhances the “realness” of Gebrselassie for his audience. For example, Gebrselassie was asked to answer questions such as: “Are the rumors true that you have plans one day to become president of Ethiopia?”; “Do you think you can be as successful as a politician as you have been as an athlete?”; “Can one
person solve all the problems your country is facing?”; “What place do you see for foreign aid to Ethiopia . . . how long will changes take?”; and “. . . how is it to be so famous . . . and so loved by your people?” (Denison & Markula, 2005). According to Denison and Markula, not only do these questions artificially inflate Gebrselassie’s importance in western perceptions of Ethiopia/Africa, but they also serve to simplify the cultures of Africa by allowing one man’s voice to carry so much weight. It is unlikely that Tiger Woods would be asked such questions after winning the British Open. Denison and Markula argue that while Gebrselassie avoids categorization as the stereotypical athlete, it would seem as though the nature of the press conferences they observed would give Gebrselassie considerable counternarrative power, that is, for example, the power to voice his thoughts/concerns on the position of Ethiopia in world politics. However, they point out that the press conferences actually were dictated by western media to satisfy western media interest in Ethiopia/Africa (Denison & Markula, 2005). Thus, even though issues of politics and Gebrselassie’s political concerns were discussed during the press conferences, the lack of context for these discussions positions these problems as issues for Africans only and subtly reinforces or justifies the unequal relationships between Africa and western countries (Denison & Markula, 2005).

In part, it might be argued that Gebrselassie colluded with the press by not actively giving information outside of what the reporters were asking. However, Denison and Markula (2005) contend that this has to do with what they call “obtuse meanings,” which, by definition, encourage the gathering of knowledge, but not understanding what that knowledge means in relation to the larger context. In this instance, the media asked Gebrselassie numerous questions about Ethiopia and his political, business, and humanitarian plans; however, such questions are unable to get at the depth of what that information means. For example, Denison and Markula (2005) note that questions such as those asked by the media failed to explore how Gebrselassie’s efforts may have a global impact, or what the effect or meaning of poverty in Ethiopia is to western countries, or even how Gebrselassie feels about white westerners and their role in inequitable trade policies—and, Gebrselassie does not provide answers to these unasked questions. Denison and Markula conclude that by keeping the meanings surrounding Gebrselassie obtuse, and therefore incomplete, with calculated questions and calculated
answers (from Gebrselassie), western media can remain in their comfort zone (even Gebrselassie remains in his comfort zone) and lay African problems on African people.

Denison and Markula also found evidence of what they called the “humanitarian businessman” image. Their analysis indicated that questions asked of Gebrselassie by the media (noted previously), constructed Gebrselassie as a “savior of Africa,” the African athlete who got rich in the West, and is using the West’s money for the good of his/her people. Thus, this image that simultaneously linked Gebrselassie closer with western notions of success and removed him from his Ethiopian/African context, serves to further alleviate pressures on western countries to consider, more fully, Africa in their foreign policies by providing examples of a successful African who westernized countries can look to as having economic responsibility for his home country (Denison & Markula, 2005). While it would seem unlikely that governments would form international policy based on an athlete’s activities, Denison and Markula contend that sport, and the messages and images that are constructed around it, impact (directly and indirectly) large segments of the population, segments that influence the directions and concerns of government.

Conclusion: Towards Excavating the African Athlete in the West

This review has explored some of the extant scholarship on racism in America, (mis)representations of Africa, and stereotypes associated with African American and African athletes. Analyses of media, specifically news and sport, and racism in America suggest that racist and stereotyped constructions of African Americans and Africa(ns) (re)produce inequality/racism, and may have an impact on actions/attitudes towards the two groups. One of the more overt results of such racism that has been examined in sport is positional discrimination that arises from the stereotype that African Americans are “natural” athletes (i.e., their athletic ability is genetically-based and not due to effort and hard work).

Research on the history of western media representation of Africa demonstrates that some stereotypes about Africans are similar to those of African Americans, while others differ. With regard to similarities, it is suggested that these stereotypes may play a role in U.S. policy towards the continent, especially when combined with the history of dictatorship and government corruption (which is to some degree a stereotype as well) on
the African continent. While conversely, research on African athletes has found that the media constructs them as *in situ objects* and as noble athletes (savages) and exotic Africans. These media representations are somewhat different than those that studies of African Americans have found yet are still potentially important to western views, attitudes, and values towards the African continent.

Research on media representation of African American athletes is extensive. However, research on African athletes is limited. At the same time, media constructions of African athletes may well shape notions of race, blackness/whiteness, and athletic ability in the U.S. Hence, this thesis proposes a new angle from which to look at this issue. Through the years, Africans’ (immigrants from African countries) presence in America and in sport has grown significantly (Walton & Butryn, 2006). The dominance of East Africans in running, increasing numbers of Africans in college/professional football, and professional/collegiate basketball recruitment in West/South Africa, are just a few areas where Africans have made inroads into American sport. Until now, most studies concerned with the major American sports (i.e., football, basketball, baseball, and ice hockey) have either ignored Africans or have subsumed them under the category “African American,” something which confuses ethnic with racial groupings.

Further, whereas the previous research has focused on how the “white sports media” have talked about white and black athletes differently, this study will examine how (a largely white) sports media describe African athletes. This is an important topic because the success of African athletes may not only challenge white supremacy globally, but it may also challenge American nationalism/xenophobia surrounding the success of “foreigners” in American/World sports. This is especially so in the U.S., considering current tensions over immigration reform and overseas businesses migration.

This thesis will examine discourses on specific African athletes to explore the way the African athlete (as well as Africa itself) is constructed by the media. In essence, this research complicates previous work on African Americans through the addition of nationalistic lines of power and discourse. That is, given the numerous stereotypes of Africa and its people that exist in the West, it is important to examine how or if those views are expressed by an American/western media that has at least historically (if not also contemporaneously) represented African Americans and Africa—and African
American and African athletes—in narrow and racist ways (Nauright & Magdalinski, 2003; Rada & Wulfemeyer, 2005). Hence, the research question that guided this thesis was: How are African athletes constructed by western sports media? Further, topical or sub-questions included: (1) Why are African athletes constructed by western sports media as they are?; (2) How might such constructions of African athletes impact public sentiment or beliefs about African athletes and by extension Africa in the United States?; (3) Are African athletes constructed by the sports media differently than African American athletes are, if so, how and why?; (4) How are stereotypes of African Americans (in general and athletically) applied (or reconstructed to apply) to African athletes (especially regarding masculinity and gender)? Prior scholarship, while serving to ground and direct the current study, has given scant attention to African athletes in U.S./western sport thus leaving a hole in our understanding of race and sport—a hole that this thesis project begins to fill.
CHAPTER 3
Methodology

As mentioned above, the purpose of this research project was to investigate and gain insight into discourses western sports media create around an illustrative sample of African athletes involved in professional sport in the U.S. To do this, the research process employed a qualitative approach and focused on four athletes. The athletes selected for this thesis were Hakeem Olajuwon, Tegla Loroupe, Christian Okoye, and Tamba Hali. To begin explaining why these four athletes were chosen for analysis, the methodology for this thesis is now presented. Specific attention in this section is paid to defining qualitative research and its significance as an investigative tool, the research approach used, and the method and specific procedures that were utilized.

Why Qualitative Research

Qualitative research, according to Shank (2006), is a “systematic empirical inquiry into meaning” (p. 4). This broad definition means that such research is done in an ordered/planned (but not rigid) fashion, hence the notions of flexibility and emergent design (Schram, 2006) are central to qualitative research. It is concerned with the world of experience; that is, rather than using speculation or reflection as the basis of understanding, qualitative research relies on “observations” of the social world. Qualitative research is also deeply involved in meaning processes (Shank, 2006). The emphasis on meaning is central to qualitative research. Understanding how sense is made of social processes and phenomena, the construction of “reality,” the beliefs and assumptions people hold about a social phenomenon and how they came to those beliefs and assumptions are the foci of qualitative research (Schram, 2006). To the qualitative researcher, meaning is always incomplete and infinitely complex in nature, and in the process of doing research it is not about “finding” the “right” meaning but about having enough meaning (Schram, 2006; Shank, 2006). To this end, where quantitative studies often try to find one solution to a problem or “the” truth (positivistic), qualitative researchers continually try to find more and different meaning(s) in an attempt to reveal the complexity of and problematize the social phenomenon of interest (Schram, 2006). By problematize, Schram means “inviting consideration of other plausible interpretations of phenomena and inviting attention to their complexity” (Schram, 2006, p. 24).
With knowledge/meaning always being incomplete, qualitative researchers are open to new ways and methods to study and learn from the world of lived experience. Shank (2006) is one who conceptualizes the tremendous diversity of qualitative research into two types that he sees as existing along a continuum. At one end of the continuum is *qualitative science*, which seeks to work within the boundaries of science. Thus, qualitative science is deeply concerned with issues such as standardization, control, validity, reliability, generalizability, bias/error, and verification/testing of results, theories, and hypotheses (Shank, 2006). Often, this way of doing qualitative research tends to be reductionistic by examining smaller/simpler processes that lie beneath more complex phenomena, and this can be seen in research approaches such as Grounded Theory, semi-structured interviews, and mixed methods (Shank, 2006). However, Shank (2006) contends that qualitative science differs from “normal science” in three ways: (1) qualitative researchers are capable of doing exploratory studies where qualitative data are the ending point for empirical inquiry (mainly in mixed methods); (2) scientific thinking is extended into areas which are not normally easily quantified or cannot be quantified through quantitative means; and (3) phenomena are studied in a “natural” environment rather than a lab. While qualitative science seems to break away from the assumptions of qualitative research, the inherent search for and pursuit of meaning makes qualitative different from quantitative science (Shank, 2006).

In contrast, *qualitative inquiry*, positioned at the opposite end of the continuum from qualitative science, seeks to be anti-reductionistic. This anti-reductionist stance means that qualitative inquiry is deeply concerned with the whole and its infinite complexity and refuses to simplify or reduce (Shank, 2006). This is because of the belief that nothing can be truly understood outside of its context (Schram, 2006). In qualitative inquiry, the role of theory can be rather minimal in that theory is never used to settle questions of meaning, it is only used to inform or enrich, not dictate/determine meaning-making (Schram, 2006). Qualitative inquiry does not use the assumptions or language of science. For example, standards such as objectivity, generalizability, validity, and reliability are seldom, if ever, utilized and applied during qualitative research, because such measures assume that there is a truth or reality that is stable and universal and can be discovered through simplification/reductionism and controlled research processes.
Since qualitative inquiry encompasses such a broad spectrum of ideas and approaches to research, the three tenets of qualitative inquiry are broad as well, according to Shank (2006). These three tenets are that “the researcher matters” (the researcher is recognized, discussed, and a part of the study), that “inquiry into meaning is in the service of understanding” (qualitative inquiry is not concerned with prediction but understanding and does seek to make “factual claims” while often having a critical agenda (Schram, 2006)), and that “qualitative inquiry embraces new ways of looking at the world” (i.e., phenomenology, critical theory, social constructionist) (Shank, 2006, p. 10).

In summary, qualitative research is undertaken when one delves into the social processes and meaning making that construct social reality in an effort to reveal the complexity underlying these processes. The present study falls on the qualitative inquiry end of Shank’s continuum. Its effort to explore and examine sports media discourses constructed of specific African athletes involved with professional sport in the U.S. will ultimately be an addition to the discourses outside and within sport to present a more complex understanding of the social/western construct of African athletes in western sport.

**Research Approach**

A research approach or tradition guides a study ontologically, epistemologically, and methodologically (Schram, 2006). In determining an approach one must consider the link between research question and approach, where one wants to focus his/her attention, and if one wants to claim the whole or part of the tradition (Schram, 2006). Taking these factors into consideration, this study borrows from the discourse analysis approach. The concern of this approach is on how the subject (western media in this instance) links, frames, and contextualizes events into a discourse. Thus, the focus of discourse analysis is not only a question of what discourses exist, but why they exist as they are. This is discourse analysis’ particular way of questioning how events/ideas become meaningful (Schram, 2006).

**Method**

Discourse analysis is a broad methodological approach to research and many varying methods or techniques are used to analyze discourse, whether it is in conversational, textual, or any other form. Discourse refers to “a particular way of talking
about or understanding the world (or an aspect of the world)” (Phillips & Jørgensen, 2002, p. 1). The concept of discourse developed within linguistics and referred to interconnected writings/speech. However, it was philosopher Michel Foucault who advanced the discourse concept to entail language and practice (Hall, 2007). Foucault sees discourse not only as a representation of knowledge, but as the production of knowledge (meaning) through language, and since meaning influences individual practices (actions), all social practices have a discursive aspect; that is, help reinforce and create specific modes of thinking (Hall, 2007a). This view of discourse relates strongly to Phillips and Jørgensen’s (2002) explanation that one’s access to and experience of reality is primarily mediated through language, meaning that language, and the inherent creation of discourses through language, results in both one’s creation and understanding of the social world. For example, in this thesis, the examination of sport media articles about a select group of athletes from Africa is concerned with the language used in such articles (texts) and what discourses (systems of meaning) the articles create and promote. Assumed is that these discourses may influence readers’ understanding and subsequent actions regarding race, gender, nationality, and other “markers” of social inequality. A further premise of this kind of research/analysis is that individual texts do not carry meaning on their own, that is, texts draw, accumulate, and create meaning from a variety of other texts (Hall, 2007b). The process of accumulating meaning (or the selective drawing upon of familiar discourses) across texts and reading within the context of other texts results in an intertextuality from which hegemonic discourses emerge, something that was of great interest for this thesis, as this project is intertextual by nature (Hall, 2007b; Wood & Kroger, 2000).

As noted above, given that discourse originated as a linguistic concept, many of the analytical methods and tools focus on language structure; however, as the concept of discourse has changed there have emerged multiple ways for analyzing discourse. The approach to discourse analysis this thesis took was chosen not so much for a well established set of analytical tools, but for the overall theory of discourse (discourse theory, borrowed from Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe, 1985, as discussed by Phillips and Jørgensen, 2002) which grounds and guides the analysis process.
While discourse analysis can become very detailed in its examination of the structure and content of language, this thesis was primarily interested in knowledge and how knowledge is created discursively. This social constructionist view (constructionist theory of meaning and representation) regarding meaning and representation posits that, while objects have a real existence, one can only have knowledge of that object through discourse and discursive practices (Hall, 2007a). To that end, Phillips and Jørgensen (2002) outline four main premises that characterize all social constructionist approaches including discourse analysis. The first premise is that knowledge is not, and should not be treated as, objective truth. Discourse theory believes that “truth” is a discourse in and of itself and our access to reality relies on discourses which are fundamentally reductionistic; because of this they cannot be taken as truth since other possibilities have necessarily been excluded for that particular discourse to exist. For example, as covered in the literature review, the persistent belief in a natural athletic superiority among black athletes necessarily excludes discourses that explain superior performance due to a number of other factors such as environmental, individual effort/persistence, and even societal (parent/coach) expectations. Second, knowledge is historically and culturally dependent. That is, “the ways in which we understand and represent the world are historically and culturally specific and contingent . . .” (Phillips & Jørgensen, p. 5). This notion of contingency, according to Phillips and Jørgensen, is an anti-foundationalist view. That is, as a form of social action, discourse “plays a part in producing the social world . . . and thereby in maintaining specific social patterns” (p. 5). This view is also anti-essentialist; that is, the character of the social world is not natural or inevitable nor determined by external conditions. Neither is there a fixed or authentic set of characteristics that identify people. The third premise is that the ways we think about the social world are created in social interaction; common truths are constructed and debated in social processes. Finally, knowledge and social action are connected. That is, “(d)ifferent social understanding of the world lead to different social actions and therefore the social construction of knowledge and truth has consequences for social action” (Phillips & Jørgensen, p. 6).

As mentioned previously, discourse theory, as explained by Laclau and Mouffe (1985 in Phillips & Jørgensen, 2002), does not supply a concrete set of analytical tools,
and yet offers what Phillips and Jørgensen (2002) call “analytical focus points” which are interrelated. This notion of focus points guided the current study’s examination of Africans who are/were athletes at the professional level of U.S./western sport. The first of these interrelated focus points is the examination of discourses that are dominant in the text of interest (in this case, sport media reports of western origin). Often, through hegemonic processes, one discourse becomes prevalent through the subversion of other, competing, discourses (Phillips & Jørgensen, 2002). This process was considered in the current study. Closely related to this is the second focus on determining what meanings are included and excluded by the discourses found in the text. This includes examining the components (or nodal points) making up the discourse, focusing on what the discourse draws its meaning from and what it excludes. Nodal points, or a sign from which other signs gain their meaning, are important because it is around such privileged signs that discourses attempt to crystallize meaning (and other signs) and inherently exclude alternative meanings (Phillips & Jørgensen, 2002).

The third analytical focus point directs one to examine how different discourses struggle to assign meaning to signs which they have in common, whether there is a struggle to hold meaning to signs, and whether there are meanings that have become taken for granted across discourses (Phillips & Jørgensen, 2002). Here the concepts of the element and floating signifier become relevant. According to Phillips and Jørgensen (2002) an element is a sign whose meaning has not yet become fixed, and a floating signifier is an element whose meaning is under contention from differing discourses. Since discourses are reductionistic and seek to crystallize meaning around signs, elements are inherently troubling and have the potential to undermine established discourses. Discourses will “try” to assign meaning to these elements, but ultimately such a practice is futile as new elements inevitably emerge and because meaning can only be fixed temporarily. Related to this idea of elements, floating signifiers are very often nodal points within established discourses which are struggled over in different or competing discourse. To illustrate, Phillips and Jørgensen (2002) give the example of the body, where in “traditional” medical discourse certain signs/meanings are associated with the body, but such signs/meanings associated with the body in alternative medicine or religious texts may be very different and utilized in different ways. Thus, while
discourses try to remove ambiguity surrounding elements through the fixation of meaning, that meaning always has the potential to disintegrate into multiple meanings/interpretations (Phillips & Jørgensen, 2002).

