On August 21, 1996, Dennis Rodman, an African American basketball player with the National Basketball Association (NBA), created a media event that shut down the daily fast-paced movement of New York City for a few hours when he showed up to his book signing in a horse-drawn carriage, wearing a white wedding gown and escorted by female “ushertes” dressed in tuxedos. Music Television (MTV) captured the event and the behind-the-scenes creation of “the nervous bride” for its then-upcoming program titled the Rodman World Tour. When MTV aired the episode months after the event, Dennis Rodman proclaimed as an introduction to the show, “When I’m not stroking myself, I’m stroking the media.” In the text of the show, the audience is privy to the entire makeup process, fitting session, and the thoughts that were going through Rodman’s head as he prepared for his “wedding day.” Throughout the step-by-step preparation of the bride, a female member of Rodman’s production staff repeatedly prompted Rodman to share his feelings: “Does it make you feel feminine? . . . How do you feel now (after putting the dress on)? . . . Do you feel feminine? . . . You’ve got your makeup on, you got that dress on. . . . When are you going to feel feminine?”

The questions fired at Rodman during this episode get to the heart of changing gender relations in American society. Contemporary media culture plays an enormous role in this process because of the mass audience that it serves. Therefore, the images and messages sent through popular entertainers such as Dennis Rodman serve an important function in how
gender (and race) gets constructed and how the current gender and racial orders get reproduced. As witnessed previously, Rodman regularly pushes the boundaries of gender and sexual conventions, obtaining mass media attention in the process. What effect does Rodman’s mediated gender and sexual play have on representations of gender and race in society? Do his media displays represent a potential challenge to prevailing notions of race and gender? In short, is Rodman’s image disruptive of the current race/gender system?

To explore these questions, I employed ethnographic content analysis (Altheide, 1996) to look at conventions of gender construction used by MTV’s Rodman World Tour. Episodes were videotaped from the first season the show aired, running from December 1996 to April 1997. All efforts were made to obtain every episode, in the end missing no more than three (12 out of 15 episodes). To obtain a random sample of shows for qualitative analysis, each of the episodes was catalogued by topic, after which each topic was written on a piece of paper, and 7 were randomly chosen from the possible 12 for inclusion in the data. I decided on 7 episodes because it represents approximately half of the total shows that were aired (15), even though I was only able to tape-record 12 episodes.

Once the sample was chosen, I watched each of the shows and began coding procedures. Because of the new terrain mapped out by the complexity and ambiguity of the images included in the Rodman World Tour, I did not develop preexisting categories for analysis. Rather, I approached the text with broad topics in mind and sought to determine how the show handled such topics. These topics included masculinity, sport, cross-dressing, and sexuality and were informed by my knowledge of Rodman’s media image prior to the show, my familiarity with the Rodman World Tour (which I often watched while video-recording the episodes), and my preliminary review of the pertinent literature. With these broad topics in mind, I allowed the particular categories to emerge from the data. In this process, the following categories became codes that I subsequently used for analysis: athlete, aggression, natural self, badness, body, penis, objectification of women, heterosexuality, homosexuality/homoeroticism, cross-dressing, and “femininity.”

Masculinity and the Black Male Athlete

With the increasing role that mediated sports play as mass entertainment, athletes become ever more important actors in the construction/ 
reproduction of masculinity. The extent to which sports figures such as Dennis Rodman embody and represent black masculinity determines the role they play in the ongoing construction of both gender and race in contemporary society. This study seeks to determine the role that the particular embodiment of black masculinity within the mediated representation of Dennis Rodman plays in this process of gender and race construction. As such, it necessitates a theoretical framework that addresses the popularly disseminated image of black masculinity, its relation to structural and political factors, as well as the agency with which popular media figures such as Rodman take part in enacting and deploying that image.

Sports offer a cultural site where social notions of masculinity are enacted and reproduced. Connell (1987) distinguished between hegemonic masculinity and subordinated masculinities, arguing that hegemonic masculinity is constructed in relation to women and subordinated masculinities (p.186). Sport scholars have illustrated the ways in which sports take part in the construction of hegemonic masculinity, focusing on the exclusion and debasement of women as well as the homophobia that permeates the cultural site (Messner, 1992b; Messner & Sabo, 1994). Throughout history, African American male athletes, in particular, have played an important role in the construction of hegemonic masculinity. Whereas pioneer black athletes challenged racial and class barriers among men by breaking through segregated professional sports, today’s black athletes increasingly stabilize hegemonic masculinity as mediated figures in televised spectator sports (Messner, 1992b). According to Messner, black athletes offer middle-class white male spectators a symbolic identification with a shared concept of their “naturalized” superiority over women while at the same time serving as the racialized “other” against whom privileged men define themselves as “modern” (p.170). This dual role is particularly poignant within basketball, where black male athletes are at once dominant as players and yet socially subordinate as black men.

John Hoberman (1997) goes so far as to argue that it is the prominence of African Americans in sports that has kept them socially subordinate in other realms of society. Arguing that a large part of the African American community accepts the notion that black success in the arena of sports represents a significant overall success for blacks in a racist society, Hoberman asserted that the community (especially black intellectuals) are in complicity with their own “relegation” to the arena of sports (p. 4). Rather than challenging the racism that continues to inhibit African American economic success in business, academia, and industry, the black com-
munity, by embracing sports as a viable career choice, accepts racist beliefs about the physical superiority and intellectual inferiority of African Americans (p. 53). Although black athletes often seek “status, respect, empowerment and upward mobility through athletic careers” in response to racial and class constraints, their choice to do so within the venue of sports reproduces the very racist notions they are fighting against (Dworkin & Messner, 1999, pp. 4-5). The tension between black men’s subordinate status in relation to white men and their wide acceptance of notions that define hegemonic masculinity, especially through the institution of sport, is an important part of the emerging scholarship on black masculinity even beyond the venue of sports.

