Basketball as the American Dream:

Fictional and Nonfictional Representations of College Basketball Recruitment

by

Jeremiah Huntt

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Sponsor: Paul Megna

Second Reader: Elise Lemire

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Background, Connection, and Purpose

As an NCAA athlete on the collegiate level, I have experienced transitioning from high school athletics to college sports. This by no means was an easy transition and I had to do a lot of work on the fly in hopes of getting recruited to play in college. During my senior year of high school, I thought it was finally time to take being recruited seriously. Now, I know what you may be thinking, this is extremely too late to start being serious about being recruited. However, I never thought that I would have been trying to play collegiate level volleyball. I had not seriously touched a volleyball until my sophomore year when I joined the team, which was only because my friends were on it. I soon fell in love with the sport and by the time I started to get really good at it, I was already in my senior year.

I was an excellent volleyball player. I was the leader of kills in the PSAL Manhattan B Boys division. However, compared to kids all around the country who had played club volleyball, beach volleyball, or even had just been playing volleyball longer than the three years I had played at that point made me look like a nobody. And so, I would prop my Canon DSLR up in the corner of the gym and record game footage of myself. Soon, after a few games I would have enough footage to make a little mixed tape. Once that was complete, I would go to the website of my prospective schools and find the email of the volleyball head coach. I would send a nice email introducing myself and tagging along my highlight reel. I probably sent an email out to ten schools and all but two coaches got back to me. Despite receiving two responses, I felt terrible about myself as an athlete. I was completely unaware of the true effort and sacrifice that needs to be made in order to get noticed by good schools and be recruited.

Introduction of Texts/ Film and OverArching Theme

While I am happy that I landed as a recruit to Purchase College, this process has never left my mind. As I dwelled on this experience, I began to think-- how many more athletes are in the same position that I was? Then, even clearer, I began to realize how hard this process must be for those who were financially less fortunate than I. This has contributed to my interest in written representations of this transition for this senior project. I will be using the texts: *Sooley,* a novel by John Grisman, *The Last Shot: City Streets and Basketball Dreams*- a nonfiction narrative by Darcy Frey, and lastly the movie *He Got Game* directed, and written by Spike Lee.

All of these sources emphasize the transition to college for athletes in many different circumstances. The end goal for all of these characters are pretty much the same, yet there are various journeys and processes that each one must endure. However, although the journeys were different, there was an overarching theme that linked each of the characters from the various texts and most young hoopers today. The consistent theme is the idea of the "American Dream" used in the form of basketball. The young men of color in all of the texts aspire to become successful and make it out of poverty, in their case through the sport of basketball. And so, with these subjects embedded in each text, I want to explore how people of color who frequently lack generational experience with college recruitment, struggle with this transition and are sometimes exploited by the institutions they represent. There are many things that go into play during this process and I want to bring that to light and help bring more knowledge to people.

The American Dream and Basketball

"The American Dream is a national ethos of the United States, the set of ideals in which freedom includes the opportunity for prosperity and success, as well as an upward social mobility for the family and children, achieved through hard work in a society with few barriers" (Wikipedia). "A happy way of living that is thought of by many Americans as something that can be achieved by anyone in the U.S. especially by working hard and becoming successful" (Merriam-Webster Dictionary). "The ideal that every citizen of the United States should have an equal opportunity to achieve success and prosperity through hard work, determination, and initiative" (Oxford English Dictionary).

The American Dream has been defined and redefined by many people throughout the years. However, the most common and emphasized part of the definition is that ANYONE can achieve upward mobility with hard work. Yet, it seems that the promise of the American Dream is a bald faced lie. When looking at the statistics of races who make the most money in the United States, African Americans sit at the bottom of the list, while Asians sit at the top and whites in the second spot. Upward mobility has been stunted for the African American race as racial profiling, creation of the projects, drug induced neighborhoods, etc. have been barriers for the African American race for quite some time, no matter how hard they have worked. Likewise, the opportunities given to African Americans are not nearly the same that are given to the average person of another race.

Another common idea associated with the American Dream is the notion that immigrants can leave their home country and come to America for a better life. There are two sides to this

argument because there are layers to this statement that are and are not true. Compared to other countries, America is built upon a principle of freedom. There are better ideals, opportunities, living situations, etc., and so for that reason it could be easier for someone to come to America and have a better life than the one they used to have. However, once they get here it becomes much harder to be successful. The language barrier is oftentimes one of the hardest things for immigrants and is the main reason for lack of quality jobs. The stigma and stereotypes around immigrants also prohibit opportunities for real growth and the ability to climb the social ladder. And so, it may take generations for an immigrant family to finally be successful as they integrate more into American society.

So can anyone really be successful in America? The texts I will be analyzing indicate that the ideal of the American dream is just an ideal. Over the course of time, America has done better at creating equal opportunities for everyone no matter the race, gender, size, etc. in the field of sports. There are a handful of sports that children are introduced to and can play all the way until the end of college. There are a few sports that America takes pride in as it has grown in popularity. They are: football, basketball, and baseball. Out of those three sports, basketball is progressively growing and has 24 million active people playing organized basketball. I think that is a result of its accessibility all around the country. In virtually every neighborhood you can find a park with basketball hoops up, although not all of them will have nets. In most school playgrounds you can find basketball hoops. Famous basketball players have tons of popular, stylish sneakers. And so, basketball becomes a sport that many kids end up playing and falling in

love with. Then, a realization begins to come and the meaning of the game shifts. Suddenly, making it to the NBA/ WNBA is a priority and way of becoming successful.