Laclau and Mouffe’s (1985 in Phillips & Jørgensen, 2002) last analytical focal point is the examination of what identities and groups are created through discourse. This last point is especially important given the social construction of reality and our “need” to categorize the world around us. Group formation is reductionistic because some possibilities of identification are put forward while others are excluded. This is problematic because individuals necessarily have multiple identities, some, all, or none of which may be used in any given situation. A useful example here is the notion that there is more variability within any one “race” than there is between races. Specifically this focal point is a useful analytical tool for this thesis because inherent within the media constructions of African athletes in U.S./western sport is the formation of different identities. These athletes are individuals who have identities and belong to groups that have been historically marginalized in western society and western institutions, including the media. Using this approach to discourse analysis allowed for a critical analysis of the discursive structures established by the media regarding the identities/groups of the selected athletes.

Procedure

The African athletes selected for this study and the representations of them presented are only possible representations of African athletes as no one athlete encompasses all or a standard set of representations regarding African athletes as a whole. This kind of sampling represents a mix between what Mason (2002) calls sampling strategically and sampling illustratively/evocatively. Sampling strategically means that this study selected athletes not to represent the “wider universe,” or all Africans in sport, but to capture a “relevant range” in relation to the wider universe. Similarly, sampling illustratively means that the meaningful data sources selected for this study have the possibility of representing the wider universe, but yet this study can make no claim on how well the data represents said universe. What this study does provide then, is a glimpse into one reality within the larger universe of western sport media constructions of African athletes involved in professional sport in the U.S./West (Mason,
That being said, the athletes selected for this study (Hakeem Olajuwon, Tegla Loroupe, Christian Okoye, and Tamba Hali) were selected for their success and popularity (leading to more media interest) in their respective sports.

To generate data for this thesis, the researcher relied on various media outlets whose work exists within the Factiva and LexisNexis news databases. Using these databases meant that the majority of news sources originated from U.S. news outlets, while the other sources were from other western countries (North American and European). The latter was especially prevalent in the analysis of Tegla Loroupe, a distance runner, who ran many races in Europe. To generate sources on each individual athlete, search terms were set to the athlete’s name in the lead paragraph. The lead paragraph delimitation was used to ensure that the articles would be about the athlete in question and not just include a random mention of the athlete. After those search terms were set, most articles that were generated were selected for reading. Those articles not read were excluded because they did not contain relevant information (i.e., they only reported box scores) or they were repeat articles. For the most part, data generated were in the form of newspaper/magazine articles, yet a few sources were in the form of radio interview transcripts (specifically, from National Public Radio). After the dataset was produced the researcher read and re-read and analyzed/coded each article based on the research questions. Individual codes or meaning units (Schram, 2006) were organized and re-organized into themes around recurrent discourses. While data saturation (Mason, 2002), a point where little new data are being generated, was a goal, the length of athletic careers and availability of coverage surrounding an athlete sometimes limited this possibility. At each level of analysis (meaning unit and thematic), data were organized and re-organized until themes were produced that allowed the data to “hang together” and themes to “make sense” in relation to one another. Ultimately, the goal in qualitative inquiry is to construct a story that is an authentic, credible, and compelling representation of the “observations” made (Mason, 2002; Schram, 2006; Shank, 2006).

Once the evolution of themes was “completed,” how to best present results/my interpretations of the discourse analysis, the “story” of western medias’ representation of African athletes involved in professional sport in the U.S., was considered. I decided to present the results for each athlete individually first because each athlete is a story in
her/himself as well as a part of a part of the “whole story” of “The African Athlete.” Because of the individual presentations, I was allowed more flexibility in the writing process. This meant that each chapter, while organized generally by the dominant themes, was organized a little differently from the others, because each athlete had representations that were specific to him/her. I began the writing process with Hakeem Olajuwon. However, keeping in mind what was discussed above in regards to the principles of qualitative research and discourse analysis (e.g., holism, contextualism), the thinking and process of the writing were evolutionary as I moved from Olajuwon to Tegla Loroupe then Christian Okoye and Tamba Hali. During the revision process, it sometimes was necessary to go back through the data and re-think or add to the original analysis. Thus, the final product here, beginning with Olajuwon, is not only the result of numerous revisions, but the intellectual growth of an individual.
CHAPTER 4
Hakeem Olajuwon

Originally from Lagos, Nigeria, Olajuwon immigrated to the United States in the mid 1980s to play college basketball for the University of Houston, before being drafted into the NBA by the Houston Rockets where he would eventually win back-to-back championships in the mid 1990s. History records Olajuwon among the greatest centers ever to play the game of basketball, often discussed in the same breath as Hall of Fame center Patrick Ewing and other Hall of Famers such as “Magic” Johnson, Larry Bird, and even Michael Jordan. In fact, in the 1984 draft Olajuwon was taken two picks before Jordan, who is considered by many to be the best basketball player ever, and rarely is that pick questioned (Olajuwon Bio, 2008).

Hakeem Olajuwon first came to the United States in 1980 to visit the University of Houston, on a ticket bought by his father, to potentially play collegiate basketball. He did not arrive as a blue chip or highly touted prospect, but rather, he was a walk-on to the Houston Cougars basketball team. Throughout Olajuwon’s resultant career, the themes of noble athlete, Big Man, the Nigerian, and The Dream fluctuate in occurrence and importance as does the overall meaning of Olajuwon. Two decades of Olajuwon’s career are examined, followed by a brief exploration of his post-career years. In a narrative form followed by a discussion, this chapter begins in the early 1980s, when Olajuwon had his first breakout season (1983), leading the Houston Cougars to their second consecutive appearance in the NCAA Final Four. With Olajuwon’s emergence as one of the top collegiate players (Patrick Ewing and Michael Jordan were two of his contemporaries), the noble savage theme/stereotype is the first theme we encounter.

Noble Athlete

The Eighties

There were eyes on Olajuwon, he was the first African-born basketball player to achieve success at a major college, in a major program. Coaches, scouts, and fans commented on his appearance; Olajuwon was described as gangly and thin, and his skill was called raw and untapped. The media were impressed with his command of the English language, commenting on how it is “clipped, proper-sounding English” (“The big men”, 1984, p. C8). However, he was still singled out for his “thick British accent
whether he speaks English, French or three different Nigerian dialects” (Pomerantz, 1983a, p. D5), and his slowness to react when reporters talked too fast, “At times, he appeared to strain for the right answer, as if something had been lost in a translation . . . He speaks English well, having learned it many years ago in his hometown, Lagos, Nigeria.” (Johnson, 1983, p. B5). Given Olajuwon’s Nigerian middle-class upbringing, English may very well have been the language he used most often; British colonialism was effective in leaving behind an educational system many former colonies still utilize today. Yet the most glaring image was that of Olajuwon’s “precious innocence” (Johnson, 1983, p. B5). His boyish mannerisms and jovial manner (he “always smiles” (Martinez, 1986, p. C17)) endeared him to the media who commented on this and his “simple, sincere love for the game” of basketball (Johnson, 1983, p. B5), a game he only took up when he was a “fifteen year old youth growing up in his native Nigeria” (Martinez, 1986, p. C17). The media would mention the latter throughout Olajuwon’s career.

Many of the same elements of the noble savage/athlete and exotic African stereotypes in the Nauright and Magdalinski (2003) article about Eric Moussambani resonate when discussing Olajuwon. The focus on Olajuwon’s “raw talent” (Johnson, 1983, p. B5) and gangly/thin appearance serve to support dominant notions of Africa in that Africa is often seen as lagging behind, it is “third-world” and not quite developed yet (i.e., “raw”). References to Olajuwon being gangly or “painfully thin” draw images of the numerous hardships (e.g., AIDS, civil wars, refugee camps, etc.) on the continent that western media have brought consumers (Adebajo, 2004; Gordon, 1998). This is similar to Moussambani’s case, where his physical body marked his difference and lack of ability (Nauright & Magdalinski, 2003), but in contrast, it was evident that Olajuwon had potential even though he was raw at the moment. In fact, it was Olajuwon’s potential that even allowed him to make the team, as his coach was skeptical since he had seen many African athletes try out but ultimately fail. Moussambani was given no such benefit in the world of swimming.

Further, the image of an ever-smiling Olajuwon with a precious innocence and simple love for the game resonate soundly again with Moussambani. In Moussambani’s case, he represented the Olympic ideal, an ideal for “why we play the game”. A similar
discourse surrounds Olajuwon early in his career but always seems to stop short of the “why we play the game” motif. Perhaps this is because Olajuwon himself short circuited the discussion through his own (counter) discourse of wanting to be famous, something he expressed in early interviews. Additionally, Olajuwon in his early NBA years was known as a bit of a “malcontent,” not afraid to speak out when teammates/management were not giving their all, and occasionally giving opponents elbows and fists. Regardless, this example, like Moussambani’s, shows how western media, when faced with the exotic other in novel situations tend to portray that other as child-like and simple (Nauright & Magdalinski, 2003). Comments such as, “There is a precious innocence surrounding Akeem Abdul Olajuwon” (Johnson, 1983, p. B5), “Boyishly, Olajuwon smiled at the analysis” (Johnson, 1983, p. B5), and “Olajuwon is a delightfully innocent 20-year-old” (Denlinger, 1983, p. C5), are all examples of this. Granted, Olajuwon was of normal college age while in college, so he was very young, but similar discourses do not surround young American athletes in the same fashion, meaning that there is not that same feeling of naivety among American athletes. The consequences of such representations serve to reinforce white racist stereotypes concerning blacks, particularly blacks in developing countries, as being inferior to whites, especially whites in western nations (Nauright & Magdalinski, 2003).

Olajuwon’s command of the English language is an interesting subtheme to this noble athlete theme/stereotype. This subtheme could perhaps stand by itself, but remains under the noble savage theme because of the way it was combined with the precious innocence discourse. While reporters and coaches admitted his more than passable command of the English language, as examples quoted above demonstrate, his novelty to American conversation made him susceptible to the gaze once more as an exotic foreigner trying to speak English (or “American”). Coming from a modern city (Lagos) by any means, the gaze in this respect shows the ignorance of U.S. media towards modern Africa, when even then English was an official language in quite a few African countries. However, despite the media’s framing of Olajuwon’s use of English, Olajuwon probably struggled more with fan perceptions, which, early on, may have been less informed about his ability to utilize English than were the media.
While the overall language used in describing Olajuwon may have framed him in line with the noble athlete stereotype, there were a few examples which countered the oft-assumed ignorance of a black man from Africa.

Akeem Olajuwon—“The Dream,” they call him—is a middle-class young man with skills so pure, so spontaneous he is frightening. Olajuwon did not walk barefooted around the continent and wear a leopard skin. He is from Lagos, principal city in Nigeria … He learned that because he is a black foreigner, he was assumed to be ignorant. “People don't think I can count. They say, this is a quarter, 25 cents. It is four in a dollar. They don't think I can look on the coin and see for myself it is 25 cents” (Denberg, 1986, p. E07).

He may be new to many American ways, but Olajuwon hardly came from the backwoods of Africa. He grew up in the cosmopolitan city of Lagos, Nigeria, one of six children in a middle-class family. His parents are cement dealers. One older brother studied at Oxford. His sister studied at American University in Cairo. Akeem speaks English, French and two Nigerian dialects. “Akeem told me he was wearing $500 suits in high school,” Petersen said. (Barreiro, 1986, p. 1B). “That is Hollywood's Africa. It is not Hakeem's. He grew up in the city of Lagos, a crowded metropolis with skyscrapers and movie theaters and traffic jams and poverty … He does not own a spear” (MacMullen, 1994, p. 49).

Thus, there is a discourse which seeks to dispel some of the stereotypes surrounding Olajuwon as an African, yet these discourses appear to be less prominent than the one about Olajuwon as a noble athlete.

_The Nineties: A Shifting Focus_

This theme would largely fall away into the background as the 90s progressed. While a discourse surrounding Olajuwon as “always smiling” would be noticeable throughout his career, it seems that much of the novelty associated with this theme eventually wore off as Olajuwon maintained a presence in American culture. With the Houston Rockets being a good team in the mid ‘90s, winning two championships, and Olajuwon becoming a perennial MVP candidate, thus no longer a “project” or player just beginning his career, perhaps the theme ceased to adequately fit Olajuwon. Pertaining to other foreigners who have come to play in America, the relationship between this theme
and the novelty of the “other” would seem to be strong; this researcher would speculate that similar findings would be found regarding the cases of NBA stars Yao Ming, Dikembe Mutombo, or MLB superstar Ichiro Suzuki.

*Big Man*

*The Eighties*

Olajuwon’s body was a powerful one, listed at seven feet tall and around two hundred forty pounds. The media saw him as a natural athlete, a “prodigy” (Denlinger, 1983, p. C5), and a “thoroughbred” (Martinez, 1986, p. C17) with that “stunning power and uncommon agility” (Denlinger, 1986, p. D1). Even Olajuwon stated that what he did was largely off of his natural instincts, “I don’t practice different moves, I adjust to the situation. I see somebody coming at me, I adjust. It’s a natural ability” (Martinez, 1986, p. C17). He was not considered to be a strong player—rather, he was a finesse player as opposed to a power player; it was said that he played a beautiful game. Yet, despite his smiling image and humble appearances, he was a player of “infinite intimidation” (Pomerantz, 1983b, p. B1) around the basket. He played aggressively, sometimes getting into minor scuffles with opposing players, and his seven foot frame was always looming under the basket, always coming up with the blocked shot out of nowhere. Natural, intimidating, and possessing a beautiful game are adjectives that were used to describe the early Olajuwon.

As Olajuwon started improving rapidly as a basketball player a concurrent theme ran alongside the noble athlete—the big man theme. This theme arose out of the above media representations that constructed Olajuwon’s masculinity along hegemonic lines. Perhaps his choice of sport helped him in this regard—his body build lent itself to basketball where tall and thin had been present for some time, and was represented by some of the greatest players to ever play the game. In this way, where skinny and a finesse style of play would not necessarily be considered masculine in a sport setting, previous greats, such as the young (“early”) Kareem Abdul Jabbar and Wilt Chamberlain, established a masculine identity for the tall and skinny male. They represented dominant forces in the game exemplified by Chamberlain’s NBA record 100 points in a single game and Abdul-Jabbar’s NBA record six MVP (Most Valuable Player) awards. Furthermore, they were intimidating defensive presences during their eras.
The argument can be made that participation in professional sport inherently casts one along hegemonic modes of discourse. This is likely to be true in most cases, but may very well be a certainty when one performs at the level Olajuwon (or Chamberlain, or Abdul-Jabbar, or Jordan) played at. Thus, because his play made him worthy of emulation, so discourses around Olajuwon conform to hegemonic norms. Of course, Olajuwon simultaneously challenges those norms since, as mentioned previously, one would not normally consider tall and lanky to necessarily be masculine. It is also worth note that such discourses inherently ground Olajuwon in heterosexuality.

*The malcontent.* For his part, Olajuwon helped to create this masculinity through his career in the 1980s and into the 1990s through a series of events. The behavior which brings about “the malcontent” subtheme within the big man theme does not *make* the big man theme. Instead, it is useful to look at the representations presented in this section as helping to cement certain discourses around Olajuwon in the context of a “problem player,” as later in his career the malcontent subtheme disappears to a large degree. The discourses the malcontent seals around Olajuwon are facets of masculinity such as strength (physical/mental), aggressiveness, confidence, etc. As one will be able to tell, these qualities are somewhat exaggerated during the 1980s time period, but they set the stage for an enduring masculine image of Olajuwon that will be called upon until the end of his career.

One of the first publicized “outbursts” was in the wake of an NCAA finals loss in Olajuwon’s senior year. After the University of Houston’s loss to Georgetown, which left Olajuwon without an NCAA championship while reaching three straight Final Fours, Olajuwon criticized his teammates and the officiating. “What will they think when they read this? I don't care what they think,” said Akeem the Steam. “This game was very important and we blew it. They just didn't get me the ball” (Wilbon, 1984, p. n/a). In addition, he said, “When some of our players drove to the basket, Georgetown went for the block and I was wide open. But we blew it. We didn't play as a team. We were selfish” (Alfano, 1984, p. B). This seemed, to some, that Olajuwon was the selfish one as he showed little concern for his teammates; he was thinking only of himself.

Yet Olajuwon’s criticism was not confined to his teammates. Of the officials he said, “Before the game the referee says, ‘I’ll let you play.’ But he didn’t. Sometimes he
did. Then he came down on me. Nobody would have called me for those third and fourth fouls” (Center, 1984, p. D2). In response, Olajuwon’s comments drew criticism from his own coach (Guy Lewis). “Bing, bing, bing, fouls every time,” Lewis said. “He had one silly foul, where the guy takes one pump fake and goes up. He knows everybody’s gonna do that” (Wilbon, 1984, p. n/a).

Following this game, Olajuwon took his talents to the NBA. The media portrayal of the malcontent followed him to the professional game where he would encounter a number of disciplinary actions from the NBA. In one instance he was fined $1,500 for punching a player, the Utah Jazz’s Billy Paultz, who had been frustrating him during a game. “He was pushing me,” Olajuwon said. “And every time I would push him back, they would call a foul on me. I was just trying to get the ref’s attention. I was trying for the referee to make it equal. I am satisfied I did it” (Blinebury, 1985a, Sports p. 2). With no show of remorse, Scotty Sterling (NBA Vice President of Operations) wrote, “He (Paultz) was in no way prepared for the punch and totally defenseless . . . While the flagrant act was undetected by the officials working the game, it nonetheless violates all of the NBA’s principles of fair play and sportsmanship” (Blinebury, 1985b, Sports p. 1). Given the nature of the incident and because it was the second time Olajuwon had received a fine (the first was for partaking in an earlier fight with the Dallas Mavericks’ Kurt Nimphius during a game), some were surprised that there was no suspension.