Scholarship on black masculinity recently has become a contested terrain, as black feminist scholars challenge traditionally sexist notions embedded within black masculinity discourse. Early in the literature, Robert Staples (1982) identified elements of what he called compulsive masculinity that characterize lower-class black males: crime, violence, sexual promiscuity, and procreation. According to Staples, these characteristics evolved out of the economic and racial subordination of black males that has excluded them from so-called legitimate means to attain and prove their manhood (as deemed by the hegemonic definition of masculinity). Staples’s model of compulsive masculinity is challenged by Black feminist scholar bell hooks (1992), who criticized Staples for ignoring the widely diverse experiences of masculinity among African American males (p. 98). Hooks offered a feminist critique of Staples’s assumption that African American men uniformly accept the sexist goals of hegemonic masculinity and merely find various means to attain those goals.

Breaking Staples’s theory of compulsive masculinity into its two (sexist) components of patriarchal and phallocentric masculinities, hooks explained that the phallocentric model emerged as a form of masculinity to which all men, regardless of race, had access by virtue of their penis, regardless of their ability to provide for their family as required by the patriarchal model (p. 94). Although arguing that not all black men have accepted and internalized white society’s hegemonic notion of patriarchal masculinity, hooks importantly recognized the extent to which patriarchal, and increasingly phallocentric, masculinity is displayed within black popular culture. She explained the ease with which such views make their way into the popular media that relies so much on cultural hegemony:

Without documentation of [the presence of “individual black men who critiqued normative masculinity”], it has been easier for black men who embrace patriarchal masculinity, phallocentrism, and sexism to act as though they speak for all black men. Because their representations of black masculinity are in complete agreement with white culture’s assessment, they do not threaten or challenge white domination, they reinscribe it. (hooks, 1992, p. 98)

Hooks indicted public figures in the entertainment industry such as “Eddie Murphy, . . . Spike Lee, and a host of other black males [who] blindly exploit the commodification of blackness and the concomitant exotification of phallocentric black masculinity” (p. 102). For hooks and other cultural theorists, prevailing ideas about black masculinity largely come from the images and messages disseminated through the mass media, no matter the diverse experiences that may exist among individual African American men.

Todd Boyd’s (1997a, 1997b) cultural approach to the study of black masculinity articulated more fully the consumerist nature behind black popular culture, focusing on the elements that present a unique black male image to a mass audience. According to Boyd (1997a), black popular culture represents an “excessive image” of African Americans in an attempt to sell products to an increasingly consumerist society (p. 5). African Americans are particularly susceptible to buying and selling these images because they have been excluded from traditional methods of economic consumption for so long. The increasing role that spectacle plays in the “ever-expanding visual space” (p. 5) of mass media accounts, in part, for the excessive image of the black male, illustrated most clearly by the emphasis on style that characterizes black popular culture.

The importance of style in the embodiment of black masculinity has been pointed out by a number of scholars (Boyd, 1997a; Majors, 1992; Majors & Billson, 1992). Owing to the tenuous experience of “winning” among African American males in a white male-dominated world in which the rules of the game can change at any moment, many black males have opted to focus on style as an element over which they have control (Boyd, 1997a, pp. 109-110). Richard Majors (1992) found that what he calls “cool pose” is a “signature of survival” among African American men who mistrust the dominant society (p. 132). Majors explained that acting “cool” portrays images of control, toughness, and detachment that are often elusive to black males in American society. Boyd paid similar attention to style in his analysis of basketball as the embodiment of contemporary blackness (1997a, 1997b). He compared basketball with jazz of the 1940s to the 1960s, focusing on the improvisational nature of contemporary basketball that has its roots in black oral culture (1997a, p. 111).
Bringing elements of street basketball to the professional courts, African Americans have transformed the traditional "textbook" NBA style of play into a fast-paced, highly stylized game (1997a, p. 115).

This sense of style, combined with elements of phallocentric masculinity as pointed out by hooks (1992), creates a unique form of black masculinity that integrates elements of hegemonic (sexist) masculinity into the subordinated status of black masculinity as it is articulated and represented in culturally mediated forms, such as sports, music, and entertainment. Images of homophobia, the objectification and degradation of women, the emphasis on the phallus, and the articulation and embodiment of violence and aggression characterize much of the popular forms of black entertainment in contemporary society, including spectator sports in their mediated and commodified forms. Although this is the prevailing notion of black masculinity that permeates American media culture, hooks (1992) contended that much more diverse experiences of masculinity exist. Is Rodman’s experience with masculinity as portrayed in his media image an example of one such different experience? Does his embodiment of masculinity offer us a new model of masculinity, one that critiques normative ideas of masculinity in general and/or black masculinity in particular?

The “Real” Dennis Rodman and Commodified Rebellion

The commodification of athlete/entertainer Dennis Rodman centers on his public representation of always “being himself” rather than constructing an image that society (and particularly the NBA) might expect from him. Like the current street slang popular among black youth, Dennis Rodman embraces the phrase “keepin’ it real,” promoting the idea that he stays “true” to himself and does not let “the system” keep him down. Having adopted this image, Rodman “talks the talk” and “walks the walk” in his autobiography, on the basketball court, during public appearances and interviews, as well as on his new MTV show, the Rodman World Tour. Rodman’s public performance “as himself” (and perhaps his willingness to play the role of black man as ridiculous court jester) has made him a hot commodity deemed worthy of commercials for Carl’s Junior restaurants, Kodak cameras, Victoria’s Secret lingerie, and Converse All Star sneakers.

Before acquiring such recent commercial endorsements, Dennis Rodman was already a mediated personality by virtue of his sports star status. Ever since he began the various actions that defined him as “unusual” on the basketball court (dyeing his hair, piercing his body, getting tattoos), he clearly articulated these actions as “being his real self.” This is the central theme of his autobiography Bad As I Wanna Be (1996), in which he began the book with the story of how he was about to commit suicide because he could no longer be the person that was expected of a professional basketball player:

I couldn’t continue to be the person everyone wanted me to be. I couldn’t be what society wanted an athlete to be. I couldn’t be the good soldier and the happy teammate and the good man off the court. . . . I was two people: ONE PERSON ON THE INSIDE, another person on the outside. The person I wanted to kill was the person on the outside. The guy on the inside was fine, he just wasn’t getting out much. . . . I came up with an idea: . . . Why not just kill the guy on the outside and let the other one keep living? (pp. 4-8)

Since that time, Rodman has become known for his public displays of cross-dressing that accompany his wild hair colors and growing body art in the form of tattoos and piercings.

