Ball Don’t Lie!—The Book

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

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

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

Although my genealogies partly inform the “alternative accounts” I subsequently offer, I do not counter the myths of basketball culture by replacing them with a story that I claim corresponds more faithfully to “what really happened.” After all, historians and sociologists have already
provided such accounts with little effect on the grip these myths hold on the culture of basketball. Though indispensable, historical and sociological research alone cannot dislodge the power of myth, because myth speaks to affect and imagination and such research speaks to reason. Destabilizing the power of myth requires storytelling that, while informed by the reason of scholarly research, also operates via affect and imagination. Therefore, I submit my “alternative accounts” in the form of what I call “inventions.” Inventions tell a different story about the subjects of basketball myths by combining elements excavated by genealogy with close readings of the on-court phenomena that I find distinctive and compelling in those subjects.

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

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

The myths of this period, which appear in rulebooks, instructional manuals and promotional guides, institutional documents, and personal memoirs, as well as in popular and scholarly histories, maintain that basketball has a fixed and static athletic, moral, and aesthetic nature, born at the moment of the sport’s invention, and that this essence is safeguarded by self-appointed institutional stewards who protect the game against
chaotic forces of change wrought by entrepreneurs, spectators, and, most of all, players. These myths, which I examine in Chapter 1, “The Myth of Creation, December 21, 1891,” and Chapter 2, “The Myth of Foundation, June 6, 1946,” established a normative paradigm of basketball culture that equates tactical elements of game play (passing the ball and moving without it, defending aggressively and hustling cleanly after rebounds and other loose balls) with moral qualities (unselfishness, cooperation, hard work, humility). This complex was then naturalized as inherently pertaining to the white, Anglo-Saxon, Protestant, mostly middle-class men by and for whom the game was originally devised.

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

In Part II, “Myths of the Modern Basketball State,” I take up a forty-year period from the middle of the twentieth century to 1991. By the beginning of this period, the major contemporary institutions of American basketball (state high school associations, the National Collegiate Athletic Association [NCAA], and the NBA) had emerged, consolidated regulatory power over basketball play, and achieved relative stability, forming what I call—to indicate the arrogation of resources, rights, and powers by these institutions—the “modern basketball state.” During this period, whose beginning coincides roughly with the Civil Rights Movement and desegregation in American society at large, basketball at its highest levels of play experienced, first, desegregation (beginning at the professional level in 1950), then an influx of elite African American
players who transformed the techniques, tactics, and style of basketball and its attendant cultures until, by the late 1970s, roughly 80 percent of the NBA’s players were African American. For this reason, the history of the modern basketball state necessarily centers on race. The culture of basketball—invented as an instrument of white Anglo-Saxon Protestant social reform, institutionalized on the foundation of segregation, and buttressed by complex myths correlating techniques and tactics with moral qualities and these, in turn, with class, gender, and, especially, race and ethnicity—manifested its conflicting attitudes toward racial integration in a set of influential myths that unfolded from the late 1950s through the early 1980s.

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

Part III, “Myths of the Basketball Empire,” includes four chapters on myths that arose from the global cultural and economic expansion of basketball—the “basketball empire”—in the context of the end of the Cold War, the growth of multinational capitalism, new forms of mass media, and the widening and increasingly racialized gap between rich and poor in the United States during the Ronald Reagan years and beyond. In the basketball universe, this period is marked by four interrelated phenomena: (1) the globalization of basketball, sparked by the mega-celebrity of Michael Jordan and the NBA brand; (2) the infusion into basketball of cultural forms that originated in late twentieth-century African American urban communities; (3) the emergence and growing influence of international basketball players in the NBA; and (4) a growing entrepreneurial
assertiveness on the part of players, amateur and professional. Chapters 6–9 identify and critically examine the key myths that have emerged around these phenomena.

As Jordan’s career unfolded, a consensus formed around the claim that he was the greatest player of all time. I argue that this unverifiable claim presupposes that history, in a specific sense of the word, is over and that the global capitalist order, like Jordan, who is its metonym, is the greatest (social order) of all time, capable of bridging all differences and resolving all conflicts (Chapter 6, “The Myth of the Greatest of All Time, June 13, 1991”). Even as Jordan boosted the NBA to unprecedented levels of popularity and lure, a new generation of African American players unapologetically displayed the cultural markers of their urban upbringing (tattoos, cornrows, baggy shorts, hip-hop) while building on and raising to new levels technical and tactical innovations first developed in urban playgrounds in the 1950s and 1960s. The NBA sought to coopt this so-called hip-hop invasion in basketball by both capitalizing on the new markets it helped the league penetrate and carefully regulating the presentation of these players to the league’s traditional white male consumers (Chapter 7, “The Myth of Blackness, March 12, 1997”).

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

Finally, in 2010, LeBron James, the NBA’s Most Valuable Player and a free agent, decided to leave his hometown Cleveland Cavaliers to join two other superstars (both also African American) with whom he had consulted before making his decision. This entailed, in effect, the players’ exercising powers of team formation conventionally reserved for team owners (almost all white in the NBA) and general managers (still mostly white). The subsequent racialized public backlash (Chapter 9, “The Myth of the
Man, July 8, 2010”) invoked a normative, hypermasculine fantasy figure ("The Man") to discipline James and so police the autonomy, mobility of, and interaction among black male bodies in the NBA, on and off the court.

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