While seemingly still considered to be a well tempered individual for the most part, an accumulation of incidents through the rest of the 1980s would eventually begin to sway opinions of him the other way. In the 1986 playoffs, Olajuwon was ejected once for shoving one player and grabbing a referee during a series with the Denver Nuggets. Against the Los Angeles Lakers, Olajuwon took a few punches at a player who had been frustrating him much like Billy Paultz, and in the NBA Championships Olajuwon found himself fined $1,500 again after partaking in another fight. “His Achilles’ heel is a habit of fouling excessively in his still-reckless, undisciplined style and a temper that has raged out of control” (Denberg, 1986, p. E07). Teams realized they could get Olajuwon in foul trouble or even ejected if they sparked his temper. Combine this with Olajuwon’s constant criticism of officials, and many thought the referees were not sympathetic to his pleas.
Olajuwon’s off-court troubles, including fights, were also reported by the media, and contributed largely to this malcontent theme. In the summer of 1986 Olajuwon was ordered to pay $150 after pleading no contest to an assault by contact charge for allegedly striking a convenience store clerk who called him a name. The following January (1987), it was reported that Olajuwon and his brother fought outside of The Summit (the Rockets’ home arena) after a game. Near the end of that year, Olajuwon would fight then-teammate Robert Reid over what would later be learned to be comments made by Reid regarding rumors of drug use (cocaine) by Olajuwon. Such rumors surrounded Olajuwon that winter and prompted him to make a public denial. “Olajuwon had said he would submit to a drug test any time someone wants to put up $1,000. If he passes the test, he would donate that money to a drug treatment center. If he were to fail the test, he had promised to give $50,000 to the challenger” (Truex, 1987, Sports p. 1). Such accusations were sufficiently deemed to be nothing more than rumor, but Olajuwon gained attention again voicing his unhappiness with Coach Bill Fitch and teammate Sleepy Floyd. “All I know is that the players say they are afraid to make mistakes,” Olajuwon said. ‘If they make mistakes, he (Fitch) takes them out.’ Olajuwon also criticized Floyd. ‘We don't have a playmaker on this team,’ he said. ‘A point guard is a guard who makes something happen, who creates things’” (Johnson, 1988, p. 11C). Olajuwon would make numerous other statements regarding Fitch and the kinds of players he felt the team needed to reach the NBA Finals once again. Fitch would eventually be fired during the 1988 off-season, something Fitch would attribute to Olajuwon’s outbursts, and Olajuwon would be content with the coaching change.

Drama would not be far off however, and Olajuwon would again find himself dealing with the legal system as his ex-girlfriend who was having his first child would sue him over breach of contract after she said he promised to marry her if she became pregnant. Peculiarities of the case aside, the two would eventually settle their differences, but not before Olajuwon would strike a cameraman seeking details of the case outside of his house (sparking another lawsuit). Somewhere between all of these events Olajuwon also managed to ask for his contract to be renegotiated (threatening to go to Italy if he were not granted an extra nine million dollars), apparently unhappy that newcomers to
the NBA were making more than him. This quote by Blinebury (1988) sums up the events:

For as long as we’ve known him, Akeem has been a Dream. But lately he’s beginning to look like Freddy Krueger. It's a real “Nightmare on Elm Street” over at The Summit. It seems like every time the Rockets try to close their eyes and relax, Akeem Olajuwon has been there to give them a rude awakening in this summer of his discontent. If Olajuwon isn't assuming the role of coach and making demands about the Rockets’ offense, then he’s playing personnel director and suggesting wholesale changes. If he isn't swapping lawsuits with former companion Lita Spencer, then he’s got his hand out looking for more money or his fist raised to deck a TV cameraman. Then there are the veiled threats to pack up his slam dunks and go to Italy (Sports p. 1).

The events of the late 1980s would label Olajuwon as a malcontent (i.e., a “bad boy,” or a player who causes trouble and does not always adhere to the rules) early in his career and going into the 1990s. It does not seem that this bad behavior was linked to Olajuwon’s immigrant status, nor did it frame him as a “bad African,” but may have arisen and been evident within the fan base. Indeed, in a 1994 article sportswriter Jackie MacMullan recalled that period of time, writing of the fans, “They said he was greedy, and some said he should go back to the jungle and see how much money he’d make there. Ugly? Yes, it got very ugly” (p. 49). Regardless, ideologically, such discourses only served to cement his status as a hegemonic sporting male with a “bad boy” image. Again, this malcontent subtheme is only a part of the larger representation of Olajuwon’s masculinity, the Big Man theme, which covers discourse surrounding Olajuwon’s body as well.

*The Nineties: Malcontent to Character Guy*

An interesting transformation came about within this theme during the mid 1990s. Olajuwon’s re-investment into religious devotion would change his life, as well as the discourses surrounding him. Olajuwon now rarely let the smaller things in life bother him: “He is at peace with himself,” friends would say (Friend, 1993, p. B9). Media representations of the temperamental, instinctive star would fall away, and in would come a deeply devoted, knowledgeable, hard working, and introspective athlete. It is also during this period that his teams won back-to-back championship in the mid 1990s, he
won a gold medal with, fittingly, “Dream Team III” in Atlanta, and eventually got married in 1996 (to a woman different than his previous girlfriend). Olajuwon appears to have become one of the most respected players in the game because of his character, demeanor towards others, and religious devotion. Along with his new religious devotion and perhaps some individual agency, the discourse surrounding Olajuwon’s masculinity changed a great deal. Whereas in the previous decade Olajuwon was constructed as an intimidating athlete with a powerful body, as the 90s progressed Olajuwon was constructed more and more within a refined masculinity as compared to fellow athletes who tended to be more outspoken or flashy such as Deion Sanders, Charles Barkley, and Frank Thomas. In other words, Olajuwon became framed directly opposite the malcontent behavior he himself used to embody.

Much of the focus of this new masculine construction stems from the new found “character” Olajuwon exhibited: “He is a man of tolerance, humility and piety, a role model for kids, and perfectly willing to accept it,” (Green & Edwards, 1997, p. n/a). This character, constructed by the media but brought about by Olajuwon’s reinvestment to his faith (and later marriage), frames Olajuwon in opposition to the flashy, promiscuous, bragging, and hypermasculine athletes that were emerging. Age and maturity seem to have played a large part in this, as Olajuwon entered his thirties in the mid 90s, and a greater sense of responsibility, veteran status, and leadership within Olajuwon most likely fueled the character discourse.

Additionally, Olajuwon was starting to become framed less as the natural athlete, and more as the hard and dedicated worker. By the time he retired Olajuwon would be remembered as one of the rare players who, “never let anyone outwork him” (Mink, 2005, p. A03). Even in retrospect, and as a good example of agency, Olajuwon attributed his footwork and ability not to instincts, as he did previously, but to games such as soccer and handball which he played in his youth (Blinebury, 2005). A slight theme of Olajuwon being an intimidating player would follow Olajuwon through the rest of his career; it does not appear to be linked with his status as an African or being black, but this again may have been more evident within the fan base (and not media) as the MacMullan article demonstrated with Olajuwon’s contract dispute in the 1980s. This intimidation would
eventually be mixed with the theme of respect as his career progressed to explain how Hakeem “still has it” as an older veteran.

*The Nigerian*

*The Eighties*

Where is he from? Lagos, Nigeria . . . it is in Africa. What does he think about America? He says, “It’s the best in the world” (Martinez, 1986, p. C17), that, “You cannot compare this country with any other” (Martinez, 1986, p. C17), and that the schools are superior to those in his home country, “Everyone in Nigeria dreams of going to school in America” (Johnson, 1983, p. B5). In fact, he would offer to be an ambassador to spread the word in Nigeria. They call him “Akeem the Dream” (Pomerantz, 1983a, p. D5), coming from Africa to succeed in America, it does not get too much better than that. Where is he from again? Lagos, Nigeria . . . it is in Africa.

The Nigerian theme emerged out of the constant and consistent reference by the media to Olajuwon’s African origins. Denison and Markula’s (2005) study on Haile Gebrselassie press conferences and the media situating Gebrselassie as an object *in situ* was a useful examination tool for this theme. For this chapter, it means that the media would know and see Olajuwon outside of his cultural context (Nigeria as the absent whole) and yet frame him as a “real” Nigerian, thus giving realness to his thoughts and concerns regarding Nigerian culture/politics (Denison & Markula, 2005). It is worth noting that such objects are constructed (by the media) for selective purposes, so, as in Denison and Markula’s (2005) study, even though it is Gebrselassie doing most of the talking, he ends up having little agency in his own construction.

However, Olajuwon as an *in situ* object for Africa was not as evident when generating themes from the data. It is difficult to speculate as to why this did not happen, or did not happen on a larger scale; perhaps his youth, relative lack of exposure (being in a small market in the NBA, Houston) or the nature of the sport did not lend itself to such a situation. What did evolve was the theme called “the Nigerian” in which Olajuwon is kept in constant difference through his Nigerian and immigrant status. It may seem that this chapter walks a fine line when discussing how Olajuwon was constantly referenced as Nigerian but does not fit the idea of an *in situ* object. However, it is the opinion of this researcher that the articles examined during this period for Olajuwon do not seek to
“understand” Nigeria through Olajuwon. Further, in the chapter discussing “The Dream” theme, there is more discussion on how these early media reports reinforce U.S. world hegemony. While the Nigerian is its own theme, it essentially evolved during the early 1990s as Olajuwon came to represent (in an in situ fashion) one of the major religious faiths of the world.

The Nineties: In Situ Object for Islam

“In the summer of 1992, Olajuwon sought to renew his faith with a pilgrimage to Mecca. As a result, Olajuwon says he's grown as both a player and a person” (National Public Radio, 1994). A most interesting change occurred within this theme during the ‘90s. While there was constant reference to Olajuwon’s African roots, his Muslim identity became a point of focus with the media. This seems to arise out of Olajuwon’s work in the Muslim community, something which trumped his proclaimed love of Africa and work concerning Nigeria or African nations [causes that Olajuwon rarely undertook because of a professed “global view” (MacMullen, 1994, p. 49) in which he did not like to be concerned with boundaries “set by men” (Lee, 1994), which also results from his Muslim teachings], or perhaps even some novelty and increasing curiosity about the Muslim faith throughout the 90s and into the next century.

The media gave Olajuwon so many opportunities to talk about his faith that he becomes an in situ object not for Africa but for Islam. This means that Olajuwon, outside of an Islamic context (with America being a dominantly Christian country) was constructed to represent all of Islam because of his position as a dominant sports and media figure. Frequently across media texts in the 90s Olajuwon is given space to explain his beliefs without counter-narratives and (Olajuwon tries) to dispel many of the various stereotypes. An example of this would be Olajuwon’s consistent rejection of the teachings of the Nation of Islam leader, Minister Louis Farrakhan, whose nationalist message often stresses black unity to the point of separation and self-determination (Lerner & West, 1999, p. 522). Olajuwon was quoted as saying, “He is not teaching Islam. The call of Islam is not based on race or color but is universal. It is available to humanity, not to specific people,” (Marquand, 1997, p. 6C). Various persons in the sports media even go to Olajuwon for clarification regarding Mahmoud Abdul-Rauf, an NBA player who would not stand for the national anthem because he viewed the anthem as a
“symbol of tyranny and oppression” (Geyer, 1996), and interpreted the Koran’s tenet of putting no nationalist symbol above god as meaning it would be improper to stand for the Star Spangled Banner (Brennan, 1996). To this Olajuwon stated, “Mahmoud either misunderstood the Koran when he read it or he was given bad information or bad interpretations from other people” (Blinebury, 1996, p. n/a).

Media interest in Olajuwon’s connection and relationship with the Muslim community would persist throughout the rest of his career and into his retirement, but it is interesting to speculate as to why the media clung to this facet of Olajuwon’s identity rather than his African identity. For one thing, Olajuwon was never deeply involved in charities to Africa or African politics the way someone such as current Houston Rocket Dikembe Mutombo, a native of the Democratic Republic of Congo, has been. Additionally, with the charities Olajuwon has set up or worked with, such as the Dream Foundation and Make A Wish, his religious beliefs kept him from discussing such matters so as not to draw attention to himself and thus lose the charity part of his efforts. That being said, Olajuwon was adamant about Islam and clearing up the numerous stereotypes surrounding the religion. Even before September 11, 2001, the Muslim community faced a fair number of hate crimes, and as a new citizen of the United States, Olajuwon wanted to see those occurrences become less frequent. Thus, Olajuwon was more apt to speak out on such issues, and because he was perceived as such a character guy, in contrast to the perception of Farrakhan as a “black radical,” the media and fans appear to be more willing to hear and believe what he had to say about the Islamic faith. In this way, Olajuwon, while residing in a Christian nation, remained an “ideal Muslim” by keeping his practices personal and largely private, while fellow Christian athletes were free to express their beliefs and practices openly.

However, that does not mean Olajuwon did not express his opinions. He saw numerous problems with the view of the world many Americans have, that being, that America is the World. “‘Ignorance is one of the worst things on earth,’ Hakeem said. ‘There are people who think the whole world is the United States, and nowhere else. They mean no harm . . . but I prefer to have a more global view of things. I travel as much as I can and learn from the experience.’” (MacMullen, 1994, p. 49). In trying to stay with his world view identity, Olajuwon may not have given much aid to Nigeria or
African countries (as other African athletes, such as Dikembe Mutombo, did), but one may find it hard to argue that he loved the country or continent any less (Blinebury, 1996). This global identity did not originate from a political link with any form of nationality, but rather he stated that his Islamic beliefs encourage this world view, “That is the basis of Islam. There are no nationalities. We are all different colors, all different races, but all brothers,” (Blinebury, 1996, p. n/a). Thus, it seems that nationality mattered little to Olajuwon, save being able to play for Dream Team III and getting through customs at the airport easier. It appeared to matter more to the media.

However there is an argument that can be made that Olajuwon was an apologetic for Islam during this time period. As he sought to reconcile his Islamic faith with being in America, and eventually being an American, it may appear that he flip-flopped between apologetic and non-apologetic actions. For example, the quotes in the previous paragraph would seem to indicate that Olajuwon does not care much for his U.S. nationality, except being able to avoid airport hassles (which is discussed in the next section), and is in favor of a world view which is more about people than nations. Yet, Olajuwon’s comments supporting the superiority of the U.S. (also discussed in the next section), along with the public denials/criticisms of other Muslims in the news (i.e., Abdul-Rauf), may indicate a soft spot for the U.S. Ultimately, there appears to be a situation where Olajuwon is comfortable explaining his world views through the lens of Islam, but keeps from outright criticizing any social or political action the U.S. has towards Islamic countries. While never losing sight that Olajuwon’s words were filtered through the media, one can see how Olajuwon walked a fine line between expressing his views and being critical of American society. Perhaps walking this line was easy for him—meaning he did not feel there was anything to be critical of or to protest against. Or perhaps it was not easy to challenge what he viewed as American practices and beliefs, which would indicate a desire to simply avoid inviting criticism upon himself.

_The Dream_

_The Eighties_

“You cannot compare this country with any other,” he (Olajuwon) said, turning as emphatic as a blocked shot. “I've traveled a lot - all over Europe and to many
other countries. But the freedoms, the opportunities, the people, the system - there are no others like them” (Martinez, 1986, p. C).

The more prevalent theme early in Olajuwon’s career during the 1980s is the theme of (his nickname) “The Dream.” This theme positions Olajuwon, and his comments (some noted above, and others in the 90s), as a beneficiary of the American dream and utilizes Olajuwon in a pro-American discourse. Such framing also reinforces dominant ideologies, such as the American dream and “rugged individualism,” which have long been a part of American social fabric (Walton, 2006). Also, Olajuwon’s support of America as the greatest country in the world and endorsement of its educational system (Olajuwon once said, “Everyone in Nigeria dreams of going to school in America” (Johnson, 1983, p. B5).) serves only to promote further American hegemony and ego throughout the world.

While Olajuwon would be the first to claim love for his native Nigeria, the ultimate course of this theme marginalizes and subjugates Nigeria and other African countries to the superiority of the United States. Even Olajuwon’s nickname, “The Dream,” projects an image of it being every African’s dream to “escape” from Africa and find success in the States. Inherently this undermines the value of African culture, education, and life, but what is lost are the circumstances in which Olajuwon grew up and what he would have inherited. Olajuwon’s upbringing was upper middle class in Nigeria, as his father owned a cement business, and his family was able to send multiple children overseas without (much) discussion in the (U.S.) media about the trouble or sacrifice that would exist for a poor/rural African family (Denlinger, 1983; Patton, 1993). If this is the case—that Olajuwon would have been well off regardless—then his framing as “The Dream” in American sports media even serves to undermine what his family had achieved in Nigeria. This is one theme which would continue throughout his career, supported by Olajuwon and the media.

*The Nineties: (1990s) Dream*

It makes me feel like I have completed my journey. I try to imagine what it is going to feel like the first time I walk onto the floor wearing this uniform. I close my eyes and try to hear the music when they play the U.S. national anthem at the Olympics (Taylor, 1996, p. n/a).
As the quote above indicated, Olajuwon was proud to become an American citizen, something he completed in 1993. The immediate media coverage surrounding his naturalization was scant, but later discourse ultimately followed a hegemonic American response which congratulated him for his accomplishment. In a 1994 Spike Lee interview, Olajuwon’s response for why he naturalized was along the lines of America being his second home and having lived in the States since he was seventeen. This was a fairly neutral response, but that would later change around 1996, where Olajuwon would be quoted as explaining the problems of a Nigerian passport and being searched at airports.