Although Rodman actively takes part in the construction of his own visual image, the nature of his agency must be explored. Because his image rests so centrally on his idea of “being himself” by rebelling against “the system” and prevailing expectations about gender norms, we must analyze critically the role that his location within a corporate context plays. If Rodman claims to be resisting dominant norms that are largely defined within consumer media culture, is his agency truly resistant if he gets paid for his so-called rebellion? The monetary rewards that Rodman receives for his transgressions shed light on the possibility that Rodman is appropriating resistance discourse that does not necessarily resist oppressive structures of society, such as race and gender relations.

Because Rodman is situated quite squarely within this consumerist context, Dworkin and Messner’s (1999) theoretical model is used to analyze Rodman’s agency and its potential for resistance. Dworkin and Messner distinguished between resistant agency, which allows for empowerment to change oppressive institutions, and reproductive agency “expressed as identification with corporate consumerism” (p. 11), which contributes to and stabilizes oppressive social institutions. Rather than effect real social change, reproductive agency merely offers consumers an image of resistance and/or rebellion with which they may identify but that is appropriated from any real revolutionary potential to sell a product. Different from
collective action, individual acts of transgression that leave institutional structures of power intact are reproductive because they stabilize, rather than disrupt, the status quo. Therefore, although there may be potential for meaningful resistance in media images and messages, the consumer context must be evaluated for its limiting effect on that resistance.

Focusing on the potential for resistance, queer theories suggest that the scrambling of codes of masculinity and femininity such as that deployed by Rodman has the potential to offer a challenge to mainstream notions of gender and sexuality (Hawkes, 1995, p. 269). Gail Hawkes (1995) wrote of the importance of disrupting “the one-way causal processes between gender, sexuality and appearance” (p. 266) in an effort to challenge and resist the fixed notions of society through dress as performance. Hawkes implied that by challenging the binary models of gender and sexuality, there is a potential for radical resistance. However, Hawkes failed to place such blurring of the binaries within the contemporary context of commodified popular culture, in which figures such as pop diva Madonna have made the blurring of gender and sexual boundaries fashionable and “vogue” (Bordo, 1993; hooks, 1992; Rubey, 1991). Rodman’s own style of cross-dressing may blur the boundaries of gender, but it also leaves room for Rodman to deploy feminine codes of dress without being labeled effeminate.

Contrary to female impersonators such as entertainer RuPaul, Rodman does not cross-dress into clearly feminine attire. Rather, he incorporates elements of women’s clothing styles into his own fashion, creating a pastiche of ambiguous gender codes. His inclusion of facial makeup in these instances is what signifies his most apparent transgression from masculine codes of dress. Often, he wears feminine shirts along with jeans or other pants. For example, in one episode in which Rodman attended an L.A. club, he wore white pants with a gold, fuchsia, and purple satin shirt, a black fluffy hat, and makeup with hues of fuchsia to complement his shirt. In a scene with actress Tracey Ullman, we saw Rodman wearing a silver sequin top with everyday blue jeans, his hair blonde with blue-green circles and wearing frosty gold lipstick. When Rodman appeared on David Letterman’s show, he wore black lace pants and a matching shirt, opened to his waist, and black sunglasses. Although the pants and open shirt are general codes of masculinity, their lace fabric includes a touch of female-coded style. While appearing on The Tonight Show with Jay Leno, Rodman entered the stage while music with the words “I’m every woman” played over the studio. He wore what first appeared to be a generally masculine outfit, a long black leather coat over black leather pants, a black sheer top tied at the waist, black combat boots, and a cowboy hat. On closer appearance we, along with Leno, realized he actually was wearing a long skirt when he sat down and his legs became visible through the skirt’s slit. Leno asked him if it was a skirt, apparently not noticing at first either.

Rather than offer a radical resistance through gender bending (Hawkes, 1995), Rodman’s particular style of dress as performance seems to follow the pattern of masculine uses of cross-dressing. Research has found that men often use cross-dressing as a testimony to their social dominance through the parody of symbols of feminine sexuality (Foley, 1990; Garber, 1992). For example, one study found that male football team members play the role of cheerleaders in burlesque fashion while females attempt a serious game of football during a South Texas high school’s annual ritual powder-puff game (Foley, 1990, p. 119). In this way, a man’s physical and social dominance gives him the power to play with female codes of sexuality; he is “so much a man” that he is even a man while wearing women’s clothing. Rodman’s particular appropriation of feminine dress in limited ways suggests that Rodman may be invoking such a meaning rather than employing resistant agency against rigid gender rules.

**MTV’s Rodman World Tour**

Rodman’s position both in the NBA and in his newer venue of MTV places him in the center of consumer culture. The increasing commercialization of the NBA has been documented by scholars (Cole & Denny, 1994; McDonald, 1996) and experienced by all who watch television, whether or not they are spectators of the sport itself. MTV, in its own right, has been deemed the quintessential embodiment of consumerism for consumerism’s sake—creating music videos that consume our attention until we can go out and buy the music that they have sold to us through television, as Kaplan (1987) explained:

TV’s strategy is to keep us endlessly consuming in the hopes of fulfilling our desire. MTV’s programming strategies embody the extremes of what is inherent in the televiusal apparatus. The channel hypnotizes more than others because it consists of a series of extremely short . . . . texts that maintain us in an excited state of expectation. (p. 4)

Rodman’s show follows the same strategies as MTV’s signature videos, incorporating a free-flowing text in a nonlinear, fast-paced format that
bombards the audience with complex imagery and sound. Using a soundtrack of contemporary music, the show juxtaposes visual clips from various news sources and other television programs on which Rodman has appeared with footage shot specifically for the MTV show. Organizing the clips without regard to chronology, the show resembles the pastiche style of MTV’s music videos.

