injects a sense of unpredictable dynamism into its unfolding, *The Pale King* seeks to top it in its effort to imitate the dynamic structure of tornado-like vortices as it (somewhat paradoxically) delves into prosodic everydayness, complacent solipsism, and consumer capitalism. The final result is overwhelming: *The Pale King* sucks in style conventions, techniques, narrative voices and perspectives to diagnose "routine, repetition, tedium, monotony, ephemeracy, inconsequence, abstraction, disorder, boredom, angst, ennui" (501) as true and fearsome enemies of our lives. And yet as Hetman notes, the novel's resonance is ultimately upbeat in its persistent reminder that the key to modern life is the ability "to find the other side of the rote, the picayune, the meaningless, the repetitive, the pointlessly complex. To be, in a word, unborable" (905). This imperative appears to apply also to Wallace's *oeuvre* itself, which, as the essays collected in the volume show, remains relevant and poignant today and is far from being "borable."

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Łukasz Muniowski. *Narrating the NBA: Cultural Representations of Leading Players after the Michael Jordan Era*. Lexington Books, 2021, 207 pages.

In *Narrating the NBA*, Łukasz Muniowski looks into the lives of, as the title informs us, leading NBA players after the Jordan era. The players in question are Shaquille O'Neal, Alonzo Mourning, Vin Baker, Allen Iverson, Antoine Walker, Steve Nash, Tim Duncan, and Kobe Bryant. The title of the book itself is highly informative, as it indicates that an attempt has been made to present these eight players as more than "just athletes," but as cultural phenomena. Moreover, the title highlights Michael Jordan

(the only name mentioned in the title) as a towering figure in the NBA, especially in the 1990s, which decade Muniowski aptly refers to as "the Michael Jordan Era." At this point, I need to note that I am writing this review as a researcher and, more importantly, as a fan of basketball, the NBA, and some of the players[5] whose (auto) biographies are analyzed by Muniowski. Therefore, I am biased. I am biased in the sense that *Narrating the NBA* is one of those books which I consume passionately, regardless of their academic value, which is not to say that the academic significance of Muniowski's work is debatable.

Narrating the NBA opens with an Introduction, which provides a richly documented history of sports writing (mainly) in America. In his review of this particular genre, Muniowski focuses on sports journalism and the concepts of biography and autobiography. He also presents the modern understanding of sports as a part of Debordian society of spectacle at the crossroads of sports, business, and the media.

In the first chapter, Muniowski analyzes the mythical status of Michael Jordan. Now, Muniowski and I disagree on a number of things when it comes to Jordan. For example, I consider Jordan to be the GOAT (Greatest of All Time), to which Muniowski replies that there are other players worthy of consideration, to which my reply is, "Come on!" and I believe that renders all his arguments invalid. I also think that he puts too much emphasis on Jordan's control over the narratives which made him reach "a truly mythical status" (Muniowski 26). For example, while I agree that Jordan and his PR team had some power over the manner in which Jordan conducted himself on and off the court, they did not have power over the publication of Sam Smith's *The Jordan Rules,* which book, as observed by Muniowski himself:

> presented Michael Jordan as he was—arrogant, cocky and competitive—which was not how he conducted himself during public appearances. Paradoxically, the book played a vital role in the popularization of Jordan and, in consequence, the sport of basketball, as the hero was made, somewhat surprisingly, more appealing thanks to his demythologization. (19)

The paradox presented above puts Jordan's power to narrate his own story in question. Had Jordan not dazzled and won on the basketball court, there would be no mythical Jordan, just as there are no mythical: Penny Hardaway, Vince Carter, and Grant Hill, all of whom are mentioned in *Narrating the NBA*, yet none of whom has a chapter devoted to his biography.

There are opinions, however, which Muniowski and I share. One is that Jordan "may have been the most important athlete of the twentieth century" (Muniowski 20), which claim is supported by a 2022 poll conducted by HoopsHype among 52 former and current NBA players, which places Jordan on the top of the list of the most influential players in the NBA history with 73.85% of the votes (Scotto). I also agree that "no player has influenced the NBA discourse the way Jordan did and none has contributed to the importance of basketball-related storytelling as much as he" (Muniowski 20), or in the words of the comedian Bill Burr, "It's like when Michael

5 That is a polite way of saying that I am a "Michael Jordan psycho fan"—Muniowski's words, not mine.

Jordan came into the NBA. He was so fucking good... he wiped out everyone. No one ever goes, 'He's the next Dr. J..' 'He's the next Wilt.' No one says that. It's always, 'He's the next Mike'" (46:36–52). Not only did Jordan "erase the NBA's past," but his career also "established a blueprint" for a hybrid of the sporting, marketing and personal narratives (Muniowski 21) for "the next Jordans," and I too think that none of these players managed to reach status equal to Jordan's due to the "fact that sports stars simply are no longer able to become mythical heroes…. Instead, they are celebrities" and even though they "still are personages 'of not only local but world historical moment'… sports stars are no more regarded as more than human" (Muniowski 21). With that observation, the Author moves on to his analysis of the narrative strategies used in the (auto)biographies of eight NBA players.