I wanted to become an American citizen because I wanted to be able to travel and to have the honor that any individual deserves, if they live in a way that is honorable. Being an American citizen, if you are a good American citizen, gives you respect (Blinebury, 1996, p. n/a). He affirms that an American passport gives a person respect, a phrase which supports American superiority, but also a statement that reflects differential treatment of individuals trying to enter foreign countries. Olajuwon becomes hesitant when discussing such matters because, in his own words, he knows that “drug traffickers,” “smugglers,” and “dishonest politicians” (Blinebury, 1996, p. n/a) are the stereotypical representations of Nigeria and Africa. These are stereotypes he continues to fight with little progress because even within articles where Olajuwon tries to refute typical notions, Nigeria and Africa are often framed as places, “where you cannot say what is on your mind, where individual freedoms are not guaranteed by law, where there is a stigma attached to having been born within certain specific geographic boundaries” (Blinebury, 1996, p. n/a). This, combined with evidence of Olajuwon’s hesitance to bring up such topics leaves readers to believe that such things must be true. Perhaps only a blatant presentation of positive imagery from the continent will be enough to convince people that Africa is not just these negative stereotypes, but is in many ways and places very westernized and forward-thinking (Gordon, 1998).

2000: End of a Career

Eventually Olajuwon would be pushed out of Houston, following a seventeen year career in one place, as management decided to go with younger players. In 2001 he
would be traded to the Toronto Raptors, a team with a chance at the playoffs. However, that would never materialize as injuries to Olajuwon and standout Vince Carter would prevent the team from playing beyond the regular season. After three injury-plagued seasons in Toronto, Olajuwon retired to his real estate and business investment ventures in Houston.

For the most part, after their evolution throughout the 90s, the major themes constructed by the media would remain constant in this new decade. In terms of the noble athlete theme, Olajuwon remained a little boyish, still smiling, “giggling” (Blinebury, 2002, p. B02), or “(cackling) like a kid” (Blinebury, 2001, p. n/a). Only when the media interviews old coaches, players, and managers is the “gangly, painfully thin project” (Murphy, 2002b, Sports) who came from Nigeria at seventeen remembered. That is where the noble athlete stereotype now arises in prevalence, in memories.

Olajuwon’s big man masculinity was never in question and that holds true for this decade as well. Sure, his body was breaking down, he was an injury risk, but the media still sees him as a warrior. He was a warrior although not in the sense of any African tribal warrior. Instead, the warrior moniker refers to his hard play despite numerous injuries and his ability to still make the block out of nowhere. There is a certain amount of respect given to Olajuwon, a large amount, since he had already been named one of the fifty greatest players to ever play the game—one of only eleven players to earn this honor prior to retiring from the game. Through his framing as a warrior and respectable veteran his continued embodiment of hegemonic masculinity is secured, albeit a version adjusted for age. The quotes below speak to this adjusted version. Where the younger versions of masculinity are often dependent on an outward aggressiveness (on and off the court) and a certain amount of braggadocio, the more mature versions seem to be based more on the past body of work and not having to be a braggart by simply being above such actions. The quotes below speak to this adjusted version.

If this is the last we’ve seen of Hakeem, his elegance and class always will endure. Teammate Steve Francis actually puts it best: “He is what I want to be like when I grow up. I want people to respect me. So when people walk in the locker room, they know I’m them [sic], and I don’t even have to say anything. That’s how it is with Hakeem” (D’Alessandro, 2001, p. 18).
His involvement in the Muslim community in the United States is astounding. He provides money to build mosques, plus fund educational programs and athletic programs for youth. He does a lot of things with no desire for fame or notoriety (Smith, 2001, p. C01).

“That would be a form of trash talk,” he once told respected NBA writer Dave D'Alessandro. “I don't talk the trash. That is not interesting to me. That is not sensible. I only want to be with sensible people. This is a game of skill, not conversation” (Smith, 2001, p. C01).

As noted earlier, media fascination with Olajuwon regarding his status as a Nigerian would decline (but still continue) and give way to a fascination regarding his Muslim identity. As trends go, this too would decline moving into the 21st century, yet many articles would still highlight this part of Olajuwon’s life and his activities within it. He remains the image of the “ideal Muslim” that was discussed earlier, something of an apologist for Islam in U.S. society. His position as an in situ object continues as well, with his humbleness and character being highlighted with little exploration as to why or what practices in Islam contribute.

Further, Olajuwon’s financial backing of mosques and general causes concerning Islamic peoples were often highlighted, not to mention Olajuwon’s consistent clarifications of stereotypes about Islam. Despite his efforts, Olajuwon was still accused of giving funds to a Muslim organization with ties to terrorism, a damaging and hurtful accusation, in February of 2005 (three years after Olajuwon had retired). The story ran from the Associated Press, where a writer used two completely different Muslim aid organizations interchangeably. That is, he stated that Olajuwon had provided funds to Islamic African Relief Agency (IARA), an organization designated as a Special Global Terrorist organization by the U.S. Department of Treasury, when his support actually went to the Islamic American Relief Agency (IARA-USA), which had no ties to the Sudan-based African organization. However, with the speed that this accusation was corrected, media attention revolving around the accusation never seemed to take shape. Given the climate surrounding Muslims in America, especially after September 11, it would seem that even Olajuwon is not safe from stereotypes.
Moreover, Hakeem “The Dream” Olajuwon became an American citizen, yet media reports on him still refer to his African identity first; his naturalization is an afterthought. This serves to continually frame Olajuwon as an outsider and never a true American, a function of whiteness and/or xenophobia where being a true American is related to being white and/or growing up in the United States (Gabriel, 1998). What makes this difficult to argue, however, is that one cannot say that Olajuwon would welcome being defined as an “American” over a Nigerian or an African identity. Indeed, throughout his career Olajuwon claimed his love of Nigeria and Africa despite realizing the continent’s problems, and trying to dispel stereotypes of the continent.

**Concluding Remarks**

In the career of Hakeem Olajuwon, this chapter has presented his construction within the media as a dynamic process. With an intermix of foreigner status, hegemonic masculine models, American hegemony, and individual agency, Olajuwon moved from a naïve African to well respected athlete and Muslim ambassador over his career.

The four themes that emerged from media reports demonstrate this dynamic process as they shifted in prevalence and importance through the progression of years. The noble savage theme, at first strong with the novelty of the first great African player, eventually dwindled with Olajuwon’s continued presence to the point where it only emerges in talk of Olajuwon’s younger days. The big man theme, used early on to construct Olajuwon as an intimidating force on the court and a natural athlete to be reckoned with, gradually moved into a more respectable masculine construction that emphasized Olajuwon’s character and hard work. The Nigerian theme, in a change which surprised this researcher, moved from presenting Olajuwon’s nationality at the forefront to presenting his religious beliefs (to the point of making him an *in situ* object) first and foremost. Finally, The Dream theme describes how many events in Olajuwon’s life were framed in a way that supported American superiority. While Olajuwon’s individual agency countered such things later in his career, those dialogues further positioned Olajuwon as being an outsider and not a “true” American, whether he would welcome such a thing or not.

In close, it was thought that Olajuwon’s presence in the NBA, quickly combined with that of Dikembe Mutombo and Manute Bol, would bring about a flood of African
talent into the league. However, despite rampant media attention of these athletes and a few Hollywood movies (i.e., *The Air Up There*), such a reality would not and has not to this day panned out, save for a few unremarkable players. This probably has to do, in large part, with the lack of organization or structure within basketball in African countries, which is or may often be the result of social/political instability in general (Murphy, 2002a). Olajuwon did, however, help kick down the doors for players beyond America’s borders—European players, who at the time of his playing days were fairly unrepresented, and now have a solid presence in the league. Hakeem’s overall impact on the NBA was a positive one, while hopefully exposing American fans to an interesting and dynamic person from Nigeria/Africa with beliefs in Islam. In response to whether he would be sad to say goodbye to the fans in the Houston arena for his retirement, Olajuwon commented on how retirement was just the beginning of the next stage in his life, and then smiled.
CHAPTER 5  
Tegla Loroupe

The participation of women in sport has historically been a controversial issue, fraught with implications regarding gender, sex, and sexuality. Over time, as women have gained more access to sport, negative connotations and beliefs concerning the female body in sport have declined, yet are still persistent and problematic in the world of sport. Boundaries regarding the female body and physical activity remain ever shifting and negotiated. The majority of the research found on this topic in research journals tends to be western-centric, meaning that the subjects and analyses tend to focus on the issues and women of “developed” nations, not those located in what are considered “developing” nations. The reasons for this are surely more complicated than a developed versus developing debate, but, nonetheless, there is a lack of research focusing on women in sport from developing nations (even more so than men) either within or outside their home countries.

That being said, the focus of this chapter will be distance runner Tegla Loroupe from the country of Kenya. Loroupe’s distinguished career spanned nearly a decade, from her emergence at the New York City Marathon in 1994 to her phased retirement starting in the early 2000s. Throughout her career Loroupe achieved numerous accomplishments; among them, she is the first Kenyan (male or female) to set a world marathon best; she is the Kenyan national record holder at 3000, 5000, and 10,000 meters; the New York City marathon champion in 1994 and 1995; the Rotterdam marathon champion in 1997, 1998, and 1999; and three-time world half-marathon champion (among other accomplishments). Clearly, Loroupe was an established and well respected runner during her time and still is today, which begs numerous questions regarding her status and representation as an athlete, woman, and Kenyan (or African).

The emergence and relative domination of East African (specifically Kenyan) runners on the distance running scene has fueled much debate over the last few decades. Research has focused primarily on men, as mentioned previously, and little has been done regarding how African runners have been perceived by western media sources. Such shortcomings make this study important because Loroupe intersects with three main
lines of power—race, nationality, and gender—with each having their own importance and each overlapping to some degree with the others.

First, Loroupe can be read through her nationality, as a postcolonial athlete, coming from a formerly British colony on a continent historically stereotyped in racist terms. As Mwaniki (2007) and Adebajo (2004) indicate, Africa as a whole has/is often stereotyped as a mysterious place (“Dark Continent”) with mysterious/backwards people. Additionally, the media often focus narrowly on the local conflicts, genocides, diseases, and famines which certainly plague the continent, but are often framed as being the result of African incivility. How such stereotypes are framed around Loroupe, including whether or not Loroupe encourages/resists such framings will be a central point of examination in this research. In a previous study, Bale (2001), who examined the postcolonial athletes (Kenyan distance runners) Nyandika Maiyoro and Kipchoge Keino, called into question the resistive possibilities of the postcolonial athlete. In the paper, Bale utilizes four modes (all intertwined) of colonial discourses that are used to provide a way of thinking about non-western people. These four modes include surveillance, appropriation, idealization, and negation. Surveillance refers to the colonial gaze of African geography and anthropometry (also the stopwatch), in essence to judge African performance against standards set and created by Europeans. Appropriation refers to the discourse of western society “rewarding” non-western countries for conforming to established ideals of civilization. Usually this appropriation takes the form of a paternalistic praise and overlaps with surveillance to monitor the progress made by Africa/Africans. Idealization refers to the discourses of the natural athlete as well environmental essentialism, something which has been talked about at length in this thesis as a kind of excuse for whites regarding their perceived athletic decline. Lastly, negation refers to the downplaying of African sporting feats and accusations of genetic/environmental advantages. This mode links closely with the previous and serves to reinforce stereotypes surrounding the black body and mind (Bale, 2001). In addition, Bale (2001) questions the very nature of sport and the possibilities of the resistive athlete, noting that while transgression may occur, true resistance, which implies intent, is often silenced and criticized. Thus, it should be interesting to see how such rhetorical methods apply to Loroupe, and how any resistive stance she may take is interpreted by the media.
Second, Loroupe represents a transgression of traditional gender binaries as an elite female athlete whose performances rivaled that of men’s. The discourses surrounding female athletes, as mentioned previously, have been well studied. Historically, discourses regarding the bodies and potential of women have sought to keep women out of sport, often relying on erroneous biological assumptions about women’s physiological capabilities, downplaying the accomplishments of women, and questioning the sexuality and sex of those women who transcend the “boundaries” of female capabilities (Kane, 1995). Media constructions of female athletes have seized on these historical discourses and often frame women as “bad” athletes, meaning their successes are often attributed to luck, and their failures are attributed to lack of skill. Some studies, such as the one done by Billings, Angelini, and Eastman (2005) regarding representations of female golfers, indicate that things may be changing in terms of attributions for success and overall representation. However, while Billings et al. (2005) found a more complex framing of women golfers (less of a commentator reliance on stereotypical notions of female physical ability and personality than in previous studies), there were often times when the media regressed to stereotypical notions of luck and ability.

Further, how Loroupe navigated these constructions, not only as a black woman competing in mainly western societies but as a woman coming from Kenyan society as well, is of interest. There are an increasing number of female athletes in western societies, but it is worth noting that Loroupe comes from a paternalistic society and emerged on the distance running scene, in the early 90s, when women were still struggling to gain entry to elite training. To this end, Loroupe’s actions, whether resistive or apologetic, come into play. However, since sport is often a site where resistive athletes are often silenced, or even ignored if a woman, how effective any resistance Loroupe enacted, mediated or not, is worth noting.

Thirdly, inherent within this study are stereotypes of gender and race as they pertain to black/white athletic ability. Shultz (2005), in an examination of the media framing of Serena Williams’ wearing of the “catsuit” found significant gender and racial implications surrounding the black female sporting body. In essence, Shultz (2005) argues that the media portrayed Serena as grotesque, sexually deviant, and outside of the feminine norm. The issue of race regarding Loroupe links heavily with stereotyped
notions of the athletic ability of women and Loroupe’s Kenyan heritage. Emergence of the Kenyan distance runners at elite levels can be argued to provide further evidence for the superiority of the black athlete. While some research has shown that people already make this link, how said link relates to a dominant female athlete remains to be seen. In Walton and Butryn (2006), it was found there was resentment by white athletes of, specifically, Kenyan runners because of their entrance into a previously “white” distance running space. Often, this resentment saw the creation of a “Great White Hope” and accusations against African runners of doping (Walton & Butryn, 2006). Moreover, Walton and Butryn’s (2006) study found resentment of African athletes not only on message boards but also in other areas such as media coverage and in races themselves (concerning structure and prize money).

As the research presented above indicates, Loroupe crosses through multiple lines of power and many topics of interest, some of which emerge because of her categorization as a woman, others because of race and nationality. This chapter now moves into a brief description of the themes that emerged around Loroupe before beginning with the “Wonder Woman” theme.

Through the research process four dominant themes emerged around Loroupe: “Wonder Woman,” “Diana Prince,” “Dominant Kenyan,” and “Resistive Athlete.” This discussion begins with the “Wonder Woman” theme. This theme emerged through media references to Loroupe’s gender and sex as they pertained to her bodily performance in races. From there, the chapter will move to the “Diana Prince” theme, which also discusses gender representation. This is followed by the “Dominant Kenyan,” which further examines media representation of Kenyan Runners, and lastly is the “Resistive Athlete,” which focuses on Loroupe’s resistive moments.

**Wonder Woman**

The term “Wonder Woman” comes from the general feeling of awe, surprise, and praise at what Loroupe was able to accomplish during her career. However, as with most persons possessing super powers, there exists an alter persona, a Clark Kent to Superman, and a Diana Prince to Wonder Woman. For this thesis the concept of the alter persona is of use. Thus, Wonder Woman in Loroupe’s case represents the profuse praise she receives throughout her career, much of which is presented as gender-less, while Diana
Prince represents the questions and framings of her body, sex, and capabilities as a woman.

Before we delve into the media discourse framing Loroupe along the lines of gender and sexuality, it is important to note a discourse which overwhelming praises Loroupe as an elite athlete sometimes regardless of gender—the Wonder Woman. While such banter is more prevalent during the middle to late part of Loroupe’s career (presumably once she established herself as an elite runner), it serves as a cover for more gender- and sex-marked comments regarding Loroupe’s success throughout her career. The following quotes, while not always able to be completely separate from gender, display Loroupe’s “Wonder Woman-like” abilities. “Tegla Loroupe of Kenya, the hardest working woman or man in road racing, is back to normal... She's racing at a rate that astounds other runners... ‘She’s the most amazing athlete I know,’ says Australia's Kerryn McCann” (Patrick, 2000, p. 16C). “In the end, she did not win a medal, but she did further the legend of her unbreakable will” (Roberts, 2000, p. D1). “The Kenyan, who won the Flora London Marathon last Sunday, is one of the world's most amazing athletes” (Woods, 2000, p. n/a). “She also won the world half marathon title seven days after having won a marathon. Mortals normally ease off for weeks” (Gillon, 2000, p. 11). “Sonia O'Sullivan could be headed for a meeting with brilliant Kenyan Tegla Loroupe when she returns to competition” (Byrne, 2000, p. 25). “The win... not only thrust her into the top tier of women marathoners worldwide, it made her a heroine in her own country” (Phillips, 1995, p. D2).

These examples seem to elevate Loroupe above common gender assumptions, and, in some cases, over what is believed capable for mortal humans. The focus on her overwhelming abilities and strength/determination construct Loroupe as mentally strong and dominant athlete, which should be seen as positive progression regarding media portrayals of the female athlete. However, a critical read gives the impression that there is a “for a woman” lurking just beneath the surface of such praise, as, generally, such discourses surround only male athletes, framing them as the only ones capable of immortal feats of physical prowess. The presence of such feelings surrounding Loroupe can be seen as disruptive to the discourses surrounding hegemonic male sporting body,
however, such disruption seemingly never goes without counter discourse, and Loroupe was eventually forced to defend her status as a woman.

During the late 90s Loroupe had to publicly dismiss allegations that she was not a woman, claiming after one race, “I am pleased to show I am all woman. Some people have been suggesting otherwise, things like I am half man and half woman because I have been running with men” (Lewis, 2000, p. 41). Where these allegations exactly came from is unclear in the data gathered for this project, however, Lewis (2000) reported, “The Kenyan was speaking out after cruel gossips questioned her gender after her impressive times in races against men (p. 41).” Later in her career she would be framed along heteronormative lines, drawing attention to shopping sprees, “three-inch glittery pumps”, and the problem of, “‘A man,’ she said. ‘I can't seem to find one’” (Gettleman, 2006, p. A4). However, the very fact that the media found the allegations of interest and Loroupe had to respond to aforementioned allegations is again indicative of the kind of treatment female athletes have historically received and is evidence of Kane’s (1995) deviant mutant mode of female oppression. It seems that whenever women exceed elite standards of athletic performance questions arise as to their validity as women, what is possible for women, or their heterosexuality. Even more recently, British runner Paula Radcliffe was the subject of a debate regarding if women should exercise while pregnant after she continued distance training while pregnant and won a marathon only nine months after delivering her child (Tanner, 2007). Loroupe’s life/career does not offer an example such as this, yet it can be seen how, when it comes to the bodies of women and reproductive capability, western society is still uneasy and readily reaches for outdated ideologies, perhaps because a salient belief still exists that a woman’s reproductive capabilities can be negatively influenced by competitive sport.

