

## The Glow of False Anti-Racism

By: Lacino Hamilton

A person would have to be living under a rock not to have heard about Jewish-American, LA Clippers owner, Donald Sterling's repugnant comments about not wanting his half Black and half Mexican extramarital love interest, some say mistress, to publicly associate with Black people; and his subsequent life-time ban from the NBA. It will probably go down as one of the biggest scandals ever in professional sports. When President Barack Obama made a cameo appearance, cutting away from the crisis in Ukraine (potential civil war), to share with the American people his Presidential discuss, I knew Mr. Sterling was in the infamy stratosphere.

Even though the Donald Sterling saga is saturated with social meaning America appears to be unable to discuss under less economically contentious circumstances, I was determined to sit this one out. Courageous commentary and social analysis has been drowned out by the screaming back and forth format of the 24 hour news cycle.

America's latest attempt to publicly talk about racism quickly became a three ring circus. Filled with shock and awe discoveries that a 81 year old rich white man abhors Black people. Amazing feats of demonizing Donald Sterling when he has not been the punch line of a joke. And brief appearances of never before seen symbols of protest where for 20 minutes NBA basketball players turned their shirts inside-out. Brought on by, and dependent upon, overwhelming public consensus. Their backs were up against the wall to do something. One commentator compared this sacrifice free protest to the historic march on Washington. Really?

I was going to sit this one out because it is reminiscent of the totally artificial, cheap production of a morality drama that Bernie Madoff starred in a few years back. When the right people get pissed off, people who experience oppression, in this case racism, as part of their day-to-day lives, are given someone to sacrifice and persecute in place of "The System." Colosseum style justice. They can blow off steam while structural racism and other oppressive aspects of society remain in place.

This is because real acts of racism in the NBA, like land grabs from poor Black people to build NBA arenas, a whole 'nother species of gentrification of Black living space, or how the price of admission for Black NBA players to the privileged perch of white America (e.g., making lots of money, joining elite social clubs, living in exclusive neighborhoods, sending children to upper class private schools), is purchased by avoiding and forgetting race. Ignoring the harsh realities Black people face everyday.

While I do view Mr. Sterling's repugnant comments as part of his larger racist

discriminatory practices, racism alone fails to explain, for example, Mr. Sterling's sexism. What he "said" about Black people, basketball hall of famer Erving "Magic" Johnson in particular, does not compare to his misogynic "actions" toward Ms. V. Stiviano, and I suspect other women, including his wife of 50 years. This real live made for VH-1 reality show could just as well be viewed through the lens of women who are structurally exploited by men in their professional and personal lives. Let's face it, deeply entrenched beliefs about the worth of women's bodies in our culture often results in the marginalization of women. It is clear how the woman at the center this scandal was caricatured that women simply do not count.

The media coverage of this saga shows how the political agendas of some groups outweighs that of others. Racism alone does not explain the complicated configuration of sexual and structural financial and social constraints that silenced most of the people who were aware of Mr. Sterling's discrimination toward marginalized groups, in general. That kind of reductionism does not take seriously the psychological, sexual, social, political, cultural, and historical as crucial explanatory strands of social relations. Sexism, classism, racism, nefarious social forces, often intersect and collide, and should receive scrutiny accordingly.

Another reason why I was going to sit this one out is because of all the hypocrisy and feigned anger coming from the sports world. I am certain the sports world is upset, but not because Mr. Sterling is a racist, and a sexist. After all, not one person who was interviewed that knew Mr. Sterling for any significant amount of time was surprised by what he said.