MTV’s *Rodman World Tour* capitalizes on Rodman’s preexisting reputation with the NBA in an attempt to provide the audience with a peek into the superstar’s “real” life. In the *Rodman World Tour*, MTV allows the audience to “hang out” with sports star Dennis Rodman as he “hangs out” with other celebrities, carries out everyday tasks, parties on the town, and makes celebrity appearances in public and on other television shows. To define the show as unquestionably real, Rodman constantly seeks to solidify his credibility as always “being himself.” The show takes place in various “natural” settings rather than in a studio set, and the focus is on capturing Rodman in his natural element. The raw footage that serves as material for the final product consists of Rodman’s various appearances during his book tour (signings and talk show appearances), the filming of his feature film *Double Team* with actor Jean Claude Van Damme, and numerous days on which Rodman is scheduled to “hang out” with different celebrities in various settings. Dispersed between raw footage is Rodman introducing or reflecting on the events, as well as “expert” commentary by various sports writers, coaches, a fashion designer, and even “sex doctor” Ruth Westheimer. Due to the mature nature of Rodman’s show, the program aired in a time slot during which young children would not be prone to see it—Sunday nights at 10:00 p.m. After the first of the year (1997), television networks instituted the television rating system. Rodman’s show was rated “TV 14,” suggesting that it is inappropriate for anyone under age 14.

As a postmodern cultural product, the *Rodman World Tour* blurs the distinction between reality and fictional entertainment, creating a hyperreal atmosphere (Goldman, 1996) that relies on “spontaneous” moments while highlighting the construction process of the show’s production. The blurring of reality and fiction is particularly important to the creation of Dennis Rodman’s media image as “real” because his own commodification as a consumer product revolves around his self-proclaimed ability to “be himself” rather than merely an image created by the NBA. This conflation of reality and fiction on the *Rodman World Tour* becomes particularly clear in the way the show is constructed as a window to reality while at the same time allowing the audience to see the constructed nature of the show. The audience’s constant awareness of the camera and production crew’s presence as Rodman interacts with them in the context of the show further validates the theme of “realness.” At the same time, the invisible element of its construction remains in the editing room, where deliberate and conscious choices have been made to present a particular version of “the reality” that was captured on film.

**Bad As I Wanna Be**

As articulated in Rodman’s autobiography and during the numerous public appearances he made in the last few years, Rodman’s public image centers on his “badness” that serves as one element of his rebellion discourse. From the very first episode of MTV’s *Rodman World Tour*, in which the focus was on Rodman’s personal history and his rise to fame on the basketball court, Rodman highlighted his “badness” in an opening monologue that described his recent accomplishments, his upcoming movie, and his MTV show. He asked the audience via the camera,

> And you wonder how did this all transpire? . . . I called up MTV and said, “I want my own show, and I won’t take no for an answer. If you say no I’m gonna kick your ass, I’m gonna kick her ass, his ass, and the owner’s ass”; I mean literally kick some ass because I really wanted it. And I can do that, you see, because, you know, being king, number one, uno, is, um, pretty good.

Later on the same episode, we saw Rodman clarify what this all meant when he looked directly into the video camera during a photo shoot and said, “I’m a bad boy.” The badness theme was also worked into the textual elements of the show. In one instance, an on-screen title deemed Rodman “Dennis the Menace.” In another recurring instance, one of the segments that regularly was used to cut to commercial breaks had a woman’s voice singing “He’s sooo bad!” as the camera panned down the backside of Rodman’s naked body.

Rodman first acquired his “Bad Boy” status from his initial position with the Detroit Pistons. Their aggressive style of play rejected expected norms of professional sportsmanship and made them a liability to the image-conscious NBA, despite their championship titles (Boyd, 1997a, p. 110). Cole and Denny (1994) attributed the image consciousness of the NBA today to lagging public support for professional basketball that plagued the NBA during the early 1980s. During that period, the NBA was tarnished by the “stigmatized black aesthetic” of the game combined with
bad publicity about black athletes using cocaine (Len Bias's death, for example) and living dangerous lifestyles (Cole & Denny, 1994, p. 129). Since that time, the NBA has orchestrated a successful marketing campaign that has contained the image of so-called out-of-control black athletes largely through the nice guy images of Magic Johnson initially (Cole & Denny, 1994, p. 129) and Michael Jordan currently (McDonald, 1996). With the contained image of black masculinity that the NBA has achieved, it has become safe for the association to accept some improvisational elements of urban street basketball (such as slam dunks and 3-point shots) that have increased their marketability by creating superstar athletes (Boyd, 1997a, p. 114). In spite of this adaptation, negative elements of street ball such as physically aggressive play and trash talk remain formally unacceptable because of the black underclass connotation they carry. Issues of class now concern the NBA and its image because race has been normalized by the dominance of African American players (Boyd, 1997a, p. 120) and the successful containment of their threatening black masculinity (Cole & Denny, 1994).

This lower-class, street style of "playing dirty" is exactly the element that Rodman brings to the NBA, prompting Boyd (1997a) to place him "squarely in the middle of the debate surrounding the 'nigga mentality' and the NBA" (p. 122). This "nigga mentality," as defined by Boyd, encompasses Rodman's open defiance of the NBA rules and norms of sportsmanship, but it has its historical roots in the image of the "bad niggar" who rebelled against white society by refusing to live by its rules (Boyd, 1997b). The racial subtext by which black masculinity represents a threat to white society is upheld by the fact that Rodman is a black athlete in a sport owned and managed by white elites (Sabo & Jansen, 1994; Shropshire, 1996). However, contrary to the NBA's "bad niggers" of the early 1980s, Rodman as bad boy represents merely a symbolic threat to the NBA's carefully guarded image because it can be contained within the workings of that image while it is used to increase revenues. To this end, Rodman's transgressions of both image and unacceptable levels of aggression are contained within the already managed image of the NBA through official reprimanding in the form of suspensions and fines (during the 1996-1997 season, Rodman received the second-longest suspension in league history—11 games—after kicking a court-side cameraman in his groin).