_Diana Prince_

With the Wonder Woman theme discussed, the first discourse of interest within the Diana Prince theme is the one that surrounds the physical body of Loroupe. Throughout her career, there are many references made to the physical stature of Loroupe. Consistently, attention is drawn to her small frame and skinny build, as she stands at five feet tall and eighty-five pounds, which alludes to a certain frailty that society and the media believes women to possess (Kane, 1995). Thus, much in how Clark
Kent is the supposed weak version of Superman; Diana Prince is supposedly the weak version of Wonder Woman, though in actuality they are the same person. Examples from the media include statements such as, “At 5 feet, 85 pounds, Loroupe, 21, is undoubtedly the smallest competitor at Boston” (Longman, 1995a, Sports Desk p. 8); “The tiny Kenyan . . .” (Reuters, 1995b, p. n/a); “Loroupe has remarkable speed . . . but having the frame of a sprite has its disadvantages, and Loroupe has learned to run through all manner of impairments” (Royte, 1996, p. 28); “. . . the fast pace may have taken its toll on her 4-foot-11-inch, 85-pound frame” (Thomas Jr., 1996, p. C1); “She is 4ft 11in and just 85lb with feet so tiny that even children's running shoes are too big” (MacKay, 1999, p. 13); and “She looks as though she needs her running shoes less for foot support than to anchor her to the earth. Without them, she might simply go sailing through the air, a mote untethered by gravity” (Mott, 2001, p. 6).

By themselves, such quotes could be seen to infantilize and portray a weak female body. However, these quotes often occur in the presence of some performance outcome. In essence, the previously stated quotes serve to set up the quotes which follow regarding race details in a sort of “can you believe this” kind of moment. Thus, these performance quotes usually involve a sense of awe and amazement over Loroupe’s accomplishments. Examples of these can be seen throughout her career, comments such as, “Loroupe, who is only 4’11” (1.5 meters) tall, was well behind . . . when she began weaving her way through the field of runners in front of her, most of whom were men” (Reuters, 1995a, p. n/a); “The two tiny Kenyans who live and train together under the watchful eye of manager and coach Volker Wagner in northern Germany, scored emphatic victories in the Flora London Marathon and Rotterdam event” (Martin, 1999, p. 38); “. . . words which shocked tiny Loroupe . . . the 29-year-old, who has won eight of her 19 marathons and set two world records during that time” (The Irish Examiner, 2002, p. n/a).

In an analysis of these discourses one finds, as usual, a contested terrain regarding gender/sex representations of Loroupe. On one hand, they can be seen as a validation of the female athlete, a woman so small and slight of build but yet able to turn in incredible racing performances. However, on the other hand, one could also argue that such discourses construct her as an outsider, something Kane (1995) mentions often happens to elite female athletes. In her paper regarding sport as a performance continuum, Kane
(1995) outlines several modes in which the female athlete is marginalized. These include sport typing (gender appropriate sport), erasure (invisibility of women in “men’s” sports), regendering (likening female athletic feats to those of men), selective gender comparisons (ignoring performances of women who beat men), and deviant mutants (female athletes as biologically outside what is considered feminine). Regarding Loroupe, the modes of marginalization primarily include comparisons of her performance to male athletes (regendering) and ignoring instances in which she outperformed male runners (selective gender comparisons). This may seem like a fine line to draw, simultaneously comparing and ignoring performances to men, however, one will usually find in such instances that performances are compared to the elite men in the sport, while performances that best the majority of men are ignored.

While there are examples of discourses which focus solely on athletic ability, such discourses could be seen contradictorily as improvement or as back-handed compliments. However, one could argue that, given the examples regarding the pregnancy of Radcliffe and questions of Loroupe’s sex, there is often a quick reach to outdated stereotypes and assumptions about the potential/capabilities of women. In something that will be touched on more in the Resistive Athlete theme, Loroupe had to struggle not only to overcome many obstacles regarding the paternalistic society from which she came, but also preferences by distance coaches to only coach men as well as discrimination from male athletes in order to succeed (Longman, 1998).

Dominant Kenyan

The next theme for this thesis links heavily with that of gender and the Super Woman theme. This theme, Dominant Kenyan, serves to illuminate the Kenyan identity/body of Loroupe and the discourses surrounding it in the media. Loroupe was the first Kenyan woman to begin winning marathons and championships in the 90s. Her emergence was predated by that of Kenyan men, whose dominance had started numerous questions and stereotypes regarding the peoples of Kenya. In search for a cause for this dominance the Kenyan body has been analyzed and measured, and even the geography/lifestyle of the country and people has been examined. Regardless, there is no evidence to support any inherent physical advantage Kenyans supposedly have, but much as is the case with African Americans, stereotypes of athletic superiority persist. As a
woman and black Kenyan, this thesis explored how Loroupe’s success and identity as a Kenyan was interpreted in the media and found numerous similarities with African/Kenyan male runners.

Male Kenyan runners were already on the distance racing scene when Loroupe emerged. Thus, from the beginning Loroupe was cast in the mold of another typical elite Kenyan runner. This mold follows a predictable pattern often seen when discussing athletes from developing nations, especially African runners, which trivializes athletic performance due to assumed genetic predisposition or environmental essentialism (Denison & Markula, 2005). This “mold” (discourses pertaining to African runners and their success) serves to reinforce the backwardness and lack of modernity concerning Kenyan runners as a belief that they “came from nowhere” belies any sophistication in their training regimes. This relates to Nauright and Magdalinski’s (2003) work which found that media representations of Eric Moussambani, an Olympic swimmer, sought to frame him as ignorant to swimming and technologically backwards when it came to training and equipment. Loroupe countered such typical discourses through interview quotes such as “Loroupe, who called discipline the key to running success . . .” (Thomas Jr., 1994a, p. D1); and “It is all about training hard two times a day and having excellent medical back-up, including daily massages . . . one of your coaches . . . learned it was all simply about hard work” (Aberdeen Press & Journal, 2000, p. n/a). Yet, there are just as many examples of Loroupe reinforcing environmentally deterministic stereotypes, such as, “I didn’t know I was training” (referring to an upbringing in which she ran many places) (Longman, 1995a, Sports Desk p. 8); “At age 5, I was carrying heavy loads . . . At 10, I was doing the work of a full-grown woman. It’s a hard life. Running is easier than working at home” (Patrick, 2000, p. 16C); “Our way of life is one reason why the rest of the world cannot understand Kenyan success and why it is so difficult for Europeans to challenge us as runners” (The Express, 2000, p. n/a); “From the age of six I walked 50 kms each week and sometimes carried more than my body weight” (Cowdy, 2000, p. n/a); and “She said the rigors of travel and training are nothing to the chores of carrying firewood and water she shouldered as a child” (“Loroupe says Sydney”, 2000, p. n/a).
In general, a large part of the media discourse surrounding her Kenyan identity focused on her childhood growing up. Frequently throughout her career, the media focused on this upbringing, outlining how,

One of seven children, Loroupe began running the way many Kenyans begin running, to and from school, barefoot, with a book bag strapped to her back. She grew up on a farm outside of Kapenguria on the Ugandan border. It was six miles each way to school, she said, and “if you were late you were punished.” Her parents raised cattle and grew corn and potatoes, she said, and sometimes she chased the herd as far as 12 miles (Longman, 1995a, Sports Desk p. 8). Running 10 kilometers (6.2 miles) to and from school, Loroupe logged 15,000 altitude miles by the time she was 15. She also worked the family farm, lugging heavy sacks of grain for several miles (Patrick, 2000, 16C).

Tiny Loroupe weighs a mere 6st [stone] 4lb and stands just over 5ft, but her power and strength has been accumulating since she was five when she would carry bundles of maize on her shoulders to her family's home in Kapsait, an uphill journey which would take two hours (The Express, 2000, p. n/a).

Often, these quotes simultaneously serve to portray Kenya as backwards, particularly in the area of gender equity, modernity, and punishment. As mentioned previously, examples of the above quotes are often the most significant/prevalent image of African/Kenyan environment and culture in western societies. This belies the existence of complex and emerging economies, cultures and cities, de facto subjugating developing nations to developed/western nations (Nauright & Magdalinski, 2003).

The truth regarding this topic is that Loroupe did much of her training with a distance running coach in Germany during most of the year. Thus, much of the technological backwardness and environmental essentialism which is claimed as reasons for success (sometimes failure) of African athletes does not hold true in Loroupe’s case. The continued prevalence of the story of how she used to run to school and carry sacks of grain for miles only serves to demonstrate western preoccupation and fascination of the (colonial) black sporting body. This fascination is evident and can be seen in the media coverage of African American athletes in the major American sports, but also, and importantly in this context, in the history of colonialization in Africa.
Another interesting facet to this conversation of African dominance is that of performance enhancing drugs. As Walton and Butryn (2006) mention, the rise of performance enhancing drugs in distance racing (specifically EPO, a drug that increases endurance, and blood doping, where hemoglobin rich blood is transfused before a race allowing for greater oxygen transport) immediately cast doubt on African runners as cheaters, especially once a few tested positive for the aforementioned drugs. Of course, many other, non-African runners have tested positive as well, and, ironically, such criticisms/accusations fly in the face of stereotypes regarding a supposed natural athletic ability. So ultimately this places African runners in a no-win situation by posing their success as either the result of a genetic advantage or drug use. This issue of drugs and doping comes into play with Loroupe as well. While Loroupe never tested positive for drugs, there were a couple of male and female African runners who were caught. To this end, Loroupe had to defend herself and her career while offering support to her friends. “I don’t eat anything,” says Loroupe, referring to drugs like endurance boosting erythropoietin. “Those who say that should come to Kenya and see the life we’re living” (Patrick, 2000, 16C). Walton and Butryn’s (2006) article, through the examination of message boards, shows how the accusation and confirmation of drug use by a few Kenyan athletes quickly gets translated into labeling them all as cheaters. The quote by Loroupe in which she defends her fellow Kenyans is indicative of this wide brush approach, and one doubts the same logic is readily applied to western runners (though it should be acknowledged that athletics as a whole is now often viewed with skepticism regarding performance-enhancing drugs, given the troubles Major League Baseball, track & field, and cycling have had with such drugs).

While Loroupe’s accomplishments were first very highly heralded, they became less and less newsworthy as her career progressed. To this end, it also seems as though media began to focus more on Loroupe’s competition, including fellow Kenyans such as Joyce Chepchumba and Catherine Ndereba, but, perhaps more noteworthy, there was an intense focus on western (white) runners. Enough evidence of this surfaced that one could accuse western media of looking for a “Great White Hope.” It is noteworthy that much of the media focus on white runners comes from their native countries; for example, British newspapers tended to focus on Paula Radcliffe while Irish newspapers tended to
focus on Sonia O’Sullivan. However, this nationalistic trend is of little relevance as it was found that when it came to who counted as a “true” American runner, the conversation often excluded naturalized Africans and even African Americans (Walton and Butryn, 2006). One could argue, carefully, that this logic translates fairly well to most western nations, especially those responsible for large amounts of media export. Thus, the favoritism shown to “home grown” talent by western nations is inherently raced/racist (harkening back to stereotypes of African bodies and training routines).

As her career progressed there seemed to be more evidence of increased racial favoritism by western media. However, the most provocative evidence supporting the Great White Hope theory is the issue of Loroupe’s world marathon record. In 1998 Loroupe set the women’s marathon world record at Rotterdam, nearly breaking the mythical (at the time) two-hour twenty-minute mark for women with a time of 2:20:47. The controversy started when the London Marathon race organizers claimed Loroupe had used male pace setters to set the record. However, as Loroupe notes,

I felt a little bit upset at what people were saying. I was the one who ran the race, not the men running alongside me, and I ran most of it on my own. No one has bothered mentioning that Kristiansen also ran in London with men (Martin, 1998, p. 42).

Ingrid Kristiansen, from Norway, was never publicly questioned about her use of male pace runners to set the record that Loroupe later broke. Eventually, in the ensuing debates, the London Marathon organizers decreed all women’s times set in mixed marathons (or point to point) ineligible for world record consideration. Needless to say this eliminated many would-be records, but eventually the London organizers slacked on this regulation, coincidentally, in London for British runner Paula Radcliffe. At this point, Radcliffe owned the official women’s world marathon record of 2:17:18, set in Chicago, and wanted to improve on that time. Though that time was faster than Loroupe ever ran, the hypocrisy of London race organizers was evident:

Radcliffe, who wants to break the record of 2hr 17min 18sec she set in Chicago, will be paced by men in what will be called a separate mixed race. Loroupe said: “When I ran my record, the London people started to complain. They were pointing the finger and now they’re doing it themselves” (Knight, 2003, p. 8).
Thus, when Loroupe owned the world record, or when Naoko Takahashi (Japan) broke the 2:20:00 barrier, no one felt the need to give them pace makers to possibly improve their time. It was only when Radcliffe, a white woman racing in her home country (in the city which first proposed that women only races should count for world records) was in position to further her legacy that London dropped its protests and provided male pace makers. Previously, London race organizers had claimed, “We believe that to maintain the integrity of women’s marathon running it is essential to recognise times set in women’s only races. We are putting our money where our mouth is” (Mackay, 1998, p. 4). It is interesting how integrity goes out the window with one of your own.

Additionally, and of important note within this issue, are discourses surrounding the athletic ability of women. The previous quote speaks of integrity in women’s races and excluding male pace makers from those discussions. How do male pace makers hurt the integrity of women’s races? Men have used male pace makers since the beginning of organized racing with no discussion that it somehow violated the spirit of the sport. The ideology that men are naturally better/stronger/faster athletes is painfully obvious in this circumstance, and I would argue that it is largely misapplied in this context. It is misapplied because the job of a pace setter is not to necessarily finish the race with the intended runner. How often do we see pacing in a sport such as cycling where, one by one, pace setters drop off, eventually leaving the lead runner by him/herself to finish the race? With marathons being a more individual event than cycling (which has established teams and team tactics), the concept of pacing to win races or set records is somewhat foreign. Loroupe claimed to have run with men to protect her from crowds while she was running, not for pacing purposes. Regardless, given the workings and purpose of pacing, there is no reason why women could not pace Loroupe as well as men, making the argument that men violate the integrity of women’s racing farcical.

Resistive Athlete

Throughout her years as an elite distance runner Tegla Loroupe voiced her opinion on numerous issues. These issues cover topics such as the treatment of women in Kenya, treatment of women in the sport of distance running, peace in Kenya/Africa, stereotypes regarding Kenyan runners, etc. While her voice comes across as strong and purposeful, it is worth noting that her voice is still filtered through the media via their
representation of Loroupe’s words and the very questions they ask Loroupe. To that end, one can again apply the concept of the in situ object to Loroupe. Bale (2001) reminds us that due to the structure of sport it is very hard for athletes to be truly resistive, as their voices (and sometimes livelihood) depend on the media, public perception, corporate sponsors, etc. Thus, while the purposes of Loroupe’s words are resistive, one must remember that she is only as resistive as western media allows us to see through their selective questioning and representation of such resistance. This chapter now turns to examples and analysis of Loroupe’s resistive moments.

At the heart of these resistive moments is the issue of gender, as, after winning her first New York City Marathon, her stance against the treatment of women (athletes) in Kenyan society caused western media to portray her as a feminist symbol (Thomas, 1994b). As a quick overview of how Kenyan society was portrayed in media reports, Loroupe, herself often quoted, is described as coming from a country where, “The traditional system is, you listen to your father until your husband buys you [in exchange] for cattle, then you listen to him” (Noden, 1998, p. A23); and “They give more opportunities to men” (Thomas Jr., 1994a, p. D1). Others similarly commented, attributing paternalism to Africa. For example, Wagner, a former coach, recounting Loroupe’s early training with African men said, “When Tecla [sic] first came to stay with me, I was managing some Tanzanian athletes who said ‘Great. Now that there’s a women [sic] in the house we will not have to do any of the chores’” (Minshull, 1998, p. n/a); and “While Wagner was away, they asked Loroupe to clean their tracksuits and cook for them. With her African upbringing robbing her of the chance to read tracts by Germaine Greer, she felt she had no choice but to agree” (Mott, 2001, p. 6). These statements serve to portray an unflattering image of African men and a subservient African woman. It could be argued that these quotes are inaccurate, but but there are areas all over Kenya where the societies tend to be paternalistic (though matrilineal). However, given the lack of counter representations of African life in western media, and there are many, these quotes seem to reinforce Kenya and, by western association, Africa as culturally backward.

The reality, again, is much more complex. Saavedra’s (2003) study of women’s football (soccer) in Nigeria, Senegal, and South Africa revealed varying levels of female
acceptance and promotion within the sport, as well as different constructions of the sport (as a male, female, or neutral activity) across and within the three countries. In Loroupe’s case, running in Kenya—a country where considerable social change is occurring in its own right with regard to government and modernization (Frederiksen, 2000)—had been constructed as a masculine activity, something which made resistance to her entry inevitable, however such a statement is unlikely to hold true across different regions, countries, cultures, etc. Thus, while Loroupe serves as an example of resistance to male patriarchy, her example serves as an inspiration/empowerment (Longman, 1995a) for the women of rural Kenya (and similar locations) while simultaneously serving to relegate African societies below and deflect attention away from gender inequality in western societies.

