

Whom Does Kobe Bryant Represent?

by Ben McGrath

I had no particular expectation of controversy when I asked Kobe Bryant about the Miami Heat players' Twitter activism in the wake of Trayvon Martin's death, posing in hoodies as a protest against racial profiling. It was, if anything, a so-called softball question, meant to confirm my impression that Bryant, the subject of my Profile in last week's *New Yorker* magazine, who had spoken proudly of his participation in Bill Clinton's Health Matters Initiative, was more politically engaged than his idol Michael Jordan.

"Is that the kind of thing you could see yourself doing?" I asked.

Bryant paused and said, "Smartly," seeming to imply that my example wasn't one that he would have chosen himself. "I won't react to something just because I'm supposed to, because I'm an African-American. That argument doesn't make any sense to me. So we want to advance as a society and as a culture, but, say, if something happens to an African-American, we immediately come to his defense? Yet you want to talk about how far we've progressed as a society? Well, if we've progressed as a society, then you don't jump to somebody's defense just because they're African-American. You sit and you listen to the facts just like you would in any other situation, right? So I won't assert myself."

This particular quote sparked a contentious debate, particularly among African-American commentators. On ESPN, the columnist and on-air personality Jason Whitlock dismissed Bryant's "disingenuous appeal for colorblindness," and wrote that he "sounds like he's promoting Rush Limbaugh's opening monologue." Roland Martin, a former CNN contributor who now hosts a morning show on the TV One network, tweeted his disapproval so relentlessly (e.g., "Does this dude have a brain?") that Bryant was moved to call Martin's cell phone for an impromptu debate. Najee Ali, the founder of an organization called Project Islamic H.O.P.E., even called for a boycott of all products endorsed by Bryant. Yesterday, the Heat's Dwyane Wade offered a milder reproach, saying that he "respectfully" disagreed with his rival shooting guard. "It was our backyard, and being in our backyard, being something that a lot of guys on this team – not only growing up in the kind of environment that Trayvon was in – but also having young boys," Wade said, of the motivation behind the hoodie photo. "It was more so that than the color of his skin."

In our conversation, Bryant was speaking generally, more about my expectation that he should voice a strong opinion about the Martin case than about the incident itself. (He has since tweeted that he believes that "Martin was wronged" and "the system did not work.") "I won't say, 'OK, I'm going to vote for Obama just because he's an African-American,'" he went on. "I'm not going to do that in a million years. You got to sit and take everything as equal and pick the best candidate for the job. That's it. Now, from a responsibility, individually, I feel like I speak quite a bit to African-American kids about dreaming bigger. If you look at playing basketball, or you play baseball, or you're a musician, or whatever it is, there's a thousand different things that surround that career path that you can get into as well. I tweeted a while ago for athletes not just to understand their sport but to understand their sport's industry, because I think that's where it's at. You don't want to go out there and just play the game. There's so much that goes on around you in your brand and what you represent, and what you could represent."

The quotes in the preceding paragraph were not included in the Profile but they bring us back to the question of what – or whom – Bryant represents, and how he wishes to exert his considerable influence. (Ben Crump, a lawyer representing Trayvon Martin’s parents, appeared the other day on Roland Martin’s show and said, “What made the Miami Heat so inspiring is that they have this influence, and they weren’t just using it to sell basketball shoes.”) Bryant told me that the seven years that he spent living in Italy, as a child, while his father played professional basketball there, inspired in him a strong sense that there is “a much bigger world out there.” His ambitions have long seemed international in scope, if inchoate, such that he might not want to be perceived as speaking exclusively for a subset of the domestic population. “We are not even the dominant minority anymore,” the ESPN host Stephen A. Smith, who is black, said on *The Arsenio Hall Show*, on Sunday night, in the course of defending Bryant. “We have to recognize that we are outnumbered.”

A few months ago, even before the Trayvon Martin flap, the retired running back Jim Brown appeared on Hall’s show and argued that Bryant was, in effect, not a true African-American: “He is somewhat confused about culture because he was brought up in another country.” At the time, Bryant seemed almost to embrace the diss, referring to himself on Twitter as a “‘Global’ African-American” and wondering whether Nelson Mandela or Martin Luther King, Jr., would have appreciated Brown’s pejorative insinuation that Bryant’s foreign upbringing made him less authentically black. In the past week, Bryant has continued to embrace the debate, telling Roland Martin that society needs lightning rods, and that he’s willing to be one, proclaiming, via hashtag, that he was proudly color-blind and gender-blind. “Critical or not,” Bryant wrote, “We’ve had a ton of convo the last few days about a BIG issue. That’s always a good thing. Luv to ALL who tweeted thoughts.” Let’s hope that he keeps the discussion going. Michael Jordan may or may not have said “Republicans buy shoes, too,” to defend his decision not to endorse a black challenger to Senator Jesse Helms, in 1990, but he never cared to articulate a vision grander than Being Like Mike.