Importantly, Rodman is a skillful rebounder (holding six consecutive rebounding titles) and is matched with Chicago Bulls teammate Michael Jordan, who represents the center of the NBA's current managed image (McDonald, 1996). If Rodman represents the "bad nigga" of the NBA, then Jordan's image provides the counter "good nigga" representation against which Rodman can stabilize his image, and vice versa. As Cole and Denny (1994) pointed out, the NBA's campaign success of the late 1980s was due to the "marketing of particular players' personalities" (Magic Johnson and Larry Bird) that served to "reorder and manage" the black masculinity that was closely associated with the sport (Cole & Denny, p. 129). Today, Rodman and Jordan play a similar role in the NBA's marketing machine, as suggested by former Detroit Pistons coach Dick Versace in one episode of the Rodman World Tour:

The NBA is an image-conscious league and I think they try to control the image [of Rodman] as much as they can.... I think they watch Dennis. ....They love the marketing he does for the league, but then they think they have to keep him under control. [Italics added]

Rodman's transgressive but contained image is beneficial to the NBA in the form of increased revenues (attendance at games, Rodman merchandise, etc.). The league gets the best of both worlds: It reaps the benefits of Rodman's marketability and it is able to maintain its image by targeting him as the "one bad apple" in the bunch. Rodman knows this and articulates it within his discourse of being "bad." In one episode of his show, Rodman asserted, "There's not that many athletes who can go out there and do what the (bleep) [fuck] he wants to and so I'm just challenging the system."

The system that Rodman claims to be challenging is the image-producing "star system" of the NBA that gives certain players (i.e., Jordan) enormously lucrative contracts and fails to "recognize" hard-working rebounders like Rodman with equally lucrative contracts. In his autobiography, Rodman wrote about his frustration over what he interpreted as this economic injustice as well as the targeting that he has "suffered" over the years by the NBA. He accused the NBA's "system":

I'm an easy target. Too easy. They point to me as the bad guy, and the public accepts it. They've come to expect that Dennis Rodman is going to be the bad boy of the NBA.... The NBA decides who's going to be the chosen ones. (1996, p.66)

Importantly, it is the very basis of this accusation that has enabled Rodman to find his own lucrative niche within the NBA. By enacting the
bad boy in increasingly diverse and outrageous ways and claiming that it is
his “true self,” Rodman has achieved the stardom, fame, and fortune to
which he aspired. Playing off of Jordan’s “everybody’s all-American”
image (McDonald, 1996) and naming the NBA the “oppressive system”
that has “kept him down,” Rodman fills the marketing niche that appeals
to the rebellious Generation X youth that make up MTV’s primary audi-
cence. In such a way, Rodman, Jordan, and the NBA marketing machine
take part in a mutually beneficial cycle of “antagonism” (perhaps
feigned), through which each party gains monetarily. Given the economic
cost that Rodman’s rebellion discourse seems to be supporting, it appears
as though the agency with which Rodman enacts his bad boy image is
largely reproductive rather than resistant.

**Persistent Heterosexual Masculinity**

Dennis Rodman’s gender and sexual play in the media takes center
stage on MTV’s *Rodman World Tour*. Even as Rodman pushed the bound-
aries of gender and sexuality in the media (on both MTV and other venues
depicted on the show), the show framed Rodman’s behaviors within a lim-
ited realm of transgression, consistently invoking codes of hegemonic
masculinity in the form of heterosexuality and the objectification of
women’s bodies.

In a telling moment from the show, Rodman’s identity as an athlete be-
comes central in the framing of an instance in which Rodman was getting
made up for a night on the town in Las Vegas. The scene was Rodman’s ho-
etl room on one side of a split television screen. The other side showed var-
ious women walking through the hotel on their way to Rodman’s room.
The first on-screen title led the audience with the implicit notion of sport:
“Let the games begin.” The next title that immediately followed main-
tained masculine notions, even though it referred to Rodman getting made
d up. It read, “applying war paint,” and the camera (on the half screen) cut to
Rodman getting makeup on his eyes and face and having his nails pol-
ished. We continued to see the women on their way up to Rodman’s room
on the split screen. The next text read, “Game Plan,” and Rodman ex-
plained the plan: “All the girls up, so I can interview them, so I can weed in/
weeds up.” Finally, the audience learned that “the goal” (on-screen text) of
the evening was “to have a great time,” as Rodman said, exaggerating
his speech. Rather than fully resist dominant notions of masculinity,
Rodman’s masculine identity was maintained here by implicit references
to sport and heterosexuality even as he transgressed the male gender
boundary by wearing women’s makeup.

Rodman’s minor transgressions were further balanced with reproduc-
tive images of masculinity through explicit references to Rodman’s het-
erosexuality and his objectification of women. In the next segment,
Rodman interacted sexually with the women and related to their bodies as
if they were primarily sexual objects. When the women arrived, Rodman
visually surveyed them from head to toe, focusing on their bodies. At one
point, Rodman consulted with his cameraman (in a private, male-bonding
moment) about which ones he should choose, identifying one of the
women by her “big” breasts as he makes hand gestures cupping imaginary
breasts in front of his own chest. Later, he explicitly told one of the
women, “Your chest looks good,” as he stared openly at her breasts. Once
Rodman had chosen his female entourage for the evening (he takes five of
the six women, all white, and “weeds out” the only black woman who was
invited), he was ready for his night on the town. Having five women escort
him for the evening itself serves to visually mark Rodman as hyper-
heterosexual, thus validating his masculinity. As the evening progressed
(we saw an edited version) and the group became increasingly intoxicated,
the audience saw the escalation of sexual interaction between both the
women and Rodman and between the women themselves. The evening
culminated in a private dance party for Rodman in his suite as he sat watch-
ing the women dance together provocatively. This scene was interspersed
with “expert” commentary from “sex doctor” Ruth Westheimer explain-
ing that men (implying heterosexual men) enjoy watching two women to-
gether because they have fantasies about being with two women. This
expert testimony served to further mark Rodman’s heterosexuality.