Suddenly, every kid who picks up a basketball has an equal opportunity to work hard, have determination and initiative in order to be successful. Sounds familiar?

Basketball in many ways has become the American Dream for a lot of young players in this day and age, especially those of the African American race. The ability to move upward in social classes for African Americans and those coming to America to start a new life, has its barriers. There are many things embedded in this country that are meant to keep the wealthy, wealthy and the poor, poor. Yet, sports are universal and for everyone. It is also very hard to deny talent and raw athleticism. And so, those of any race or origin who have worked hard to be one of the best players on the court have earned their way to being successful. Although there may be the barrier of not having much money or resources, basketball is always accessible. The ability to go to the park and work on your jumpshot is always available. There are not nearly as many barriers for anyone to work hard and be the best basketball players.

Chapter One: *The Last Shot*

The book *The Last Shot: City Streets and Basketball Dreams*, by Darcy Frey, is a nonfiction story of four basketball players: Stephon Marbury, Corey Johnson, Russel Thomas, and Tchaka Shipp. Its action takes place in the rough streets of Coney Island. Here at the tip of Brooklyn lies what has come to be known as “part of the endless phantasmagoria that is New York City… the dealers set up their drug marts in the streets and alleyways, and the sounds of

sirens and gunfire keep pace with the darkening sky, it feels like the end of the world." (4) As the author of a work of nonfiction, Frey has to give accurate information about the events that occurred in real life. Likewise, there are moments where he has the freedom to ignite the reader's mind, as he creates the perfect ensemble of words to paint a picture. In the passage above, he does so by describing this nightmare of a place that is the home of many African American families. Frey effectively makes the bad seem normal, as he plays on the idea of "drug mart" (a full service pharmacy for medicinal drugs) and uses it to describe a full-service drug dealing location. He achieves the same effect by comparing the darkening sky, a pretty consistent thing, to that of the guns and sirens, showing that they are just as consistent.

And so, with this vivid description from Frey, we can understand why Coney Island or any projects of that sort are hard to get out of: it keeps the poor, poor and the rich, rich. However, for the youth of these impoverished neighborhoods, there is a golden ticket out: basketball. Three of the four boys (Corey, Russell, and Tchaka) are in their senior year of high school and are eager and ready to take their basketball game to the next level in order to escape from the projects of Coney Island. This story is effective because it captures three different people with three different journeys and routes of playing college ball.

Reliability/Authenticity of the Narrator

Another aspect to think about in this novel is, who is the narrator? This is important to think about as American films, TV shows, and books often have a trope/narrative called "the

White Savior". This trope is often seen when a white character essentially "rescues" a non-white characters from their less fortunate situation throughout the unfolding of the plot. And so, when analyzing the book with the American Dream as the theme, it is helpful to also keep the white savior trope in the back of your mind as well.

The book has a first person narrator, as the story is told from the narrator's point of view. However, we are not told who the narrator is and how he knows all of the information he provides. Yet, since it is a true story, one would think that the narrator is Frey. This idea could be challenged. In the very first few lines of the prologue, the narrator is watching Russel Thomas play basketball in the park. Frey writes, " What is it? Has he spotted me, watching from the opposite end of the playground? No, something else is up." This is the first thing that lets the audience know that this book is a first-person narrative. However, it doesn't actually convey a reliable idea of the narrator. The narrator thinks he has been "spotted." Someone who is spotted is typically or always someone who is not supposed to be in a place; they have been exposed. And so, why is the narrator there and observing Russell without his knowing? If Frey is the narrator, the question now becomes: why is Frey, an adult, observing a teenager without him knowing? Why is Frey, a white man, studying and writing about the young black basketball players? Is Frey documenting this story without them knowing? Is he exploiting them and earning a profit from it? From this first quote, the audience should question the intention and reliability of the narrator.

The presence of the narrator throughout the rest of the book is clear to the rest of the characters. In fact, the narrator drives Tchaka to the airport and goes with him to the Nike

invitational. He drives around with Russell and Corey often. He was in the room when the coaches gave his speech about summer basketball camps and getting good grades. Frey is in a lot of these places that not just a normal person would be. And so, again, the readers may ask, who is this narrator? How does he have so much inside information about the boys? Yet, the fact that this story is a true story still comes into play. Where does Frey fit into it all?

Russell and Tchaka

The main two characters who I want to focus on right now are Tchaka and Russell because they both represent common, yet polar opposite journeys of an African American teenager playing basketball. Frey immediately sets up these two as different people within the first description we get from the two. The first being Russell:

> RUSSELL THOMAS places the toe of his right sneaker one inch behind the three-point line. Inspecting the basket with a level gaze, he bends twice at the knees, raises the ball to shoot... He's lifting his nose to the wind like a spaniel; he appears to be gauging air currents. Russell waits until the wind settles, bits of trash feathering lightly to the ground. Then he sends a twenty-five-foot jump shot arcing through the soft summer twilight. It drops without a sound through the dead center of the bare iron rim.

This passage about Russell is the very first thing that opens the book at the prologue. This already tells the reader that there is something special about Russell. The way Frey describes the actions performed by Russell truly makes these actions appear in the reader's mind's eye as poetry in motion--a phrase that is often used when watching someone play basketball at a high

level. Frey's imagery describes small but important movements (e.g., "placing his toe behind the line, lifting his nose", etc) that make us see Russel and characterize him as a thoughtful and precise player. It is clear that Russel has the love of the game, which the narrator has as well as he is able to describe these actions in such detail and accuracy.