The first player analyzed by Muniowski is Shaquille O'Neal whose biographies ought to be viewed as a clear case of self-promotion and even false advertising—the blurb of the 2012 *Shaq Uncut* promises "Juicy, behind the scenes peeks" none of which can be found in the book. What can be found is yet another case of O'Neal portraying himself as black Superman—an archetypical superhuman of many talents, capable of doing more than others, which as Muniowski demonstrates is an example of a star/celebrity's subjectivity and control over their own biography, which is characteristic to the "narcissistic culture of professional sports" (55).

The next player on the list is Shaq's contemporary and, for a time, his main rival, Alonzo Mourning. In the analysis of Mourning's biography *Resilience,* Muniowski, in a most fascinating manner, presents how a spiritual story can be told through a corporeal narrative. By fitting the Mourning's tale of his battle against focal glomerulosclerosis into the context of African American Christianity, in which physical and spiritual healing is an important element of exercising faith, Muniowski demonstrates how Mourning created a spiritual text with a conscious decision to be a role model and to inspire. In the Author's view, *Resilience* reconnects the body and the spirit in an exemplary fashion by "conveying an account of a disease in the form of autobiography" (61).

The chapter on Vin Baker also treats on a story of overcoming a disease—alcoholism. This athlete's life story, as told in his autobiography *God and Starbucks*, is analyzed by Muniowski in terms of "The Downfall and Rebirth" (73). Baker's biography, as retold by Muniowski, is a textbook example of an alcoholic's tale of how his own character flaws and insecurities led him to addiction (the downfall), and how he was able to regain sobriety through faith (the rebirth), which allowed him to fill *God and Starbucks* with lessons for other athletes, and other drinkers as well. While Muniowski aptly demonstrates the "correlation between alcoholism, Christianity, and sports" (76), especially in terms of healing through a narrative cure (constant retelling of the story of addiction), it must be noted that the Author's focus on Christianity is somewhat limited, as the members of AA (frequently mentioned by both Baker and Muniowski) refer to their "Higher Power," which needs not to be Jehovah or Christ. However, the choice of Christianity is understandable when discussing the story of Vin Baker—an alcoholic Christian in America.

Allen Iverson (AI), who also had a fair share of alcohol abuse in his life, is analyzed in terms of "Celebrity and the Event" (89). I must admit I never understood

the phenomenon of Allen Iverson. Chapter Five of *Narrating the NBA* does little to help me understand the level of reverence AI has received, but I guess that was not the Author's goal. His goal was to present the complexity of Iverson's persona and his life story as being reflected in two Events for which Iverson is most remembered, and this Muniowski does splendidly. Perhaps the reason why I "don't get" Iverson is because, as the Author ingeniously demonstrates, he was an Event himself, a temporary occurrence, which I missed. Muniowski concludes that the player, who placed "keeping it real" above all else, was a product of harsh environment, the stereotypes of which Iverson embraced in his search for freedom. Unfortunately, all that AI's "realness" does for me is to remind me of the *Chappelle's Show* and a series of sketches entitled "When Keeping It Real Can Go Very Wrong" ("Chappelle's Show" 03:15–05:21)

My reaction to Antoine Walker's story, after reading Chapter Six, is actually quite opposite to my reaction to AI. Both players' careers had similar trajectory of the rise and fall narrative, both of them considered themselves the best players on the court, both of them enjoyed some measure of success, and neither of them lived up to the expectations, nor reached their full potential. The difference between the two, in my view, is that Walker was overconfident and Iverson was an asshole, which opinion, prior to reading *Narrating the NBA,* was that of a basketball fan; now, it is backed by scholarship and for that I have to thank Muniowski. By applying philosophical observations of Dominic D.P. Johnson and Aaron James to Walker's story, the Author in a quite endearing way, presents Walker as a victim of "positive illusions" (109), whose, frequently emphasized, generosity excludes him from being portrayed as someone who systematically allowed himself to enjoy special advantages in interpersonal relations out of an entrenched sense of entitlement that immunized him against the complaints of other people—an asshole.