It is important to note Loroupe’s resistive moments towards Kenyan society. To begin with, her very involvement in sport was resistive as throughout her childhood it is recalled by Loroupe that, “They try to discourage women. But I wanted to show them” (Thomas Jr., 1994a, p. D1); “My tribe says I am crazy when I run. Now they are quiet” (Patrick, 1994, p. 02C); and “When I ran in school, the men in my tribe said, ‘Tegla, you’re wasting your time’” (Longman, 1995a, Sports Desk p. 8). While it is often made to seem as though Loroupe overcame this gender bias through her own determination, there was actually an infrastructure of women who encouraged Loroupe to pursue her running. This begins with the women in her family,

. . . her mother had grown up as an orphan and taught Loroupe the value of independence. One of her aunts told her never to be caught crying in front of men.

Her older sister, Albina, told her that if you don't own something of your own, like property, men will not respect you (Longman, 1998, p. G1).

Loroupe would also receive encouragement and build confidence as a runner when she attended a boarding school for girls. The support Loroupe received through her early years from women in the community and close to her, while not absolute, is indicative of a more complex cultural system where women often look out for each other and are resistive within a patriarchal system.
Once Loroupe won the New York City Marathon, she had no problems openly criticizing the culture she had come from or the Kenyan Amateur Athletic Association (KAAA). The media instantly took up her situation, printing text such as the following:

The 21-year-old Loroupe, who emerged as an instant feminist symbol after she became the first black African woman to win a major marathon, repeated the spirited comments she made on Sunday when she complained that Kenyan society discouraged women from running even as it lavished attention on their brothers (Thomas Jr., 1994b, p. B13). And,

Her debut victory elevated Loroupe to an elite group of favorites for Monday's Boston Marathon, and, perhaps more significantly, provided her independence both financially and culturally. By crossing the tape first in New York, she won . . . the legitimacy to speak out for Kenyan women—to assert that a woman's life could be one of possibility and achievement, not subservience and capitulation (Longman, 1995a, Sports Desk p. 8).

Later, Longman (1995b) wrote:

Until last November, Loroupe had never run 26.2 miles. Then . . . she surged over the final 10 miles to become the first black African woman to win a major marathon. Her victory became an affirming symbol of achievement for Kenyan women, whose lives are often lived in subservience, and a silencing rebuke for the Kenyan men who had told her she was wasting her time (p. B9).

“Other women have come out of Kenya and run before Tegla, but all were very careful not to rock the boat,” said Anne Roberts, who coordinates elite runners at the New York City Marathon and has befriended Loroupe. “She is the first to have the courage to say something and to continue to say it emphatically until someone listened” (Longman, 1995a, p. 8).

“A week after Tegla’s victory in New York, I was at a regional track meet in Kenya and saw a father encouraging his daughter to compete,” says John Manners . . . “That would have been impossible two weeks earlier” (Brant, 2001, p. 24).

These quotes frame Loroupe as a kind of feminist hero for women in Kenya/Africa and as well as for women in general. However, as will be elaborated upon later, this framing
is offered uncomplicatedly while linking to western notions of self-help and post-feminist/humanitarian businessman ideology.

Further, Loroupe was quoted numerous times explaining the progress that has been made for women in Kenyan athletics and the responses she has received from Kenyan women, “There was more encouragement for women” (Phillips, 1995, D2); “You did a good job,” Loroupe said they (the women of her ethnic group) told her. ‘You showed that we are like the men, we can do things. We are not useless’” (Longman, 1995a, Sports Desk p. 8).

Right now, we have a lot of women running, more than before . . . For me, I had to fight the federation. Still now, I have to and I don’t know why. But at least now there are chances for other women. It makes me proud. That is very positive. I’m happy about that (Roberts, 2000, p. D1).

“. . . after I won, the women came to me and said ‘You were wise to resist our words. We are proud of you.’ . . . It gave a lot of motivation to many people,” she said, adding that her village “gave me an ostrich feather. They usually give the feather to the warriors who come home victorious” (Lorge, 1996, p. n/a).

Clearly, Loroupe’s outspoken and actively resistive approach had a greater impact than a simply transgressive approach would have had. Through her career, Loroupe’s efforts to establish sports training facilities have increased opportunities for women to enjoy sport and served to disrupt traditional gender roles/stereotypes in Kenyan, and western, society (http://www.teglaloroupepeacefoundation.org). Indeed, it was probably extremely rare for a woman to get an ostrich feather symbolizing a victorious warrior. Loroupe’s activist efforts, along with those of others, have resulted in training facilities for women, as well as educational facilities for orphaned/HIV children. Additionally, Loroupe has been deeply involved in bringing peace to her part of Africa (for example, she started the Tegla Loroupe Peace Academy). Further, she has organized benefit races in Kenya and help set up running facilities to give pastoralists/warriors caught in the dangerous activity of cattle rustling other options instead of violence (Gettleman, 2006; Mbaisi, 2004).

However, while these representations of Loroupe distinguish her as an individual helping others, western media discourses framing Loroupe as a feminist icon are necessarily problematic. In post-feminist western societies feminism and feminist
sentiments have often been co-opted by mainstream interests/corporations and commodified, through ideologies of individualism, for consumption by women as some sort of trend. The focus on individual vigor and efforts that post-feminism has cultured belies the importance of second-wave feminist activism and the creation of programs/organizations that help women around those feminist principles (Cole & Hribar, 1995; McDonald, 2000). It can be argued that these post-feminist forces commodify Loroupe, for the consumption of western women, as a woman from a developing country who was able to overcome a paternalistic society through, for the most part, solitary efforts (hard work and determination). Thus, while Loroupe most likely means something very different for Kenyan/African women, through the establishment of various organizations helping both women and men, for western audiences she becomes a symbol of meritocracy. This is further complicated, in both African and western arenas, by the corporations which shape and stand to benefit from Loroupe’s societal perception by having her promote their products. Unfortunately, this links closely with what was discussed regarding the humanitarian businessman alleviating western responsibility to help developing countries and also runs parallel with American ideals of meritocracy where sport serves as a way for blacks to “make it out the hood.” The allure of such ideology is tempting because society valorizes and finds glory in the individual achievement, however, too quickly does a focus on the individual mask institutionalized disparities regarding socioeconomic class, race, gender, and opportunity (Cole & Hribar, 1995; McDonald, 2000). Ultimately there needs to be a shift towards a more critical examination of social ideologies that promote the individual, something which, ironically, may have to start with individuals in the form of grassroots organizations.

Concluding Remarks

In summation, Loroupe can be read along many lines of power. Regarding the power line of gender, I feel that Loroupe and other elite marathoners have made significant strides towards moving past perceived gender barriers in running, and it was surprising to see non-sexist comments at all. However, as was noted through the Diana Prince theme, there were many references to Loroupe which infantilized, weakened, and compared her elite performances to that of elite men’s. Also, it was interesting that
Loroupe’s identity as a Kenyan played into a type of performance expectation, where western media would make a logical link that since the men dominate the women will too for many of the same reasons.

Regarding race/nationality/ethnicity, media accounts of Loroupe, and others, support the dominant stereotypes about Africans’ natural ability when there were numerous western (and eastern, as it was a Japanese woman, Naoko Takahashi, who first broke the 2:20:00 barrier) runners who posed serious challenges to East African runners. Most reports relied uncomplicatedly on environmental essentialism, something which was reinforced by Loroupe, and while environment plays a role in any athlete’s development, other factors, such as dedication, training sophistication, youth sport options, sport popularity, etc., should be looked at as more likely, or among, reasons for Kenyan/African success.

Loroupe’s resistive moments posed an interesting analytical challenge and provide a point for further analysis in this chapter as most of her resistive moments were directed at a distant (for western media) and foreign culture/organization (the KAAA). While Loroupe seemed/seems to be rather successful in her opposition and catalyzing change, the media representation of the culture she was resisting remained uncomplicated. While Loroupe supported much of this, it would not be incorrect to suggest that western media failed to dig deeper and attain a fuller picture of the cultural situation Loroupe and others grew up and live in, then and now.

To conclude, the reading of media representations regarding Tegla Loroupe has shown to be a complex interaction of numerous power lines, primarily those of gender, race/nationality, and agency/resistance. That being said, this chapter tried to detangle a context where Loroupe was simultaneously represented as an elite athlete, gender/sex transgressive, culturally resistive, stereotype reproducing, etc. While themes were used to more easily illuminate these power lines, it seems evident that there are no clear distinctions between lines of power and overlap was, as in all cases, inevitable.
CHAPTER 6

Christian Okoye & Tamba Hali

The sport of American football was built on, and has served to reinforce, the ideologies of masculinity. Those ideals of physical and mental toughness and hegemonic masculinity are present in few other sports to the degree to which they exist within football. The sport itself has been studied repeatedly in the academic realm; of note are the works of Trujillo (1995), who studied football and its links to warfare, and Messner (2002), whose work has highlighted the institution of athletics, and especially football as the site for reinforcing hegemonic masculinity and misogynistic tendencies. Trujillo’s (1995) study looked at episodes of the famed Monday Night Football program for representations of the male in a football context. His findings grouped representations of the male body into three main categories: (1) the body as a tool (football as work); (2) the body as a weapon (football as war); and (3) the body as an object of gaze (a site where men are allowed to derive pleasure from watching other men). These representations link easily with Michael Messner’s (2002) “triad of violence” in men’s athletics. This triad includes violence against men, violence against women, and against themselves. While this research project does not offer a comprehensive review of violence, misogyny, and hegemonic masculinity in football, the work of Trujillo (1995) and Messner (2002) is useful for analyzing representations of football players as this chapter does.

This chapter takes a closer look at two African-born National Football League (NFL) players. The first, Christian Okoye, played for the Kansas City Chiefs in the late 1980s and early 1990s before retiring, and the second, Tamba Hali, is a current Kansas City Chief who was drafted in 2006. Two players were chosen for this chapter to give a deeper historical perspective, as it could be argued that the players occupied different playing eras. This chapter also explores whether there are differences in the way sports media discourses frame different eras and countries in Africa (Okoye is from Nigeria, and Hali from Liberia). We begin with a brief introduction to the athletes and an overview of the themes that arose during the analysis.

Okoye was a running back for the Kansas City Chiefs from 1987 to 1993. Prior to that Okoye played football at Azusa-Pacific University where he also competed in track and field, amassing seven national titles in shot-put, discus, and hammer throw as well as
seventeen All-American honors in track and field. Drafted in the second round of the NFL draft (35th overall), Okoye played all his years for the Chiefs, totaling 4,897 rushing yards, a franchise record at the time. The best years of Okoye’s career were 1989 and 1991, where he rushed for 1480 and 1031 yards respectively (the former being the NFL season high that year), and made the Pro Bowl both years. Though his career would be somewhat short (compared to Olajuwon’s or Loroupe’s), Okoye’s achievements would be enough to ensure his entrance into the Kansas City Chief’s Hall of Fame, the 30th person to do so in the storied franchise’s forty-five years.

Tamba Hali, currently a defensive end for the Kansas City Chiefs, was drafted in 2006 with the 20th overall pick. Still early in his career and considered a rising talent, Hali began playing football in high school before being recruited to play for the Penn State Nittany Lions. During his senior year at Penn State he tallied eleven sacks and seventeen tackles for loss, garnering him All-American honors at his position. In his first two full seasons in the NFL, Hali recorded 116 tackles and 15.5 sacks. Thought of as an impact player coming out of college, Hali seems to be living up to expectations for a promising career.

The analysis part of this chapter begins by exploring the discourses which surrounded the bodies and masculinities of Okoye and Hali under the theme of “The Physical.” From there, analysis will move towards discourses which arose around each athlete’s coming to America in the theme of “Fleeing the Scene (of Africa).” (Tamba Hali has an additional section due to his naturalization.) Finally, the chapter turns to investigate how western media portrays the African continent via Okoye and Hali in the theme “Representing the Continent.”

The Physical

Okoye: The Physical

The departure point for the examination of Christian Okoye is the nickname he was given early in his NFL career, the “Nigerian Nightmare.” Despite being a fancy alliteration, the Nigerian Nightmare carries implications regarding Okoye’s identity as an African/Nigerian, constructions and beliefs about Africa/Nigeria, and Okoye’s construction as a masculine athletic figure within the realm of football.
Okoye’s nickname originates from discussion of his body, playing style, and, of course, his Nigerian origins. Throughout his early career, Okoye was physically described as, “the musculature chart in the high-school science class. He is a Michelangelo sculpture warped for effect” (Mucken, 1987, p. F1); “bricked muscle stacked atop a 6-foot-1 physique” (“Chiefs’ Okoye starts”, 1989, p. 7D); and “a remarkable athlete out of Africa who is built like Mike Tyson and runs as fast as Jerry Rice” (Gustkey, 1990, p. 8D). These examples frame Okoye as someone almost superhuman, or, at the least, a natural athlete. Combine this with the “brutality” (Quindt, 1991, p. H16) and aggressiveness of Okoye’s playing style and one gets the “Nightmare” part of this nickname. It has already been noted that the sport of football lends itself, and is often likened, to war or some kind of battlefield. In this context where individual (players’) masculinities are formed and contested at multiple levels (i.e., personal, team, and public), media representations of Okoye as this physical nightmare serve to construct him along hegemonic masculinist lines of power.

While such construction grounds Okoye as a physically superior and heterosexual male, one wonders, to what extent does the use of “Nightmare” play (perhaps unconsciously) on stereotypes of Nigeria/Africa and blacks in general? It can be assumed that the Nigerian Nightmare nickname is designed to evoke fear, since nightmares are inherently something to be feared. Given the negative attention many black athletes received then and even more so today regarding off-field issues (from Michael Irvin’s drug case in 1996, to Ray Lewis’ and Ray Carruth’s murder cases in 2000 and 1999 respectively, and even Kobe Bryant’s rape case in 2003), one can argue that the casual observer could easily make a link between such behavior and Okoye’s nickname. (It should be noted that Okoye has had no criminal issues to date.) Further, the nickname may feed into the xenophobic sentiment that exists in the United States, as it attaches nightmares and fear to Okoye’s status as an immigrant from Nigeria. As Correll, Park, Judd, and Wittenbrink (2002) found in their study regarding police shooter bias, it is often what one unconsciously believes that gets acted upon in uncertain situations. While the Correll et al. (2002) study was concerned with the shooting of innocents by police, it would not be a stretch to argue that situations such as job interviews may be impacted by unconscious stereotyping as well. This discussion melds
with the theme of “Representing the Continent,” which will examine the implications of Okoye’s nickname on perceptions of Africa/Nigeria further.

Continuing with the discussion of Okoye’s body, this thesis argues that the gaze on his body as physically superior to those of other NFL athletes serves to support the link between blackness and a natural athletic ability. This link, which has been well covered throughout this thesis, serves to dehumanize blacks as somehow being less evolved, thereby better athletes due to a closer link with nature (primates) than their white counterparts (simultaneously casting whites as intellectually and morally superior). While this discourse is evident in the narratives about Olajuwon, where the term “raw” was examined and it was argued that the idea of raw relies on an assumption of an innate, natural, black athletic ability (especially regarding Africa and its association with the primitive), the concept of “rarness” was not so explicit in the discourse surrounding Okoye. Yet it was not far below the surface.

Of note, there was some contradiction where articles proclaimed Okoye as “bright, not just smart, he’s extremely bright” (Mucken, 1987, p. F1), and having “a concentration level and a work ethic that are exceptional even by pro football standards” (Gustkey, 1990, p. 8D). Yet, most of the emphasis was on how recently Okoye had started playing the game of football and how good he could become. In other words, even as he was viewed as smart and industrious, Okoye was seen as “raw,” meaning variously, that he was new to the sport (but naturally talented), and unaware (ignorant) of what many Americans undoubtedly would know. For example, there were often quotes such as, “Okoye, a 244-pound Nigerian, had never seen a football until he arrived at the California school on a track scholarship in 1982” (“Small-college back,” 1987, Sports Desk p. 5); “Christian doesn't have any idea how good he can be” (“Chiefs’ Okoye starts,” 1989, p. 7D); “Imagine how good [he] would be if he ran properly. If he lowered his shoulder instead of running so upright. If he followed his blockers better. If he tried running past defenders instead of through them” (“Broncos aim to halt,” 1990, p. 4C); “Then one day, he saw a football and asked ‘What is this unusual object?’ So a coach put him in football pads, and Okoye smashed school records” (Miklasz, 1990, p. 1D); “But Okoye, who was born in Enugu, Nigeria, never played the game until the 1984 season at tiny Azusa (Calif.) Pacific University” (Thomas, 1991, p. 1D); and “I’m still learning the
game,’ he said. ‘I’m still a kid in the game.’” (Thomas, 1991, p. 1D). This idea of being raw is, as mentioned before, only reinforced by media representations of Africa as backwards/undeveloped and a standing “common sense” belief in the physical superiority of the black athlete. (Okoye was already an Olympic caliber athlete before playing football). Thus, it appears that an athlete from Africa is cast as being almost more “genuine” than his/her African American counterparts (meaning that if African Americans are great athletes because they are black, then an athlete actually from Africa must be even better). This rather simplistic mode of thinking was employed by the writers above; it was also evident in some of the examples of Olajuwon and Loroupe.

While Okoye was cast as raw and athletic, his portrayal differs from that of the swimmer, Eric Moussambani. Although Eric Moussambani was cast as being a raw athlete and being closer to nature, he was not portrayed as the next potential great swimmer; instead, he was viewed as an outsider in a sport where he did not belong in the first place. Most likely, this take on Moussambani has to do with the construction of (Olympic/elite) swimming as a sport primarily for (upper middle-class) whites, a sport where one rarely sees a person of color compete at a high level. On the other hand, the current dominance of African Americans in sports such as basketball and football has lent itself to those sports being labeled as “black” sports. Given the popularity and importance of football and basketball in America, this labeling helps reinforce/create a “common sense” linkage between blackness and natural athletic ability.