Another questionable choice Frey makes is to use a simile to compare Russell to a dog. In the block quote above, he states "[He's] lifting his nose to the wind like a spaniel" to characterize Russell as having an excellent sense of smell, as a spaniel. Likewise, as spaniels and other animals often seem to have a "sixth sense" enabling them to predict what is going to happen, so, for Frey, does Russell. While this is not necessarily offensive, it is important to note that Frey's simile dehumanizes Russell, which might point to some unconscious bias on the author's part. In fact, an article, "Skin in the Game: Colorism and the Subtle Operation of Stereotypes in Men's College Basketball," by Steven Foy and Rashawn Ray, talks about the way African American players are described compared to White players:

> (Hypothesis 1) Compared to darker-skinned players, lighter-skinned players may be rewarded more for their performance due to being perceived as working harder to achieve a similar outcome. Given this, we hypothesize that announcers will be more likely to discuss the performance of players with lighter skin tones. (Hypothesis 2) Given the tendency for Americans in general and sports announcers in particular to characterize darker-skinned players as physically superior (Hawkins [44]; Hoberman [47]; Feagin [24], [25]), we hypothesize that

> announcers will be more likely to discuss the physical characteristics of players with darker skin tones.

This was interesting to read, not only because this can be seen in NBA commentating, but because of the way it doesn't connect to Frey's portrayal of Russell. Based on this hypothesis, we could say that Russell is a young white teenager after reading the opening paragraph of the prologue. In fact, Frey doesn't even mention Russell's skin color.

After introducing Russell, the "Yin " to Russell's "Yang" is introduced as Tchaka. He is fortunately better off than Russell and the rest of the boys. We know this is important information to Frey because it is the first thing we read about Tchaka: "Tchaka lives miles away in the more working-class environs of Jamaica, Queens; and [. . .] at six feet seven he towers above all his teammates . . . ." This information foreshadows the success of Tchaka, as he is taller than all of his teammates--one thing to make you more likely recruited/drafted in the future. And he does not live in the projects of Coney Island. By first describing Russell in terms of his focus, skill, and attention, and then describing Tchaka in terms of his living situation and height, Frey demonstrates that a mixture of practice, social position, and natural body type all contribute to the success of an athlete. Also, going back to the article that tackles the difference in the way players are described (where we learn that [words needed here] "characterize darker-skinned players as physically superior"), here we see Tchaka described by his physical attributes. This allows Frey to separate Russell and Tchaka in an interesting way and alludes to some foreshadowing.

By also first describing Tchaka by his physical attributes and social class, we can understand why Tchaka has more of a chance to be exposed to more competition, scouts, players, etc. Although a small detail, it goes a long way in understanding the opportunity Tchaka had received. Tchaka has been privileged enough to partake in some summer athletic camps and play with a handful of different teams during the off season. His ability to do this stems from the fact that he doesn't live in the projects of Coney Island. However, it isn't like Tchaka is rolling in money, but the mere environmental change could be all that's needed for some people. All of this in combination has earned Tchaka an invitation to the Nike Basketball camp, where 120 of the nation's top high school basketball players go and top D1 recruiters come to watch and assess what skills you have. Tchaka, only averaging 10 points a game, has been invited over Russell who averages more points and often "got the ball last season whenever the game was on the line." Although he is shorter, Russell clearly was the better basketball player. Russell, having much more of a difficult life, had not participated and refused to participate in any summer athletic camps. Instead, he spent tireless hours working on his game in the courts of Coney Island. He was not able to get much exposure or recognition.

The difference between Russell and Tchaka can also be seen in the difference in language Frey uses for the characters. Tchaka clearly really wants to be in the NBA. Everything he has worked for is to be in the NBA, and that is shown through how he carries himself and what he says. Frey reports that, to a general public crowd, Tchaka states that he wants to " 'use basketball to further my education' but allows privately that he hopes one day to 'bring back the serious loot in the NBA'." Publicly, he says what he knows everybody wants to hear and what is

grammatically correct, but in closed doors we see his true goals; which is revealing as to who Tchaka really is. Frey's use of slang in the word "loot" allows us readers to get more from what he is saying and who he is/where he comes from. It also helps to ground us more in the setting of Coney Island. The term loot has a few different meanings, but the one here is just another way to say money. Not only does he hope to be in the NBA, but he hopes to be paid a ton for it. He is expecting to be one of the best players in the NBA, as that is the only way to "bring back the serious loot" per say.

Frey shows Russell in perfect contrast to Tchaka, as his goals are a little bit different; they are a little bit more personal. Again, Tchaka doesn't live in Coney Island, so he doesn't have to worry so much about the things Russell has to do. Russell states,

> Maybe I might make the NBA like Tchaka… But to be honest with you, I'm using basketball to go to a four-year school. What I really want is to graduate from college, start me a nice little family, and get me a nice little job as a registered nurse. But first I got to make sure I get that degree.

He also states at another time in the book, "Maybe after I finish college I'll come back to get my mom. But that's it. I'm leaving. And I'm never coming back". Both of these quotes really capture the character of Russell and show what he sincerely wants in life. I think it speaks volumes that he doesn't want to truly be in the NBA. Because at the end of the day, if he was in the NBA, he would still make it out of Coney Island and be super successful. However, him being in Coney Island and seeing all the things he has lacked, (a father, parents with a great job,

someone in his family with a college degree), these are now the things he hopes to achieve in life. He doesn't just want the best for himself, he wants the best for his family. This is what drives Russell his senior year to get his grades up and work hard. The dream to make it out of Coney Island. These two characters truly represent the duality of opportunities for an African American athlete. It often happens that the player with extremely good talent can not go very far with his craft because he comes from a low income neighborhood. It is really tough when you love a sport so much but have to swallow the pill knowing that you most likely will not go pro.