Steve Nash was definitely not an asshole. How could he be? After all, he was seen (by some) as a white savior—who arrived to the "too black" league and saved its fundamental values. I use the irony here merely as an introduction to Muniowski's excellent exposition of the complexity of race relations characteristic to the NBA, sports, and American culture. In his analysis of the biographies of the "long-haired, skinny, white" superstar, the author demonstrates how, depending on the narrative, Nash can be seen as the hero or the antihero of the post-Jordan NBA. He was the NBA's establishment's hero by elimination (Bryant too selfish, Duncan too boring, and Iverson too controversial (128)), but also the predominantly black players league's antihero (white, beer drinking, and "sympathy MVP"). In Muniowski's conclusion that "Nash's legacy do not have much to do with his skin color and background, but rather with the fact that these issues are brought up whenever his basketball ability is disputed" (141), the hackneyed platitudes of "everything is a matter of perspective (and context)" becomes a fact. The additional value of this chapter is that it signals the rise of nationalistic sentiments, the full-blown effects of which are exemplified by Trump's presidency and the Russian invasion of Ukraine. Interestingly, while such sentiments have been evident in the post-9/11 America, the Author reveals their Canadian face.

I have always liked the San Antonio Spurs and their leader, David Robinson (obviously not as much as the Bulls and Jordan), yet I have never cared much for Tim Duncan. Not that I did not like him as a basketball fan, I just saw him as a member

of one of my favorite teams—no one special, which is odd given Duncan's five championship rings and three Finals MVP titles, and two regular season MVP titles. The list of his achievements is far longer, and proves that Duncan was one of the best players in the league's history. I was unable to understand my lack of fascination with Duncan until Muniowski explained it to me in his book… Duncan was boring, and, as the Author proves, it is narrative boredom that reflects Duncan's basketball genius.

Kobe Bryant I have been fascinated with, in that I hated his guts, mainly because Bryant, "throughout his career, at times very successfully, tried to emulate Michael Jordan" (Muniowski 161), which I found sacrilegious. Muniowski's analysis of Kobe Bryant as the embodiment of the spectacle is most accurate, and I have already expressed that in writing, somewhat indirectly though:

> If it were true that Americans did not react to the killings of unarmed black men and, in consequence, police officers, because they were watching a basketball game, which in itself was a spectacle 'prepared by the league, the team and the player' (Muniowski 226), that means that America is a society of spectacle as proposed by Debord; a society which chooses *panem et circenses* over social issues. (Jacheć 155)

I have not much to add, except that, as in life, so in death, Bryant was the spectacle. Also, since *Narrating the NBA*, due to the time of its conception, does not cover the untimely death of Kobe Bryant in 2020 and how it resulted in hagiographication of Bryant's persona, I would like to shamelessly direct any reader interested in Bryant's persona to my own article, which not only confirms the observations presented in Chapter Nine of *Narrating the NBA,* but also provides a *Post Scriptum* to Muniowski's study on Bryant.

With Kobe Bryant, *Narrating the NBA* comes full circle, in the sense that the book starts with Jordan, who may have started the sports/business/media spectacle in America, and ends with Bryant who embraced and embodied the very spectacle.

Garry Whannel, in his typology of celebrity biographies, lists the following types of the functions of such narratives: "the exposé/hatchet job, the hagiography, the 'real' person revealed, the chronological account, the 'meaning' of the subject as capturing the *Zeitgeist* or reflecting his or her time, and the subject as creative genius" (117). Muniowski, to some extent, uses Whannel's typology and expands it by looking at the cultural representations of the players through the prism of certain universal concepts discussed in humanities—boredom, event, celebrity, body, spectacle, etc.. In doing so, Muniowski manages to demonstrate how important biographies of contemporary sports (not just basketball) stars can be to students and researchers of media studies, sports studies, and American studies in general.

Narrating the NBA offers an insightful analysis of narrative strategies used in attempts to encapsulate lives of prominent athletes and simultaneously to put these life stories in a larger, cultural context. Moreover, the book is a fascinating tale of people behind public images, which brilliantly illustrates the complexities and polysemic meanings behind the personas of those who function in the world of professional sports, corporate interests, and the story-hungry media. In *Narrating the NBA,* Muniowski displays his vast knowledge of the topic, acute analysis and insightful observations,

which I appreciate immensely. Moreover, the author, who is a basketball fan himself, throughout his book manages to "keep it real"—in the academic sense, of course. That, I salute.

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