**Hali: The Physical**

The representations of Okoye regarding his body and masculinity framed him very closely to the representations seen regarding the early Olajuwon. The discussions on these two athletes have found that talk of athletic male bodies inherently constructs them within a heterosexual framework, with their heterosexuality never coming into question. To this effect, representations of Hali were found to be redundant with the discourses surrounding the athletic ability of Olajuwon and Okoye. The one slant to representations of Hali, besides the lack of a catchy nickname, is that there seems to be more emphasis on effort and hard work than either Olajuwon or Okoye. It may help to think of the three men as existing on a continuum of discourse ranging from “natural” to “hard work,”
placing (the early) Olajuwon on the natural side, Okoye somewhere in the middle, leaning towards Olajuwon, and Hali much closer towards the “hark work” end.

The difference seen in representation may have something to do with a combination of the body of Hali, which one would not inherently describe as highly athletic looking, and his position and style of play, both of which would not be described as classically athletic (although it is recognized that there are many defensive linemen who are viewed as being extremely athletic, and the position is dominated by black athletes), where as Olajuwon and Okoye played sports/positions one would stereotype with the need for greater athleticism. Or, looking at the trajectory, it could be that the writers have softened their stance on raw athleticism with the accomplishments of each athlete. Perhaps Olajuwon and then Okoye had dispelled some of the overt notions about Africa and raw talent (if not Africa as backwards) in the NBA/NFL. While certainly a possibility for the NBA/NFL, the research that focused on Moussambani at the 2002 Sydney Olympics shows that such discourse is far from outdated. Regardless, the discourses surrounding Hali’s athletic ability followed along the lines of being hard-working, not naturally athletic: “Stocco was sacked nine times - four times by the indefatigable and unblockable Hali” (Lucas, 2006, D1),

“Playing behind Tamba, I learned how to play relentlessly and play hard every down,” said the 6-foot-1, 263-pound Gaines. “He wasn’t the biggest, he wasn’t the strongest, he wasn’t the fastest but he just played hard every down. Look where it got him” (Ceisner, 2006, p. n/a).

He will become a good starting defensive end who will make a lot of plays, especially as a pass rusher, but will always make a few less plays than you expect due to his lack of ideal instincts. His smarts and work ethic will help him to learn to identify plays through reading keys to make up for some of his lack of instincts (Fitzpatrick, 2006, p. n/a).

“It’s a way to pay him less. Anyone who watches Tamba Hali on videotape should know it doesn’t matter if he runs a 4.5 or a 4.9,” he said. “Tamba has the ‘it’ factor.” It’s the “it” that’s turned him into an NFL prospect after just eight years playing the game. It’s the “it” that’ll have Hali graduating in May, after just
four years and a major switch from information systems technology to a kinesiology and journalism double (Kinkhabwala, 2006, p. S01). Of course, Hali’s never been interested in being just a little good. Teaneck defensive coordinator Ed Klimek, who first pulled the 6-foot-3 beanpole onto a gridiron, said there wasn’t one practice in four high school years when Hali wasn’t the first to show up. Corrado says today, on this Penn State team, Hali’s work ethic is unsurpassed (Kinkhabwala, 2003, p. S01).

That Hali is so prominent a prospect is a tribute not only to his athletic ability, but also his determination, devotion, and enthusiasm for detail (Fox, 2001, p. S07). References to Hali having the “it” factor, playing hard each play, having an enthusiasm for detail, or having an unsurpassed work ethic are a departure from the discourses of “natural ability” one frequently sees regarding black athletes and, in particular, African athletes. There did not appear to be a reverse bias in these reports, meaning, there were not over/undertones of Hali’s immigrant status fueling him to work harder than “lazy” American athletes white or black. Inherent in some of these examples are fragments of the “raw” discourse that was discussed with Okoye, but such discourses were not very prevalent. Certainly, it is positive to see discourses of hard work and effort surrounding a black African athlete.

**Fleeing the Scene (of Africa)**

The theme of “Fleeing the Scene” represents the media discourses concerning the “flee” from Africa that both Okoye and Hali made. Coincidentally, both of their flights were reported in the media as being escapes from war/violence, something which is apparent in each section and should resonate soundly (though not completely) with the representations/depictions of Africa described earlier in this work. The most significant part of this theme however deals with representations of war and how they intersect with sport.

**Okoye: Fleeing the Scene**

Regarding Okoye, and his “flee” from Nigeria, there were few news articles which specifically focused on a troubled country and a fortunate flee to the awaiting success in America. In addition, neither during his career nor after it were there many questions posed to Okoye on what he felt about Nigeria in any aspect. This represents a
departure from the narratives concerning Olajuwon and Loroupe, perhaps due to the relative brevity of Okoye’s career or the intense media focus on his body and performances. There were, however, a plethora of references making note of Okoye’s Nigerian background/identity. For example, a phrase such as “Christian Okoye of Enugu, Nigeria” (Wallace, 1987, p. A), was very common. Importantly however, those articles which did seek to illuminate Okoye’s life in Nigeria portrayed it as, “vaulted straight out of post-civil war Nigeria” (Kreidler, 1991, p. D1).

He was 6 and living in a small village named Nri when insurgents from his native Ibo tribe seceded from Nigeria and formed the republic of Biafra. It started a 1967-1970 civil war that killed 500,000 to 2 million people, most of whom died of starvation . . . “People carried machine guns in the streets,” Okoye said. “We hid in people’s basements. I can remember the sound of guns and the explosions. We had to stay on the move all the time, to stay ahead of the fighting. When the shooting got too close, we’d move on to the next village” (Gustkey, 1990, 8D).

Further, it was later reported that Okoye was no longer welcome on the Nigerian Olympic team (of which he was a part as a discus thrower, an activity he also participated in while he attended Azusa-Pacific) when, “he was excluded from the Nigerian Olympic track team in retribution for his tribe’s participation in an attempted secession” (Kreidler, 1991, p. D1). While these are real and valid snapshots of Nigeria, the argument remains that the singular focus on violence and tragedies western media has regarding Africa often lacks historical context and relies too heavily on simplistic explanations (such as tribalism), even when the words of the athlete are used. Of course, these examples also saliently serve to contrast the “Third World” with western nations.

It is also worth noting the way in which the idea of war intersects within this context. As Trujillo (1995) noted, football in America is often referred to as war, with many parts of the game, including the players, being referred to in war-like terms (e.g., missiles, bombs, battlefield, soldiers, etc.). But, this is make-believe—participants are “playing war.” However, for Okoye (and Tamba Hali) war was a real experience, however contrived or sensationalized it may have been by the media. In these instances, the media tend to acknowledge the frivolity of sport when lives are at stake, yet often infuse sport idioms into a player’s war/life experience. The examples above illustrate the
kind of discourse used when discussing war. What follows is a continuation of this discussion as the vivid examples of war concerning Hali are presented.

*Hali: Fleeing the Scene*

Hali seems to benefit from the experiences of those who came before him as there was less novel media attention directed towards his African identity through casual mentions or the use of nicknames. This lack of novelty differs from Okoye as narratives around Okoye were similar to those of Olajuwon and Loroupe in regards to the constant reference to his Nigerian identity and the use of a nickname as an identifier. Since Okoye (and Olajuwon/Loroupe) had few predecessors, it would stand to reason that they had to react to more uninformed beliefs about Africa and challenge/create beliefs about Africa and African athletes. While not a part of Hali’s analysis, there remained other discourses of Africa which heavily surrounded him.

Tamba Hali is unique in that he is one of three current NFL athletes to come out of Liberia, a country still emerging from an awful civil war. (The others, Ashton Youboty and Bhawho Papi Jue, each immigrated to the United States before the age of five.) Moreover, his actual experience with war makes an interesting point of analysis as sport, especially football, is often framed in war-like terms. This analysis is further complicated by Hali’s naturalization to a U.S. citizen. Before the analysis is given, it may be beneficial to briefly go over some of the recent history of Liberia.

Originally, Liberia was settled and founded for freed African American slaves after the U.S. Civil War, a measure supported by American leaders such as Abraham Lincoln and Marcus Garvey as well as organizations such as the American Colonization Society (a society started by whites and freed blacks to promote black emigration). Once established, the new colonizers set out using the same sorts of manipulation, negotiation, and violence that the United States and other colonial entities (e.g., England/France) had been using on the continent for centuries (Posthumus, 2007). Like these colonial powers, much of what the Liberian colonists (Americo-Liberians) did was in the name of “civilization.” However, the history is a little more complicated than that. According to Posthumus (2007) Americo-Liberians thought of Liberia as their Canaan, something of a promised land given that the land represented freedom to the former slaves turned colonists. Armed with the Bible, Americo-Liberians sought to convert the pagan Africans
to Christianity, yet ultimately ended up keeping the native Africans as third-rate citizens. (There were even accusations of Liberia installing their own form of slavery and slave trade, Posthumus, 2007). After years of being treated as third-rate citizens in their native land, the Africans eventually rebelled against the Americo-Liberians and succeeded. However, after the new government crumbled, the Americo-Liberians once again took control under the leadership of Charles Taylor. Playing upon ethnic identities, Taylor spurned a bloody civil war that would last from 1989 to 2003 (Posthumus, 2007). Now, under a new, more progressive, leadership (headed by Ellen Johnson-Sirleaf), things are looking to turn around in Liberia with the establishment of programs to help both the native Africans and Americo-Liberians. Thus, Liberia and, by extension, Tamba Hali are unique in their relationship to both the United States and African Americans. The United States has been directly and indirectly involved in the many years of warring in Liberia through the history of slavery (which also implicates European countries), development policies, and, of course, continued policies of military neglect towards African countries. However, this is rarely acknowledged by those who write about Liberia and Hali. For these writers, the violence either goes unexplained or is assumed to be tribalistic in nature.

There was considerable media attention on Hali’s Liberian war experience, especially during his late college years, the NFL draft period, and early professional years. Such attention highlights the kind of intrigue and mystery that surrounds African nations and that western entities find so appealing to report. The following examples were found in media discourses surrounding Hali’s experiences living in and escaping Liberia.

It is something of a miracle that Hali escaped Africa. He remembers his family being fired upon while riding in a truck when he was a youngster. “I stood up in the truck and yelled, ‘Don’t shoot!’, but my mother and my brother pulled me back down,” he recalled. “They probably saved my life.” Hali still has terrifying visions from his youth . . . “Soldiers would come to the villages to destroy them. I would see planes coming in from overhead like birds and shooting at us,” the 6-foot-4, 245-pounder remembers. “It was very hectic. My stepfather, he’s a pastor, hid us and he got my mom to the Ivory Coast” (Fox, 2001, S07).
Because of all the civil strife of back-to-back wars in Liberia, Hali and his three siblings had moved from “hiding places that don’t have names to mud places.” For five years, the Halis had no formal schooling, and in a move that’s become local legend, Henry Hali bought his English-speaking children Hooked on Phonics tapes when they arrived in New Jersey (Kinkhabwala, 2003, S01).

Tamba Hali was a child growing up in civil wartorn [sic] Liberia when the rebel planes would suddenly come strafing overhead. Hali, now a destructive force of his own as a Penn State defensive end, would scramble for cover. . . His memories return to Monrovia, the capital of Liberia, where Hali can remember being 5 or 6 and friends carrying AK-47 rifles. He was told of his younger half-brother, Joshua, who was thrown down a well to his death at the age of 6 (Robbins, 2005, p. 60).

Growing up in volatile Liberia, where civil war and coups were common, his father made the decision to move his family from Africa to the United States (‘Made in Jersey,” 2005, p. 51).

Liberia’s civil war ended in 2003, and a presidential election was scheduled for Nov. 8. Still, Hali fears for his mother’s safety and wants to bring her to the U.S. as soon as possible. One year after he moved to Teaneck, Rachel found Joshua dead at the bottom of a well; last year she was hit by a stray bullet below the left knee. “It’s only by the grace of God that we’re still alive,” Rachel said last Thursday. “Things are getting better here, but I’m still scared” (Beech, 2005, p. Z8).

They would hide in huts, but there was no way to hide from the war around them. Often, there would be bodies piled alongside the road they were walking. Hali also said many of the uneducated children would run around killing others for no reason . . . A few years ago, even Hali’s mother was shot (Manfull, 2006, p. 14). That’s what Hali remembers from his childhood - death and killing. “Sometimes it would be a lot of people,” he said. “Sometimes it would be just one. Sometimes you’d see a stack of bodies sitting on the side of the road while you’re walking. A lot of kids in Liberia weren't educated. A lot of them would be running around killing people for no reason” (LeGere, 2006, Sports p. 4).
At age 10, Tamba Hali arrived in the United States unable to read, write or speak English, having fled from then war-torn Liberia (Bosak, 2006, p. n/a).

The examples above, culled from various sources, focus on Hali’s war experiences in Liberia. They are by far the most overwhelming representation of Africa in terms of both frequency and number. Yet, while these are the most frequently reported comments about Hali, they all (or nearly all) came out during one brief period—the period around the NFL draft. The NFL draft is a period when potential players undergo considerable team and media attention, specifically focusing on a player’s background and character. Outside of this period, Hali’s Liberian background receives passing mention and discourse focuses more on his masculinity and athletic ability. The context of war certainly makes Hali’s story of survival and success in professional football all the more interesting, and the spotlight of athletics lends itself easily to the glorification of such stories. As a link to Olajuwon, such a representation is very similar to “The Dream” which was discussed as supporting U.S. hegemony and the American dream. These stories of individual success reinforce western notions of society as a meritocracy (one where an individual will achieve (economic) success if motivated) but they ignore the reality that socioeconomic class overwhelmingly reproduces itself.

An interesting note of this analysis is the dilemma it poses with the juxtaposition of actual war and the idea of football as war. Clearly, given the experience with Pat Tillman (who was regarded as a hero after he stepped away from the NFL to join the Army Rangers in Iraq and unfortunately died in action) and Kellen Winslow Jr. (a tight end for the NFL’s Cleveland Browns who was chastised widely for his “I’m a soldier!” remarks by some who thought his attempts to link being a football player to a soldier were inappropriate), there is recognition that there is a line between war and sport. Yet, in an above quote regarding Hali, right after the description of shooting aircrafts, the author calls Hali a “destructive force in his own right.” It seems as though people (the media) realize that war and sport are nowhere near equals, and one would imagine that there has been an increased sensitivity given the current conflicts the U.S. is involved in with Afghanistan and Iraq. Yet, unconsciously perhaps, when the reality of war is not blatantly present, language which links sport to war is readily reached for. One can argue that the glorification and ideals of glory society instills in war is adopted by sport (especially
football) because of the link between the body (physical) and mortality. Where as this link is taken to the greatest extent in war (literally risking one’s life), the closest many can reasonably come to a similar experience is in sport. Football lends itself most to likeness of war precisely because it is one of the more violent sports, easily linking with the perceived physicality of war. This manifests through the ideologies in football that Trujillo (1995) and Messner (2002) discuss in their respective work, especially the sacrifice of one’s body, which results in one often being hailed and praised as some kind of martyr for the sport. Thus, Hali, the football player, becomes Hali the soldier/warrior in the media discourses, in part because of the tendency to use football as a surrogate for war, but also because of the ease with which reporters are able to connect internecine conflict in Liberia with interregional sports squabbles.

*Hali: Naturalization.* Like Hakeem Olajuwon, Tamba Hali went through the naturalization process to become a United States Citizen. In Olajuwon’s experience with becoming a citizen there were multiple references to the superiority of the United States. Much is similar in the case of Hali, however, it is stated differently, as the discourse surrounding Hali’s citizenship centered primarily on his mother and the danger she faced in Liberia. Much of the media attention regarding this topic made note of how Hali had left Liberia over a decade ago and had not had the resources to bring his mother to the United States for bureaucratic/monetary reasons, something Olajuwon did not have to deal with as Nigeria was not going through recurring violence and his family was middle class. The following examples are indicative of this naturalization discourse.

Once he cashes in on the healthy signing bonus he will receive as a first-round or early second-round pick and completes the application process to become a U.S. citizen, he can be reunited with the mother he hasn’t seen in 12 years (LeGere, 2006, Sports p. 4).

“It’ll be a great day when I become an American citizen,” [Hali] said. “This is where I want to be. This is where I want my family to be” (Craig, 2006, p. 1C).

“Now I’ll be able to do more things such as hire a lawyer, a lawyer that knows what he’s doing concerning this information about getting people here from other countries,” [Hali] said. “Hopefully, that could be one way the money could help. I know it’s really expensive” (Tucker, 2006a, p. n/a).
We think that when we become citizens (Hali is completing work on his naturalization) it will become easier. Our other way is through humanitarian reasons, showing that her life is in danger (“KC fans will”, 2006a, Sports p. 1). “It’s a big deal,” Coach Herm Edwards said. “You can dream in this country and actually fulfill your dream. In a lot of countries you can dream and you don’t have an opportunity” (“Chiefs notebook”, 2006b, Sports p. 6).

Being a citizen also should make it easier to move other family members to the United States. He hasn’t seen his mother since his father brought him over (Tucker, 2006b, p. S03).


In August he overcame another when he flew to his home state of New Jersey and successfully took the test to become a U.S. citizen. He hopes citizenship, along with his stature in the NFL, could make his mother’s stay in the United States permanent (Skretta, 2006, p. n/a).

Hali finally was reunited with his mother, Rachel Keita. You may recall that the former Penn State star hadn’t seen his mother since escaping wartorn [sic] Liberia as a 10-year-old in 1994. Hali became a U.S. citizen this summer and immediately set the wheels in motion to obtain a visa for his mother (“Hot reads”, 2006, p. E7).

Thus, discourses of U.S. superiority emerge through the discourse of Hali trying to bring his mother to the U.S. from Liberia. Similar to Olajuwon, comments about being able to vote and having the opportunity to fulfill your dreams, hire a lawyer, etc. position the United States as superior, as in free, democratic, welcoming, and much sought after by all. Also, this discourse focusing on the mother usually involves the discussion of war in Liberia, which further reinforces the superiority of western societies by framing Africa as chaotic. Certainly Hali’s mother was in a serious situation in her home country and one cannot blame Hali for wanting to get her out, yet it remains important to examine the kind of language used, especially when Africa is often thought of as one big country instead of a diverse continent.