With this in depth analysis of Russel and Tchaka, it is evident how economic status and living environment causes basketball to be used as the American Dream. Both characters still use basketball in hopes of making it to the NBA, however, because each situation and circumstance is different, one may have to work harder and differently. This goes to show that the American Dream doesn't hold true to those who work hard and to those who are less fortunate than others. And unfortunately, this is the reality of a lot of young hoopers who try and use basketball to make it out of the ghetto. And of course, there are people who benefit from using basketball as the American Dream. We can see that Tchaka is for sure African American, yet because he appears to be in a slightly higher class or at least live in an environment that is slightly higher, he can achieve upward mobility in an easier manner.

Another concept that comes through this analysis of Russel and Tchaka is that of what being successful really means in the American Dream. Yes, both players would like to make it to the NBA, yet there seems to be different motives and reasons from Tchaka and Russel. As mentioned before, Tchaka wants to make it in the NBA and make all "the loot" and that is what

is successful to him. Meanwhile, Russel focuses on being successful in basketball to get his four-year degree and help his family out of the projects. And so, different circumstances and situations offer a different meaning of success. Therefore, who's definition of success is being used for the American Dream?

Symbolism and the Impact of the "Hood"

At some point in this book, Frey touches on the struggles of trying to be better through basketball while being in a neighborhood such as Coney Island. A lot of young boys really do strive to do better and try to fill their time with extracurricular things such as basketball to stay away from the influence of drugs and gangs. However, there are so many things that happen on a day-to-day basis that prohibits them from moving forward. This is seen in the book during the Nike invitational with a friend that Tchaka had made throughout his stay there.

> Among other kids, however, a quiet transformation takes place. One tough New York kid with whom Tchaka has become friendly (he of the hitched pant leg and sour expression) has relaxed within days of leaving the city. By midweek Tchaka's friend is carrying his teacher's bag to class and has written an essay about how in New York he sometimes sneaks into his high school library so that his friends won't see. (Toward the end of the week, unhappily, he receives the news that one of his best friends has been shot and killed on a Brooklyn street. The process goes into reverse: the pant leg is hitched, the cap turns backward,

> and by the time he lands at Kennedy he is stealing doughnuts from airport vendors.)

Frey's use of imagery and symbolism in this passage allows the reader to grasp the transformation happening and the backslide that takes place. He starts off by describing the kid from New York as "tough." Most readers who are not from New York might automatically think of every person from New York as tough. However, this is the first time Frey describes someone as tough in the book, putting an extra emphasis on this kid and the way his demeanor reflects his upbringing.

What also drives the perception of the friend as a tough guy further is the image of the hitched pant leg. Now there are a few reasons as to why people rolled up their pant legs. One is to keep the grease from the chains off your pants when riding a bike, another is that depending on the side it is hitched on means that you are selling or buying drugs of some sort. Lastly, it could also mean, depending on the side it is hitched on, that you are a part of the gangs: Bloods or Crips. All of these explanations are not common knowledge, nor does Frey care to explicitly call attention to which explanation he meant for it. And so with just two words, Frey is telling us that this kid is not just a regular kid, which makes what follows in the quote much more significant. He unhitches his pant leg and helps his teachers and is writing essays. I assume this was added to show that this is something he does not do at all. However, all of it is short-lived as he spirals back into the tough kid from New York with the hitched pant leg as he hears the news of his friend being killed. This problem is a real and unfortunate problem that takes place in these neighborhoods that truly prevents our young athletes from striving to be

better. When there is one step forward made, the streets find a way to backtrack two steps. The worst things of the streets are unfortunately the same things that keep young teens in the streets.

Chapter Two: He Got Game

He Got Game, directed by Spike Lee, is an essential film for many reasons, particularly for its representation of the African American community. Lee is known for making more than just Hollywood blockbuster films. Instead, he focuses on particular aspects of African American culture, good and bad, and puts them in his film in order to let the whole world know about the hardships, accomplishments, and culture of his people. Over the course of his long career, Lee has done more than most to remedy the underrepresentation (or stereotypical representation) of African Americans in American cinema. This particular film follows the life of Jesus Shuttlesworth, a prodigy basketball player, and his father Jake Shuttlesworth, a convict in prison for murdering his wife. Just like the setting of *The Last Shot*, *He Got Game* is filmed and takes place in the projects of Coney Island, the land of the poor and the land of basketball. Where *The Last Shot* takes an ethnographic view of Coney Island's basketball culture, *He Got Game* brings that culture to life, making spectators identify with Jesus and live vicariously through the struggles and triumphs of a young and impoverished African American living the American Dream (and the American Nightmare) through basketball.

Basketball: The Savior For All

The American Dream is an interesting idea when looking at who it benefits. In the traditional

/stereotypical narrative, it usually benefits only the person/ family who is coming to America to make a better life. And that is if it even works out for them. However, when looking at the American Dream from the basketball aspect, all of the people that benefit from the success spreads out much larger. However, it is not that great of a thing for the player, as some people begin to feel entitled to be a part of said success. Any family members who sacrificed time and money on practices, close friends that went to every game, coaches and trainers that helped with the hard work, significant others who were there every step of the way are just a few examples of people who contributed what they deem is enough to deserve a piece of the success/money from the player. In the film, Spike Lee builds this on the idea to create tension and show the true nature of this process.