For the 30 years Mr. Sterling owned the LA Clippers, coaches, general managers, players, sport agents, scouts, other NBA owners, sports journalist, and definitely minority owner of the LA Dodgers, Erving "Magic" Johnson, coach Doc Rivers and superstar basketball players Chris Paul and Blake Griffin were aware of Donald Sterling's racist exploits, which exceed the boundaries of the NBA. Only after Mr. Sterling's racist views became public knowledge, which threatens corporate profits and players share of it, could the league no longer work with Mr. Sterling. It feels a lot like rich people (the NBA players are 80 percent black but NBA team owners and sponsors are 95 percent white), are "playing the race card" to rid themselves of a liability. And I did not want to play into this skillful shift from addressing the indignities imposed on ordinary Black people to a more narrow enterprise of heaping massive amounts of criticism on Mr. Sterling.

Taking Mr. Sterling's basketball team from him amounts to little more than moral posturing. By taking Mr. Sterling's team from him the "NBA family" is not required to make sacrifices. No giving up of corporate profits or salaries. No having to give up sponsorship. It is no coincidence that the entrepreneurial athlete is both apolitical and raceless. With Mr.

Sterling completely out of the picture the NBA can continue to enjoy the fruits of a situation created by taking the path of least resistance: ignoring race i.e., no requirement for NBA players to use their notoriety to rise beyond the limits of sports (sacrifice of self for the larger good).

In all fairness being a representative for the entire race is a burden. Fame makes confronting racism more monetarily costly. It is risky business. And it should never be forgotten that the NBA is just that, a business. But this is where "giving back" goes further than just writing a check or making a guest appearance. It is how the legacies of Jessie Owens, Joe Louis, Hank Aaron, Muhammad Ali, Tommie Smith, John Carlos, Arthur Ash, and other sports figures who have stood fast against racism imposed on Black People, are kept alive.

Let's not pretend that Doc Rivers, the LA Clippers basketball team, and others who threaten a league wide strike if Mr. Sterling is still the owner come next season, are somehow following the illustrious example of sports pioneers who defied white supremacy at the height of their professional careers, because they are not. Why not take a stand today?

The reason why I just could not sit this one out, as much as I wanted to, is because my silence would be just as detrimental as that of the sports world for the past 30 years. It would be like protesting where no sacrifice is involved. It would be like upholding the legacies of those who sacrificed greatly, in words only. It would be like acting as if Magic Johnson deserves the praise he has been receiving as if he is some kind of social justice or human rights agent. It would be like acting as if Magic Johnson is on the front line fighting structural unemployment, poverty, homelessness, the barbarity of police brutality that many Blacks routinely face, or on the front line of the struggle against mass incarceration that disproportionately affects Blacks.

I was a Lakers fan in the mid and late 1980s because of Magic Johnson's Michigan State roots, and I am certain he is an extraordinary father, husband, and pillar of his community. But he has also played by the rules of avoiding controversy. The favor has been returned by investing in him as a surrogate white. He has been compensated handsomely for being the face of many corporate ventures. In return he has bestowed charity on more people than we are probably aware of. However, just like sacrificing Mr. Sterling leaves structural racism and other oppressive aspects of society in place, charity solidifies privilege and domination. It is not an equal relationship based upon mutuality and solidarity. Charity supposedly proves the moral enlightenment of culture that refuses to tolerate want. If America was really concerned with eliminating want charity would not be the response, an equal distribution of resources and wealth would be.

This is why some people are hell bent on cancelling the Donald Sterling saga right now immediately. The longer it is a public conversation, the greater probability that the glow of false anti-racism will dim, and the real anti-racism work will begin. The probability that Blacks without celebrity, honorary whiteness, or wealth that largely makes NBA players immune to the treatment shown to ordinary Blacks, will tune out and not play by the rules that largely require pretending.

True enough, the exposure of Donald Sterling's repugnant views of Black people and oppressive treatment of women shed light on the dark corners of his character. At the same time, a more telling manifestation of American hypocrisy emerged. The attack on Donald Sterling degenerating into scapegoating, sacrificing one to avoid challenging beliefs and changing behavior that give racism and sexism predominance in the culture. Such a practice eases conscience. It does little, however, to challenge and change racist attitudes and behaviors.

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