In other instances, women were objectified by the camera and through
Rodman’s eyes for the viewing audience. Rodman went “girl watching” at
the beach, where the camera took time to give close-up camera shots of
two separate sets of bikini-clad women, panning up their bodies from foot
to head (in that order). Rodman told the camera crew, “There’s the guns
boys [pointing], there’s the guns.” Taking a moment to verbalize his het-
erosexuality along with these visual indicators, Rodman also announced,
“There’s a prospect,” as he walked past a sunbather and the camera fol-
lowed his gaze. In another segment from an episode in which Rodman is at
the L.A. club The Viper Room, the audience witnessed three consecutive
instances of Rodman’s gaze close up on women’s torsos (we failed to ever
see their faces): bare midriffs, a spandex-covered pelvis, breasts in a bra-like top. The audience was able to participate vicariously with Rodman as he interacted with the body parts, dancing closely behind and running his hands along them. The scene concluded with the camera catching Rodman looking directly at a dancing crotch at his eye level (the woman is on a table), then back to the camera sharing his gaze with the viewers. The fact that the audience was encouraged to participate in objectifying the women’s bodies along with Rodman suggests a shared understanding of Rodman’s heterosexuality that exists because it reproduces prevailing notions of masculinity that dominate American culture.

The objectification of women that is such a defining part of hegemonic masculinity goes hand-in-hand with implied sexuality. Rodman adheres to masculine conventions that make women’s bodies passive objects of men’s desire, thus solidifying notions about his own heterosexuality that he brings with him by virtue of his basketball star status. Sexuality, sport, and masculinity are intricately tied together in important ways. Sports represent a homosocial environment in which the negation of homosexuality is necessary to define locker room relations between athletes as masculine and not “too close” (Messner, 1992b, p. 36). When Rodman deploys dress and behavior coded as homosexual in the media, he puts himself in a compromising position regarding his teammates. In a revealing comment by Chicago Bulls’ coach Phil Jackson, we get a glimpse of the mental compromise that has taken place by the team with reference to Rodman and his ambiguous gender play in the arena of sport. Juxtaposed with a clip of the fashion designer “expert” posing the question “I just wonder about [Rodman] in the locker room. What do the guys think?” Jackson said, “As long as he keeps his clothes on, he’ll be fine.” Given the function of a locker room where athletes change clothes and shower, this is obviously a metaphorical comment by Jackson. Rather than literally refuse to allow Rodman to change his clothes, the coach is suggesting that Rodman stay within the boundaries of accepted and expected gender and sexual behavior in the locker room. With such rigid sexual codes that define sport, Rodman is careful with his transgressions. Even as he plays with his sexuality on the *Rodman World Tour*, such instances are contained by explicit markers of heterosexuality. This managed image thus neutralizes the destabilizing potential of Rodman’s hair, nails, makeup, and clothes.

Although there are numerous innuendos and visual depictions that signify Rodman flirting with homosexuality in his MTV show, two very revealing episodes clearly depict the ambiguity of Rodman’s sexual transgressions, as they are immediately contained by behavior coded as heterosexual. The first instance occurred at The Viper Room during a performance by the male disco band “Bootie Quake.” In the segment of the show that recapped the evening’s events, the first clips shown clearly were coded as heterosexual, with Rodman dancing closely with various women, touching their bodies, and looking at specific parts of their bodies shown in close-ups for the camera audience (such as their buttocks and crotches). The first homoerotic image showed a clip of Rodman on the stage dancing closely behind a white male, helping him take off his shirt and then running his (Rodman’s) hands along the man’s chest. Rodman then embraced the man in a hug from behind as he said something closely into his ear. Immediately, the camera cut to the lead singer saying into the microphone, “Hey, you can’t come in here and take all our women,” followed by a clip of the lead singer alluding to Rodman’s penis size in a commentary to the audience: “Are you all ready to get funky? . . . Go Dennis, go Dennis . . . Big hands, big feet. You know what that means.” Although the audience saw Rodman transgress sexually, we were told of his heterosexual behaviors and reminded of his penis size, thus serving to couch his transgression within heterosexual masculinity.

Although the message of contained transgression seems to dominate the construction of the show, there is, at the same time, room for alternative readings by diverse audiences. As a cultural product aimed at revenues, the *Rodman World Tour* satisfies mainstream desires for spectacle within accepted limits while simultaneously offering the space for different interpretations by more marginalized audiences, thereby increasing the audience base. In this particular example, some audience members may catch a more nuanced reference to homoeroticism. For example, the comment about “taking all our women” when Rodman is clearly hugging a man can be interpreted by members of gay subcultures as homosexual, with the male in the traditionally “female” position being referred to as a “woman.” Similarly, preoccupation with penis size is certainly not the sole territory of heterosexual men, and the reminder about Rodman’s endowment could be of just as much significance to homosexual viewers. Indeed, it is possible that some homosexuals may place even more importance on the penis as a way of “proving” one’s manhood in spite of the choice to have a male sexual partner. These various levels of interpretation embedded within the text are an important part of the attempt to appeal to diverse audiences and enjoy greater commodity success in the marketplace. Although the show leaves room for readings resistant to mainstream ideas, the primary goal of selling a commodity to a mass audience limits the amount of resistant
agency that can be deployed by Rodman, and his agency remains largely reproductive of mainstream gender and sexual expectations.

In another example of Rodman’s sexual transgression, Rodman kissed female impersonator RuPaul full on the lips while appearing on his talk show. Bringing up the topic of Rodman’s sexuality, RuPaul asked Rodman, “You’ve never been with another man before, right?” Rodman, stuttering over his words, replies, “No, I’ve, I’ve... I’ve kissed men before.” RuPaul then asked Rodman, “Would you kiss me right now?” Rodman looked to the studio audience as if asking, “Do you want me to?” and the audience clapped in response. They both stood up and kissed on their closed lips, lingering a bit before separating. Afterward, Rodman looked at the audience with a smirk and shrugged his shoulders twice while RuPaul smiled widely and laughed, exclaiming, “Oh my god, Dennis Rodman! Ooooh your lips are so big and juicy!” The footage that followed included scenes of Rodman in his studio reflecting on the kiss, as well as he and RuPaul after the RuPaul show reflecting on the kiss together. Meanwhile, a split screen replayed the kiss in slow motion, much like the instant replay strategy of sports media.