The first example that is shown of this is a conversation between Uncle Bubba and Jesus. Spike Lee has already set up some tension as Jesus and his younger sister have been taken in by their Aunt and Uncle after their mom was killed and their dad went to prison. And so, Lee creates Uncle Bubba's character as someone with an underlying scheme. When Jesus comes to him to tell him his father is out of jail, Uncle Bubba soon turns the conversation to something else.

> You're tryin' to hold out on us… You're tryin' to cut us out the deal… The deal is about to go down! I hear things…Think of your Uncle Bubba, your Aunt Sally. I think it's only right that we are compensated for sacrifices we made when we took y'all in… Now, we put out a lot of money for y'all. All I'm asking is that you let me wet my beak a little bit.

Uncle Bubba's intentions are very clear after this conversation: he wants some money. The interesting part about it is, he considers himself most likely going to be taken care of by Jesus if Jesus goes pro. Yet, this sense of entitlement is being shown as he tries to guilt-trip Jesus. He mentions taking in Jesus and his sister and being "compensated" for it. Compensation usually deals with money being rewarded to a victim of an injury or loss of some sort. Yet, Uncle Bubba is by no means the victim of the situation with the mom and dad. As the only eligible guardians to take Jesus and his sister, it was the only and right thing to do. And so, Lee asks what the success of a basketball player really means. At what point does basketball transition from being a sport they love to play to a

means of providing for their family. In an interview, Kobe Bryant mentions that he is better than other players because he desires the game more. He mentions that a lot of players' motivation to make it to the NBA was to take care of their family. And so, when they made it to the NBA they stopped working hard, meanwhile, Kobe's motivation was to be the best. As a result, it was easy for him to out work the others. And so, basketball being used as the American Dream and escaping poverty has a direct affect on players and their love of the game.

The Dark Side of Recruitment

Spike Lee portrays the temptations that come along with being recruited and going pro. One of the scenes that portray this very well is the car ride scene with "Big Time Willie." Willie holds nothing back and becomes very transparent with Jesus, stating,

> You're gonna make it out like the rest of these niggers out here, in a casket. First thing that's gonna take you out is these drugs they got for you. And you got the cocaine, heroin, crack cocaine. You got the uppers, the downers, the chiva, crystal meth. Acid. We got the nicotine for you. Huh? You don't want none of that. And don't forget about the alcohol, baby. Yeah, we got that malt liquor, a.k.a. "liquid crack… Yeah, I almost forgot. [Laughing] They got that pussy… He think 'cause he got that ball skill, he goin' up in the N.B.A., he immune. How you gonna be immune to pussy? Pussy be talking to you, Jesus. Pussy be saying, pussy be saying, "Come on in, Jesus. Just a little taste." How you gonna be immune to that shit?

To be honest, I was very shocked when I saw this scene, as it is very graphic. Interspersed over Willie's monologue are images of many drugs being ingested, people being shot over gambling and drinking, and a few clips of people have sex. At first, I thought it was a lot to have in a movie and a bit unnecessary, but as I watched more of Spike Lee's films, I realized that that is just the type of artist he is and it is for good reason. Lee does not sugar-coat anything in his films, and that is because he is intentional and creates films to enlighten people. This scene did exactly the job it would. I, nor would anyone else I imagine, will forget this scene and what it was in this movie for. The contents that take place in this montage are so raw and unfiltered, causing it to seem so real. By doing so, Lee allows the audience to truly feel and understand what happens to athletes in these situations. The images reflect the same unadulterated descriptions

that Willie is speaking to Jesus and it helps to simultaneously feel the caution and warnings that Jesus is feeling.

Another scene in this movie that shows what athletes are tempted with throughout the process of being recruited is when Jesus took a trip to Tech University. Even though it was mentioned earlier in the movie, sex was introduced again as a reason to attend this university. As they tour the school, the student athlete showing Jesus around says, “Look, man. We got some serious freaks up here in this piece, man… And I ain't talking about no love. I'm talking about… these white freaks here at Tech U, man. They love some ball-playing brothers, man.” And when they show up to a party, Jesus is taken into a room with two naked women and they begin to have sex with him. Even though Jesus has a girlfriend, none of that seems to matter at this point to anyone. What matters is the limitless opportunities that basketball is bringing to Jesus. Yet, there is some realness in this moment when realizing all of the basketball players that have backslid due to the temptations of sex. Some of the most famous and successful basketball players are unfortunately also the ones who have cheated on their wife/girlfriend. According to CNN, nearly 80 to 90 percent of all pro athletes cheat on their wives.

It may not be that strong of a theme in the American Dream as of right now, but sex has become very prominent in American TV and movies. In today's time, it seems to be pushed to the young, teenage/college community. While sex is normal for most people regardless of status, the movies and tv portray that the more money you have, the more options you will have for sex. If you have money, you can always get the cute girl or the hot guy and your sex life will never be dry. This idea has been portrayed heavily in tv shows and movies that are on “PG” channels.

Most Disney and Nickelodeon shows/ movies feature the captain of the basketball team who is just so popular and cute. Everybody wants to be their friend and all the girls have a crush on them. And so, from a very young age, kids are being ingrained with the idea that playing basketball, or any sport at that, correlates to you being worth something. They grow up thinking that once you are in a position of significance, people would like you and you would get all the girls. Yet, unlike all of the other shows and movies, *He Got Game*, to some extent, warns against the temptations of sex. Willie's speech warns Jesus of the temptations "pussy" and that he won't be immune to it. Clearly Jesus didn't adhere closely to those words, but they may have spoken more to the audience than the characters in the movie; which is what books and movies should be doing anyways.