Given this context, the argument can be made that what is most evident, yet not discussed, is Hali’s use of American citizenship for his personal ends. Through reading
media reports, it would seem as though the main motivating factor for Hali’s naturalization was so he could more easily attain a visa for his mother and bring her to come live with him, not, conversely, because he cherishes the democracy or relative freedom of the States. Does Hali care about being an American citizen beyond his concern for his mother’s safety? Arguably he does, as his expressed desire to live and have his family in the United States, as well as being able vote, would indicate. However, the use of citizenship for personal ends was also evident with Olajuwon, as Olajuwon once stated that being an American citizen let him travel internationally more easily, as he felt a good person should be able to do—a statement that is consistent with his pronouncement that he did not believe in “boundaries set by men.” This brings us around full circle then, as it has been the western nation-states that have been able to define who/what is “good” and restrict the travel of groups as they see fit. Olajuwon and Hali can thus be seen as individuals who have had to navigate the political ideology of the nation-state in order to make their lives better. It will be interesting to see what Hali has to say about Liberia, or what his actions will be towards Liberia (if he will participate in aid projects the way other African athletes have done), in the future as at the time of writing this chapter little has emerged regarding his current feelings.

Representing the Continent

The final theme of this chapter regards how Okoye and Hali individually represent their respective countries and the continent of Africa in the media’s eyes. Between the two athletes there are noticeable differences. In general, while Okoye’s representations of Nigeria revolve around his nickname, we see a return to the in situ object in the case of Hali.

Okoye: What’s in a Name?

Returning to Okoye’s nickname and its implications for the representation of Africa, it is the addition of the “Nigerian” part which makes this nickname an interesting point of analysis. As this project has argued, the dominant discourse regarding Africa, its countries, and peoples in western media has often been uncomplicated and focused primarily on negatives within the continent. The “Nigerian Nightmare” serves to further illustrate this point with the pairing of the two words “Nigerian” and “Nightmare” which saliently draw upon the one sided imagery that emerges off of the African continent from
western media sources. This imagery consists of depiction of Africa primarily via warfare, disease, tribalism, poverty, famine, the “Dark Continent,” savages, etc. Further, this suggests that nicknames such as the “Mad Hungarian” (which was once mentioned in an article along with Okoye’s), do not hold the same meaning today as one such as the Nigerian Nightmare (though they might have in the past or in the ‘90s when Okoye playing). Or, stated another way, what do we think when we think of Hungary (and, by extension, the “mad Hungarian”)? While Hungarian immigrants to the United States likely faced many of the same forms of discrimination as other white ethnic groups, today, the convergence of Hungarian-Americans into the (white) mainstream has left few residuals of the kinds of negative ethnic stereotypes of Hungary that continue to beset Africa and Africans. Thus, for the Nigerian Nightmare, it is a different story and a different set of circumstances; the moniker is rooted, in part, in persistent stereotypes about Africa.

Further, there is an interesting contrast to be made here with Olajuwon’s nickname, “The Dream.” Perhaps it is only coincidence that both nicknames refer to sleeping states, but the differences are worth noting. “The Dream” makes references to Olajuwon’s immigration from a developing country to the United States and fulfilling “the American Dream.” It also refers to his style of play being fluid and beautiful (though retaining a certain level of physicality, or “intimidation”), perhaps no more evident than in the naming of his signature move, the “dream shake.” In contrast, Okoye’s nickname makes race/violence inductions which reference black people and Africa in general and simultaneously draws references to Okoye’s playing style and the physicality of NFL football. Both nicknames then allude indirectly and directly to different representations of race, masculinity/physicality, and Africa; one serves to comfort us, the other to make us suspicious or fearful.

**Hali: Object In Situ**

As this thesis has maintained throughout, imagery of Africa as a troubled continent reinforces well-established and historical stereotypes which often lack context or understanding. It is here again where the concept of the in situ object becomes useful when applied to Hali. As with Olajuwon and Islam, and Loroupe and Kenyan culture, media reports and interviews with Hali approach him as the source from which to get
information concerning Liberia, which primarily comes in the form of questions about his childhood and subsequent move to the States. Noticeably, such inquiries into Hali’s past are from only his perspective, as would be expected, yet also fail to probe into the causes of Liberia’s problems and how/what Hali feels about such causes. Thus, any insights Hali may have regarding the causes of or historical forces regarding the conflict in his country were left unrevealed. As startling as Hali’s experiences are, they represent only a piece of a much larger picture in the context of Liberian history.

In some respect, it must be noted that the application of the in situ idea is a bit of a stretch in Hali’s case. Primarily, this is due to the fact that his career in the NFL has only just begun, and media coverage of him is lacking, especially after the aforementioned NFL draft period (and also due to his playing position, in which a player must really stand out to receive media attention). Thus, Hali has not yet received the number of opportunities to speak on Liberia/Africa that Olajuwon, Loroupe, or Gebrselassie did through the lengths of their careers (or time of observation in Gebrselassie’s case). In the cases of Olajuwon, Loroupe, and Gebrselassie, events would happen and the media would seek them out for their opinion on the matter. Instances of seeking Hali out for information were rather rare. However, once his story about his childhood and leaving Liberia reached the ears of the media there were numerous follow-up questions regarding what life was like in Liberia. In the end, it was the questions from that draft period which have loosely made an in situ object out of Hali; only time will only tell how he will be subsequently approached in regards to Liberia/Africa in the future.

Concluding Remarks

This chapter has analyzed two athletes in the NFL, one in the late 1980s early 1990s, and the other just starting out his career in the new century. Representations of Africa regarding the two were rather similar, especially when one compares the more “jungle”-like descriptions found in the examination of Olajuwon with those of Okoye (Although this chapter argues the “Nightmare” part of Okoye’s nickname draws reference to such things, it was never directly stated). If anything this shows the variation possible when analyzing individual athletes, and athletes spaced apart by time, as even Okoye and Hali vary greatly in their individual representations. For Okoye the main discourses were that of his body and playing style, discourses which led to the creation of
his nickname and drew reference to stereotypes of natural (yet still raw) athletic ability. Hali, on the other hand, was wrapped up in the discourses of his war-time experience in leaving his home country of Liberia. In contrast to the focus on Okoye’s natural athletic ability, more attention was drawn to Hali’s hard work and dedication on the football field, implying that his “natural” abilities were sub-par. The reasons for the difference in discourse regarding their bodies/abilities may be numerous, yet it may come down to something as simple as appearance. Where Okoye’s body actually looked like something of a body builder’s, Hali’s body could be seen as somewhat average as far as NFL bodies go.

Surprisingly, there was not much focus on Okoye’s Nigerian past—there was not much in the articles read for this project regarding Nigeria or Africa. Being that Okoye was one of the first African athletes to reach a degree of prominence in the NFL one might expect there to be more interest regarding the topic. Perhaps there is only such interest when the athlete has an extraordinary life experience, as in the case with Hali, something which would further illustrate that the only interests western media has with Africa is in the negative aspects, with which they (western societies) can contrast themselves.
CHAPTER 7

Discussion

This research project represents an examination of U.S./western sport media representations regarding Hakeem Olajuwon, Tegla Loroupe, Christian Okoye, and Tamba Hali. Among these representations, this thesis sought to investigate media where established ideologies regarding race, gender and nationality exist, are contested and/or are absent. The analysis provides insight and context into how western media view the African athlete, specific African countries and, more generally, the continent of Africa. In addition, the analysis reveals some of the variance that the media portrays between African athletes.

Some of the findings in this project correlated strongly with the previous research on African athletes—including the depiction of African athletes as exotic others. Other findings are similar to the research on African American athletes, including the suggestion that Africans have natural athletic abilities.

The sections that follow take a step back from the individual cases for a look at the bigger picture, focusing on what this project found throughout its examination of sport media coverage and how those findings relate to the larger body of literature. The discussion emerges from three themes found in the thesis: African athletes as exotic others; African athletes as natural athletes; and blacks (including black athletes) as deviant. From the discussion of those three topics, this section will move towards discussing this project’s implications of future research.

African Athletes as Exotic Others

Denison and Markula (2005) and Nauright and Magdalinski (2003) found that western media portrayals tended to view the African athlete as exotic. Those studies found that media fascination on the African athlete relied on misconceptions of the continent as dark, mysterious, and technologically retarded.

Similarly, this project found the media representations of Olajuwon, Loroupe, Hali, and Okoye to contain framings as exotic others. Largely, this occurred through the constant mention of their African identities, where even in seemingly mundane comments in publications (i.e., injury reports) there would be references to their African origins. By itself, the media tendency to frame individuals by their place of origin cannot be
considered harmful, but, given the current and historical (mis)representations of Africa, these framings inherently labeled the individuals as dissimilar and unusual. Further, when the backgrounds or environments of these athletes are also framed as exotic, then the stereotypes are only reinforced and remain dominant in the discourses of the African continent/peoples.

The exotic framings uncovered in this study are most likely due to the fact that the media—sports writers in the case of this project—rarely have in-depth knowledge of the continent of Africa or its cultures, and rarely seem to take the time to attain such knowledge. As important may be the lack of exposure western cultures have with African cultures and other non-western cultures in general. This is true especially in the United States, where the international news coverage is often lacking and much of the population seems to have little incentive to take interest in other cultures (Baum, 2004; Bicket & Wall, 2007). In the U.S., one could argue that the result of this self-focus is a cultural homogeneity (contrary to the idea of the “melting pot”) and sentiments of cultural superiority. The nationalistic discourses which emerged in the analysis of Tegla Loroupe are a good example of these sentiments of western (albeit in this case, not U.S.) superiority, especially with the hypocrisy that arose concerning male pacemakers and world records in women’s marathon running.

Thus, when western cultures are confronted with others from non-western countries, others are often viewed through a lens of mystery and dominance, which often frames non-westerners (and their backgrounds) as exotic and unknown. Olajuwon, Loroupe, Okoye and Hali were all othered through a process of repetitive mention of their country of origin and representations of Africa as deviant from the West. In the next section, concerning stereotypes of athletic ability, the process of making the other exotic also applies, as we see, when media describe the environments from which African athletes come.

*African Athletes as Natural Athletes*

Edwards (1972) and Harris (1991) found that African Americans are stereotyped as having natural athletic ability. This stereotype originates with a belief in the primal and uncivilized nature of blacks. For African Americans, it is believed that the arduous trip from Africa and subsequent years of slavery served as a “weeding out” process, where
only the strong would survive (Harris, 1991). Belief in such ideas posits African Americans not only as natural athletes, but to some degree unintentionally engineered athletes via slavery as well. The stereotype of an uncivilized or primal background has also been used to support the notion that blacks have innate physical capabilities (i.e., longer appendages, “double-jointed,” better heat dissipation, etc.) that further advantage them over whites in athletics. Notably, this natural athleticism is largely to the detriment of any intellectual ability (Edwards, 1972; Harris, 1991). This project found evidence of similar beliefs. These discourses were evident with Olajuwon, Loroupe, and Okoye, sometimes being reinforced by the athletes themselves. For example, discourse often described the athletes as “raw,” not knowing the game, being physical specimens in some way, or playing by “instinct.” These representations not only allude to a natural athletic ability, but also to a lack of intellect or necessity to think about the game. This is not to say that Olajuwon, Loroupe, or Okoye were not new to their sports at some point, but, clearly, if they were succeeding at the professional level there was some knowledge they possessed which allowed them to succeed. Given the findings presented in this paper, it is apparent that sports media conflates blackness, whether African or African American with natural athletic abilities.

The exceptions to the dominant natural athlete discourse were Hali, who was overwhelmingly described as “hard working,” and Olajuwon, late in his career. While in Olajuwon’s case this representation can be largely attributed to his age and declining skill capabilities (necessitating a reliance on his veteran “guile”), with Hali it seemed to stem more from his appearance. In brief, sports writers suggested that Hali does not look like the more “athletic” players at his positions, thus, we are told, he had to outwork others.

Though sports media represents blacks as natural athletes, there appear to be differences between Africans and African Americans as to how those natural abilities came/come about. As stated previously, African Americans have had their athletic ability attributed to the overseas voyage and years of slavery they had to endure, however, with Africans this is not the case. Thus, the fact that Africans are from Africa basically changes the lens from which the media views these athletes and necessitates a different set of attributions for athletic ability. This means, for example, that while representations of athletic ability may be similarly based on the belief of natural ability, the idea of
environmental essentialism is an addition often used to explain African success in sport. In some ways this is similar to the newer argument that African American athletes have greater “desire” than white athletes due to their tougher backgrounds. Environmental essentialism argues that Africans become successful in sport because the brutal African environment necessitates a stronger individual. The argument then devolves into another survival of the fittest argument. It is further assumed that the day-in day-out life of the African is heavily involved with manual labor, something that resonates with the debate that slavery made African Americans stronger. With the abundant misconceptions of Africa however, the environmental essentialism seems to be magnified. Representations of Hali and Loroupe are especially good examples of this magnification. The environments from which these athletes came twists into a discourse framing them not only as athletes with a greater desire to succeed, but also, when combined with their blackness, as more “authentic” athletes than African Americans. In this way, a representation often used for African Americans is reconstructed to apply for athletes from Africa. The next section further discusses stereotypes of Africans and African Americans, focusing specifically on the representations of blackness found in this project.

Representations of Blackness: Links to African Americans

The literature explored scholarship on the portrayal of African Americans in various aspects of American media and society. The findings on African athletes both converge with and diverge from research on African American athletes.

Much of the literature review concerning the stereotypes of African Americans focused on the believed violent and hypersexual nature of African Americans. This belief is exhibited in the entertainment industry, where the types of roles African Americans play are often the “problem” characters, and also in the news industry, where negative news stories are often centered on blacks and black communities. Additionally, these stereotypes often become linked with black male hypersexuality, especially when crimes are sexual in nature or against women. In some of the major sports, where a large percentage of the athletes are black, such bias often arises when discussing on-field and off-field issues. Recent occurrences such as those in the NBA, with the Pistons-Pacers “brawl” in 2004, and in the NFL, with the establishment of an off-field conduct policy in 2007, are inherently raced in their discourses. (Blacks represent more than half of the
players in each league and some of the policies, such as the NBA’s requirement for “business dress,” appear to be directed at styles preferred primarily by black athletes.) This bias besets black women also, as their bodies are often imbued with deviant sexuality, with the focus largely being on the shape and size of the genitalia (Shultz, 2005). It is such preoccupations that serve to keep African Americans (blacks) marginalized in U.S. (western) society.

Primarily, media portrayals of African athletes did not suggest that they have the kinds of violent or hypersexual tendencies that are often imputed to African American athletes. The exceptions are the representations found during Olajuwon’s early career and Christian Okoye’s nickname. As noted during Olajuwon’s early career, especially those first six in the NBA, there were a number of conflicts with players/management and a few off-field issues that became public. During this time it appeared that Olajuwon lost some of his novelty in the media and was defined more as a deviant athlete, however, that perception was quickly reversed when in almost a year he became viewed as a respectable person of good character. As it was noted in his chapter, Olajuwon’s deviant status was never attributed, by reporters, to his African identity, but it is difficult to say whether audiences made an association or not.

The same difficulty holds true for Okoye’s nickname where certainly the “nightmare” plays on Okoye’s black and Nigerian identities, but to what degree the imagery of a “Nigerian Nightmare” reinforces salient racial stereotypes within audiences is debatable and a limitation on this study. Throughout, however, this thesis has argued that the repeated imagery of blacks as deviant can only serve to reinforce stereotypes. The persistence of sports media’s focus on the negative serves to paint all athletes as deviant, but black athletes more so due to their higher percentages in major leagues and because of long held social stereotypes about the inherently violent nature of blacks.

Thus far, this discussion has focused on how the research results can be compared with previous research. However, generalization was not the aim of this project. Yet, while the nuances and differences between the representations of Olajuwon, Loroupe, Hali, and Okoye were most relevant, the trends and themes that were evident in each examination are indicative of discourses that have become dominant in western culture and ideology. With that, this discussion moves on towards implications to future research.
Implications for future research

It is hoped that this research would spawn similar works for different athletes, regardless of nationality or race. While more general/broad studies have been instrumental in showing the differences between coverage of men/women or white/black athletes, research such as that presented here shows the intricacies of that reality. It is important to know not only that such bias exists, but why and how it may differ from context to context. This type of research is known for its ability to critically look at contexts, such as the African athletes presented in this thesis, and examine what and theorize why representations are the way they are. Thus, collections such as this may help to provide insight into how phenomena may be varied (yet connected) in “real life.”

Further, there are various different ways to approach or talk about this kind of research. When deciding upon what kind of methodology would be best for this project, there were multiple types of discourse analysis that arose for consideration. As mentioned during the methodology, this thesis took a more flexible approach towards its analysis, but this does not have to be the case. Discourse analysis, as well as narrative analysis, offers many different and more structured methods for analysis and even data collection. In that regard, the data collection and sources of data could vary greatly for a similar research project. Sports media exists in many other forms (i.e., web or television), that have gone largely unexplored for this thesis. Also, interviews with fans and athletes could add a great amount of depth; knowing how the fan base feels about athletes, or what the athletes themselves perceive, is yet another form of discourse and a piece of the puzzle missing within this project.

It is hoped that this project has continued and built upon the work of the researchers whose projects had important ideological contributions to this thesis. Hopefully this thesis provides a spark for other researchers, to analyze western approaches to persons from African and other non-western cultures. The need to de-mystify what is perpetually kept mystical is key if equality is ever to become a reality.
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Endnotes

1. It bears acknowledgement that there is a plethora of research concerning (African American) women in sport. For the purposes of the literature review however, it was felt that a full discussion on women in sport would be better if it were saved until the chapter on Tegla Loroupe.

2. A movie, called *Black Hawk Down*, was made regarding this event in 2001. The movie effectively rewrites history as it tells a valiant tale of a helicopter being shot down and U.S. troops having to defend themselves against swarms of heavily armed Somalis.

3. It is noteworthy that the last author claims Hali could not speak English when he arrived in the States, yet Liberia is an English speaking nation and Hali *could* speak English before immigrating.