Once the kiss scenario was played out, the camera cut back to footage from the RuPaul show in which Rodman was directing a question toward an audience member. He said to RuPaul as he pointed toward the audience, “She’s got to have some skeletons in her closet, she’s got to [directing his question toward the audience member]. You got a black boyfriend?” We hear the unseen woman ask, “Huh?” and Rodman rephrased his question, “You have any black in you?” She responded, “Uuuh, no,” to which Rodman asked, “You want some?” [closing his eyes as if he can’t believe he said it, as if it just slipped out]. The studio audience went wild with applause and laughter as RuPaul said to Rodman, “Oh my god, you are scandalous!” This classic interracial pickup line suggests both heterosexual sex and the image of the black man’s penis during sexual intercourse, “putting some black into” the white sexual partner. Rodman’s deployment of this image at that moment reestablished his heterosexual black masculinity in lieu of his transgression (the kiss) that could be interpreted as homosexual. Like the series of clips from The Viper Room, the order in which these images appeared from the RuPaul show only allowed Rodman to transgress so far, quickly reminding the audience that he is a black heterosexual man who clearly likes to have sex with women. The potential resistance embodied in the transgressive kiss therefore was contained and appeared to be more reproductive than resistant.

Rodman’s Fetishized Body

As a black male, Rodman is defined by a heightened form of masculinity that historically has been identified by the black male body. This is compounded by the focus on the body in sport, subjecting Rodman to a hypermasculine identity. The hypermasculinity already granted to Rodman via his identity as a black athlete continues to characterize his identity, even as he takes part in gender play. Regardless of the gender play that Rodman deploys via makeup and dress, he is seen as, and highlights the fact that he has, a gendered body that is male.

Central to Rodman’s image is his highly sculpted, athletic male body that he displays quite regularly throughout his show. In the introduction of the show, Rodman's headless, naked torso is shown as the camera pans down his body, and we see numerous pairs of women’s hands stuffing dollar bills into his spandex pants. In a recurring segment that takes the show to commercial breaks, Rodman’s naked body is seen lying on a bed as the camera again pans down his bare back, landing just above his buttocks, where a simulated tattoo of the show’s logo appears. In another similar segment that is used when returning from commercial breaks, Rodman’s full, animated, naked body is shown from the rear, posing with his hands in the air. Again the camera pans to a close up of his animated buttocks as women’s voices sing “Welcome back to the Rodman World Tour!” In addition, Rodman’s live butt becomes the object of the camera’s close-up gaze more than once within the sampled shows.

Although such ongoing objectifications occur throughout the show by both the producer’s decisions (such as the segments used during commercial breaks) and by Rodman’s actions himself, the most telling moment of Rodman’s self-objectification occurred during his appearance on Late Night With David Letterman. Letterman brought up the topic of Rodman’s then-new book, held up the book, and placed it on his desk in front of the camera for the audience to see. The front cover depicts a naked Rodman sitting on a motorcycle, a basketball covering his lap as he looks into the camera. Rodman reached over Letterman’s desk and turned the book around, setting it back in place with the back cover now facing the camera. He said as he did this, “That’s better.” The back cover shows Rodman’s full naked body from the rear view, legs standing shoulder width apart and arms extended upward in a “Y” shape holding two basketballs. This image can be interpreted as phallic, with the upheld balls representing testicles and Rodman’s lean, tall body suggesting the phallus. The fact that
Rodman prefers the back cover to the front suggests that he indeed is an agent in his own self-objectification, unlike the women in earlier described segments who had little choice in how their bodies were portrayed on Rodman’s show. Further illustrating Rodman’s view of his body as object, he later explained to Letterman why he was not chosen to be on the Olympic Dream Team: “Look at me. They don’t want something like this representing the United States” (italics added).

The most clear examples of Rodman’s self-objectification and body fetishizing come in the way of references to his penis. Implicit references to Rodman’s penis were the most numerous of all the themes that were found throughout the sampled shows (15 compared with 9 references to “badness” and 9 instances of objectification of women). Although the penis is a symbol of masculinity, it also represents biological maleness that seems to be consistent with Rodman’s focus on his sculpted male body. The prominence of penis references and consistent body fetishizing indicates Rodman’s concern with invoking biological maleness as his essence and thereby solidifying his masculinity regardless of what clothes he wears. The phallocentrism of such tactics supports hooks’s (1992) analysis of prevailing ideas about black masculinity in American culture rather than suggests that Rodman is providing a new idea about masculinity.

As early as the show’s introduction, the fact that Rodman’s penis is an intended focus of the show is illustrated. The camera pans down Rodman’s naked torso and shows female hands stuffing dollar bills into his pants; the camera lands on Rodman’s groin as a female voice says “Oh My!” To make sure the viewer knows where the focus of this comment lies, a computer-generated, animated spiral effect (similar to that used to change scenes in the old televised Batman show) emerges from Rodman’s spandex-covered penis and cuts to a new animated scene. Throughout the show, we see numerous instances where Rodman himself “spontaneously” highlights his penis during the taping of the footage that becomes the show’s content. In one instance, Rodman explained why he does not like to wear underwear, deploying the image of his long penis hanging loose: “It’s too confining. I like to free fall every once in a while, you know. . . I like to be loose. I like to be free, you know, I like to hang totally free—tall—long” (italics added). In another episode, Rodman explained to the camera audience that he likes to “stroke” himself as he introduces us to “the two most important women in [his] life,” Monique and Julie—his hands further marking him as heterosexual.