Father Freedom

Basketball as the American Dream is worked into the movie in yet another way, although more subtly and overlooked than the main plot. It happens in the account of Jesus' father, Jake Shuttlesworth. As it is shown, Jake is imprisoned for the accidental murder of his wife during a dispute one night at dinner. One night, six years into his fifteen year sentence, he is called into the warden's office and this conversation unfolds:

> The governor's made a request that your son, Jesus Shuttlesworth, seriously consider enrolling in his alma mater, Big State. If you persuade your son to do this, the governor's given me his word… he'll do everything in his power to… cut your time here short, considerably.

> The governor can do that?
>
> He can–
>
> He can do that. I'm lookin' at 15, Warden. I mean--This is for real, right?
>
> You can make the governor very happy.

The seeming impossibility of this situation contributes to the idea of basketball as this ultimate escape for all. The freedom that is associated with basketball is enhanced, as before poverty was the bondage that basketball freed people from. Yet, here the bondage is actually bondage; he is being let out of prison in the name of basketball. The prison system is notorious for the unfair treatment of African American people. Whether it was long prison sentences for the lesser crime per say, or the racial profiling that goes on, it is safe to say that African American were a target for law enforcement. And the flip side of it, throughout history we see the counterpart white male be let off or get short sentences for a bigger crime. We can also go as far to argue that the American Dream was never meant for African Americans to prosper. As seen in *The Last Shot*, African Americans are placed in the projects that are meant to keep them from rising in social classes. And so, along with unfair law enforcement and an environment that is designed to keep you low, the American Dream meant nothing. Yet, here Lee is switching that narrative while using basketball as the American Dream. He is switching up what is commonly expected from basketball, the government, the prison system, etc.

Spike Lee's Purpose

He Got Game truly captures so much and offers even more to take away from the film.

Spike Lee doesn't hold back not to just be vulgar and inappropriate for no reason, but to ensure that the message he wants to share with his film is 100% received. He has always been a huge representation for the culture of African Amercians and has done a lot to make many people that are outside of said culture aware of all that's happening. And in this film he has depicted common struggles of a young black man, trying to be successful in the basketball industry while not trying to be swayed by all of the family, friends, recruits, etc.. intruding on the sincerity of the game. He challenges the thoughts of everything that seems to be normal.

Chapter Three: *Sooley*

Sooley is a novel, written by John Grisham, that deals with the love of basketball, the hardships of refugee life, and all of the in-between. The novel follows the life of Samuel Sooleymon, a South Sudanese basketball player who is about to get his life turned upside down. Grisham takes the audience on a rollercoaster ride of emotions as he does not spare any details of the ups and downs of Samuel's unfortunate life. However, he also grabs the reader with his attention to detail of the basketball world and Samuel's progression. He also grabs the attention through his ability to pace the story well and switch between the events happening in America and Sudan.

The American Dream in *Sooley*

The American Dream is defined as "the ideal by which equality of opportunity is available to any American, allowing the highest aspirations and goals to be achieved." Since

America has existed, this narrative has been pushed with the help of propaganda, television shows, cinema, and literature, despite the reality that America does not now, nor ever has lived up to this ideal. The "dream" says that no matter where you were born or where you come from, you have an equal opportunity to be great in America. While this may be more of a truth in America than in other countries, there are many aspects that give others a one up and denote that equality. Today, we talk about patriarchy, structural racism, heteronormativity, and other systems of power that simultaneously privilege certain groups and disadvantage others. Stories of basketball stardom, like many American stories, both traffic in and criticize the ideology of the American Dream.

Since the American Dream implies that one can "pick oneself up by the bootstraps," the American psyche has always looked for evidence of the "American Dream" in the stories of those who rise to greatness in America from some of the poorest neighborhoods and countries. There is a widespread belief that being successful in basketball will be the one-way ticket to the NBA and out of poverty. No matter where you live or where you are from, if you can make it to the NBA, you'll be alright. In fact, you'll be rich and famous! Stories of young African and African Americans making it to the NBA confirm the American Dream in the sense that they demonstrate that if you work hard enough you can make it.

However, just as the American Dream is more ideology than reality, there are some faults in the idea that basketball skills and hard work will always lead to success. In *Sooley*, John Grisham takes full advantage of the ideology of the American Dream and the use of basketball as one tool for actualizing it but also shows the limits of that ideology.

Grisham sets up the story perfectly in order to squeeze out every aspect of this trope. The novel starts with the mention of Samuel being invited to try out for South Sudan's "Under 18 Team " and the chance to play in an American tournament. Grisham describes the adulation Sooley's success wins him in his hometown as follows: "When the invitation arrived, his neighborhood erupted in celebration" (3). This passage comes from the first page of the book and it subtly plants the seed about what Africans think of America and the opportunity that playing basketball there can have. Especially because of the fact that a party is thrown for just receiving the invitation to try out of the team; he still has to make the team. And to emphasize this point, Grisham, a few paragraphs later writes: "Since the age of thirteen, Samuel had been the best basketball player in the village. His dream, like every other kid's, was to play college ball in America and, of course, make it to the NBA. There were several South Sudanese players in the NBA and they were godlike figures back home." (4) And so, within the first two pages, Grisham gives the audience something to expect, but also an understanding of the importance that basketball in America has for this South Sudanese country and Samuel.

Grisham continues this strategy of foreshadowing by dropping bits of crucial information in order to plant the seed of major plot points in the story. Another example of him doing this is when his narrator states: "Another brutal civil war was in its second year with no end in sight, and though daily life was always precarious, the people managed to make it through the day and hope for better things tomorrow" (4). He quickly mentions the fact of war, but doesn't really elaborate on it; he goes back to talking about Samuel and his invitation. However, he

doesn't really need to elaborate. By doing this, he achieves a form of foreshadowing, as he is setting up the audience to learn about the attacks later in the book. Simultaneously, he also allows the idea of the American Dream to be amplified and the steaks to be higher. Rather than America just being a better place for opportunities, America is a safer place as their home is at war. By putting us into the shoes of the South Sudanese people, Grisham shows his American audience what it is to experience America from the perspective of a less privileged country.

For the next series of chapters, Grisham blows through the tournament in America very quickly, while occasionally giving updates back at home. As the tournament goes on, Grisham plays with the minds of the readers as he constantly writes about Samuel's play. Throughout the tournament, we see constant examples of Samuel messing up: “He missed an easy layup,” “He missed his first shot, badly,” “He missed all three of his shots”, etc. . When reading this, it almost seems like foreshadowing that Samuel isn’t going to make it to the NBA or make it to college-level basketball in America. And so, this kills any hopes that Samuel would be able to pursue his American Dream. However, things take a wild turn, as Grisham tugs on the hearts and minds of the readers again. Samuel learns of the attack on his hometown and the potential death of his family. This becomes Samuel’s saving grace, as he now has no other choice to stay in America.

At this point in the novel, the aspect of the American Dream where working hard with the right opportunity will make you successful begins to slowly come to life.

‘Hey Coach.’ ‘Getting an early start?’ ‘I’m here every morning, Coach.’

> ‘How many shots so far?’ ‘One forty-two. Just got started.’ ‘How many have you made?’ ‘Forty-nine.’ (143)

This is the moment in the book where it starts to seem like Samuel's American Dream might begin to prosper. He still isn't the best basketball player, but the work he puts in will eventually, pay off. This moment also gave some insight into Samuel too, as the readers knew that he has come in early a couple of times before and practiced on his own, yet, this quote shows that he actually goes every day and does this. Later, Grisham mirrors this exact interaction to emphasize the growth in Samuels's play:

> Sooley was soaked and broke into a customary grin when he saw his coach walking toward him. ‘How long have you been shooting Sooley?’
> ‘I don’t know, Coach. Two or three hours.’ ‘How many shots?’ ‘Six ninety.’
> ‘And how many have gone in?’ ‘Three forty-three.’ ‘That’s almost 50 percent.’ (155)

Grisham uses juxtaposition here. Although they are not directly next to each other in the text, they are so similar the audience immediately compares the two. It makes it much easier to identify the progress Samuel is making. Throughout these chapters, Grisham also makes it a point to repeatedly mention Samuel’s height and how much he is growing physically, and the muscle he is putting on. At this point, Samuel is literally growing into a potential star in front of our eyes. He is becoming that much closer to utilizing the opportunities of American life to fulfill his dream of making it to the NBA. However, these details about Samuel’s potential are

not entirely in his control and not entirely tied to his hard work. This causes us to wonder if there's more luck involved in the American Dream than we realized before.

The Good and Bad of the American Dream

Along with the fact that the American Dream is not totally true, since there is not equal opportunity for everyone to be successful, there is another major problem that people face. When they come to America, depending on where they are coming from, it can be a whole culture shock on every level. There are unknown traps and setups that are put in place to knock down competition that is climbing the ladder. And so, even if you do manage to prosper from this American Dream complex, you have to be careful to not get caught up in the American drama per se. Language change can be a hindrance. Handling a large amount of money, and taxes can trip others up. The culture of famous/rich people could also cause anyone to backfall as well. Grisham takes this idea and expands on it in his novel and would ultimately be the demise of Samuel.

As Samuel became closer to getting drafted to the NBA, he started meeting more people. He was introduced into a whole different lifestyle of money and drugs, which in turn caused him to lose the very best part of himself. Grisham, in typical Grisham fashion, slides in this little bit of information at the end of chapter 54: "Arnie tried to watch everything… Sex, booze, and pot were to be expected and there was plenty of it, but if the harder stuff was being passed around and consumed Arnie wanted to know" (303). At this point, the audience can see the pattern that

Grisham has been doing. Dropping little bits of information and then seeing it unfold soon after. And so, we can expect something, whether it is good or bad, to happen in the next coming chapters. In doing this, Grisham really keeps the pages turning and the audience on the edge of their seat.

And so, just as foreshadowed, Samuel finds himself at a party with girls, booze, pot, and "the harder stuff." All of these new things are new to Samuel and could have only come in this fashion through the success that he has attained. This is the setup in the world of athletes. The game is played in order to keep the weak-minded from getting to the top. And as dangerous as the game is, the temptations come ever so innocently and smooth. Grisham portrays this ever so effortlessly, as Samuel has an interaction with a cute girl.

> 'Ever try these?' She asked 'What are they?' 'Mollies, and they're wonderful. A couple of these and you can go all night long.' She took one, swallowed it, and washed it down with the drink. If she could do it, so could he… She handed him three more and said, 'Save these for later.' (316)

The interaction happens so quickly and the dialogue is very meticulous and purposeful. She describes the mollies as wonderful, and that terminology doesn't seem to line up with drugs. Some may describe their trips on drugs as fun and crazy, but never "wonderful." And so, Samuel being new to this world, is susceptible to believing the wonderfulness of the drug. She also continues to say that with them, "[he] can go all night long." This was brilliant from Grisham because it is what fuels Samuel to keep taking them later. "The party was too much fun to miss,

so Sooley eased into the bathroom and swallowed another Molly." (317) Sadly, this would be too much to handle for the six-foot-eight South Sudanese star as he died from it.