Although Rodman takes part in highlighting his penis, it is also significant that others on the show do the same thing. On more than one occasion in the sampled shows, women referred to Rodman’s penis, declaring, “I saw IT!” with nervous excitement. One woman is a middle-aged member of Rodman’s costume crew who, while helping him into his wedding dress for his book signing appearance, inadvertently saw his penis. In the scene, Rodman’s penis was not the subject of any conversation, yet when she made her declaration referring to his penis as “it,” she implied that “it” has been the topic of ongoing discussions among the production crew. In another significant scene in the backdrop of a convertible limousine, Jenny McCarthy (who, importantly, is a blonde, white woman viewed as a “sex symbol”) brought up the topic of Rodman’s penis in an allusive way. As Rodman told McCarthy, “I’m gonna be as bad as I wanna be, as good as I wanna be...” McCarthy interrupted him saying, “As hot and as [her eyes look down at Rodman’s lap exaggeratedly] large as you wanna be.” Later in the same scene, McCarthy exclaimed, “Oh my god, I saw it, Oh my god I saw it. . . Ohhh my gooood [clapping her hands in her hair in astonishment].” For further emphasis, this scene also was replayed in a clip during Rodman’s appearance on Scott Furrell’s talk radio sports show. Before the Las Vegas convertible ride with McCarthy was over, she made yet another allusion to Rodman’s penis. In the closing scene of the segment, Rodman and McCarthy were both giving the camera the two thumbs up sign when McCarthy turned toward Rodman and said, “We have three thumbs, as she again looked down at his groin. Rodman laughed, moved both his thumbs down on his lap near his penis and said, “Three thumbs.”

Rodman’s concern with making his penis visible through language and McCarthy’s seeming obsession with Rodman’s penis deploy the stereotypical focus on black men’s (and particularly black male athletes’) sexual prowess embodied in the symbol of the phallus. This hypersexuality assigned to the black male is but one part of the hypermasculinity that is encoded in the figure of the black male athlete. Historically, the black phallus has served as the object of “white fear and fascination” in racist American society (Hoch, 1979; Mercer & Julien, 1988). Citing Franz Fanon, Mercer and Julien pointed out that myths about black men’s aggressive sexuality were created by the “white master to allay his fears and anxieties as well as provid[e] a means to justify the brutalization of the colonized” black male (p. 134). This white fear and fascination is embodied perfectly in the scene with Jenny McCarthy. Because she is a white female, the interaction between Rodman and her (as well as all the other white women with whom Rodman has been interacting in sexually implicit ways) may conjure up racist concerns about black male sexuality and its imposed threat to the white female. Clearly, these instances repro-
duce sexist notions of male essentialism as well as racist notions of black male sexuality, failing to offer resistance to these powerful ideas that have structured American race and gender relations since the founding of the country.

Conclusion

The themes that emerged from MTV’s Rodman World Tour illustrate the fact that potential acts of resistance are limited when they appear within a consumer context. Although Rodman flirts with homosexuality, wears makeup, and dons sequin tops and even a wedding dress, he also embraces the hyper-(heterosexual) masculinity that is encoded on his black male athletic body. Rodman consistently marks his heterosexuality through his objectification of women and invokes his biological maleness through his fetishized self-objectification, with particular attention paid to his penis. The phallocentrism that dominates Rodman’s image reproduces the same sexist black masculinity that has prevailed over popular culture and theory alike (hooks, 1992).

The deployment of resistance discourse through Rodman’s proclamation of “being bad” in fact supports a corporate, profit-driven end and reifies black masculinity. Being “bad” allows Rodman to invoke the symbolic threat imbued in his black masculinity, much like that of the phallus to which he is constantly referring. In fact, the hypermasculinity to which black men are subject largely accounts for Rodman’s ability to transgress such gender boundaries without becoming completely marginalized. In these ways, Rodman’s image mostly works to reproduce the current race and gender system rather than offer resistance to it. Much like the so-called resistance to racism that black athletic success purports to represent while, in fact, helping to reproduce the racist notions that relegate black males to sports in the first place (Hoberman, 1997), Rodman takes part in reproducing racist and sexist ideas that had a hand in his own steering toward a career in sports (Rodman was homeless for a time and even landed in jail for theft before he suddenly grew from 5’11” to 6’6” when he was 19; see Rodman, 1996, pp. 15-20).

Reproductive agency such as Rodman’s exists within a consumer context and merely offers an individualized rebellious style that appeals to some consumers. Resistant agency takes the form of action against corporate consumer culture to disrupt oppressive institutions. Rather than constitute resistance, individualized agency such as Rodman’s is part of the process of hegemony whereby dominant norms and relations become accepted by a mass society through consent backed by the threat of force or sanction. In analyzing television, Todd Gitlin (1987) explained how the functioning of hegemony allows for alternative and sometimes oppositional ideology by absorbing it into the mainstream (p. 242). The commodification of Rodman’s so-called rebellion and transgressive gender play on MTV provides an astute example of such absorption. In addition, Rodman is situated visually and ideologically opposite Michael Jordan, the ideal image of post-Reagan (“colorblind” and equal opportunity) America (McDonald, 1996). As Jordan embodies the quintessential commodification of an athlete, Rodman’s location as his foil serves to stabilize Jordan’s image, sell the numerous products that he endorses, and thereby support the image of America that Jordan sells to America. In spite of the fact that Rodman’s image is one of rebellion against “the system,” his containment within this consumer context actually may serve to reproduce the current gender and racial order.

The prominence of Rodman’s disruptive image (a professional athlete wearing a wedding dress certainly disrupts on some level) in the media, however, does leave room for some potential resistant agency by audiences, regardless of Rodman’s own failure to resist oppressive social structures on a material level. Further research on audiences needs to explore the diverse ways that people read texts such as the Rodman World Tour to determine how Rodman’s potentially disruptive image affects them and their social environment. Is Rodman more likely to influence audiences to take part in action that challenges oppressive structures (such as fighting for gender equity in society, gay rights, or domestic partnership laws), or do they merely engage in individual acts of symbolic rebellion similar to Rodman’s own (such as buying Converse All Star sneakers and “Chicago Bulls 91” jerseys)? These questions need to be studied to understand fully the impact of popular culture on everyday social relations.