Conclusion

Grisham does not hold back from the true reality that is faced in this area of sports, and the struggle that athletes face. Being an athlete is a blessing, especially in America, as the salary that most professional athletes make are out of this world. And, in that sense, the American Dream becomes very appealing to those who both live in America and don't. However, what isn't portrayed is the journey and the behind the scenes. What isn't shown is the ongoing decisions that are made and the choices that can change everything. And so, Grisham uses that to his advantage. He taps into every aspect that he can to inform and still entertain his audience.

Project Conclusion

I started off this senior project with interest in reading the written representations of the process for young basketball players who have hopes of playing in college and the NBA, yet there was so much more that I learned from these texts. All of the research and readings opened up a wider spectrum of how to see this process and understand what goes on both subliminally as well as explicitly. For some people, basketball isn't just a sport. It's a way of life. It is a way to open up doors for success and achieve a better life for themselves and the people around them. It is their American Dream. Yet, there was so much to unpack in that itself.

Throughout each of these texts, a different understanding of the American Dream can be received as it means different things to different people. It is also interesting to think about whose lens we see these characters through and what genre we are experiencing them in. For example, in *Sooley*, there was dual focus for Samuel: basketball and family. At a certain point, that is what America has reflected for him. All of the possible success with basketball is only coming from the opportunities America had to offer him. Likewise, the only opportunity to have a happy family that is safe from the harm they endured was also only through being in America. That is because he has been able to experience these things and witnessed them through those living in America. And so, Samuel's idea of an American Dream was a bit different, yet, basketball was the way of achieving that dream. The fact that this novel is a fiction novel gives Grisham the freedom to explore and create a reality that he wants. To create a situation where the American Dream would affect Sooley for good and bad. Yet, in all this freedom, he uses real possibilities and situations that happen for both many athletes and people from South Sudan..

For Jesus Shuttlesworth, in *He Got Game,* I would argue that he didn't even have his own perception of an American Dream, as there were so many people trying to have their own dream for him. This is what he constantly had to face and deal with as the plot of the movie progressed. Meanwhile, basketball was at the heart of it all as the saving grace for all of these people that associated with him. Since this was a movie, it was an easier concept to grasp and spread as a lot more people see movies than read books. The visual aspects and details in this film allowed the words that were spoken to be so much more real. On top of that, Spike Lee as the director drives everything home. Spike Lee is a Brooklyn native and a fanatic of basketball. He has also spent

much of his film career and life immersing himself into black culture and exposing the goods and bads of them. And so, anything you see in his film has come from experiences and the knowledge he has gained over the years.

Lastly, the young boys in *The Last Shot* saw their American Dream as making it out of the projects of Coney Island. They all wanted to do better and achieve upward mobility, as the project was not a comfortable environment to grow up in. And once again, basketball was the key to achieving their dream. This novel is a nonfiction novel, which probably takes the cake. That is because the American Dream in this novel is truly the American Dream of these characters. Frey did not have to draw up and create an idea for what these characters are going to have to struggle with. He did not have to attempt to be in the minds of four young black teens as an older white man. This fact strengthens the events that happen throughout the novel and strengthens the other text analyzed in this paper as all of them show some resemblance.

In truth, the idea of the American Dream is not the worst thing to exist, as it gives people hope. Whether it is false hope or not, it gives people something to work for. Hope gets people through hard times when they feel like they cannot continue forward. Some may work hard and achieve success and some may work hard and not achieve success. Nonetheless, everyone who has managed to continue to work hard is successful in being faithful to themselves. I consider that as being successful in itself because it is so much easier to just give up than to continue to work hard. This can be seen in each and everyone of the texts. Each of the characters worked really hard and put their all into the game of basketball and yet each character had a completely different outcome than the other.

Another huge thing that can be received from each of the texts are the dangers of achieving the American Dream, namely the dangers associated with being successful. There seems to be a lack of true mentorship for young athletes who are becoming successful in their sport. A new sense of freedom and exposure is given to the young athlete, and without the proper guidance it can be the downfall of the athlete. That is, whether it causes them to lose sponsorships, lose draft potentials, or even worse their life. The higher level of success comes with more exposure of drugs, sexual activities, shady characters, etc.. And so, if someone is not prepared to handle being in that environment, it will engulf them and change the outcome of their journey. However, all of those things are portrayed as cool in the culture. Doing hard drugs, hooking up at parties, and blowing money on unnecessary expensive things are supposedly cool now. This false sense of happiness and coolness that comes with being successful can cause someone to be depressed or feeling empty. And so, there should be measures put in place for young athletes that teach them and warn them of the consequences of such actions.

In conclusion, these authors and directors truly tapped into the reality of life when portraying these stories of young basketball players. They all set out to bring truth to their audiences and tell the hardships that players often face. As a person apart from that audience, who happens to have just finished their athletic collegiate career, things have really been put into perspective for me. While I thought I had it rough, I had it quite easy. Although things didn't turn out exactly how I expected them to, I am grateful that they went the way they did. And so, just as I have learned from these texts, I hope this paper reaches and enlightens those who need it.

Whether it is encouragement to keep pushing forward, advice on what and who to avoid, or even a piece of humbling pie, I hope it makes all the difference to creating a happy and successful life.

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