

5-2015

# The Dramatistic Implications of Burke's Guilt Redemption Cycle in the Donald Sterling Communication Crisis

Molly J. Billings

*The College at Brockport*, [mbill2@u.brockport.edu](mailto:mbill2@u.brockport.edu)

Follow this and additional works at: <http://digitalcommons.brockport.edu/honors>



Part of the [Gender, Race, Sexuality, and Ethnicity in Communication Commons](#)

---

## Repository Citation

Billings, Molly J., "The Dramatistic Implications of Burke's Guilt Redemption Cycle in the Donald Sterling Communication Crisis" (2015). *Senior Honors Theses*. 114.

<http://digitalcommons.brockport.edu/honors/114>

This Honors Thesis is brought to you for free and open access by the Master's Theses and Honors Projects at Digital Commons @Brockport. It has been accepted for inclusion in Senior Honors Theses by an authorized administrator of Digital Commons @Brockport. For more information, please contact [kmyers@brockport.edu](mailto:kmyers@brockport.edu).

The Dramatistic Implications of Burke's Guilt Redemption Cycle in the  
Donald Sterling Communication Crisis

A Senior Honors Thesis

Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements  
for Graduation in the Honors College

By  
Molly J. Billings  
Communication and Political Science Major

The College at Brockport  
May 2015

Thesis Director: Dr. Matthew Althouse, Associate Professor, Communication

*Educational use of this paper is permitted for the purpose of providing future students a model example of an Honors senior thesis project.*

## Introduction

In the spring of 2014, the National Basketball Association (NBA) was rocked by a scandal involving racism. Donald Sterling, the owner of the Los Angeles Clippers, one of the NBA's thirty basketball teams, provoked a national controversy when a recording of a private conversation with his mistress, V. Stiviano, became public. In that conversation, Sterling made a series of disparaging statements about African Americans. He asks Stiviano, "Why are you taking pictures with minorities?" and later tells her "not to bring them to my games" (*Donald Sterling Racist*). Needless to say, as the owner of a predominantly African American NBA basketball team, Sterling's private comments were not well received by the vast majority of the Clippers' players, the team's head coach, or the National Basketball Association (NBA). Numerous players on teams all over the league threatened to boycott the NBA Finals games, which were taking place during that time, if Sterling was not removed from his ownership (Markazi, "NBPA Thinks" para. 1). The Clippers players themselves staged a silent protest during one of their playoff games by refusing to display the Clippers' name or logo on their warm up uniforms (Markazi, "Clippers Stage" para. 1). In addition, several of the Clippers' sponsors began disassociating themselves from the team, resulting in potentially huge sums of revenue loss (Moore para. 10). Eventually, the controversy subsided when Sterling was banned for life from the NBA by its commissioner, Adam Silver.

After his ban, Sterling tried to rectify the damage done by his racially charged comments. He embarked on a public relations campaign to resuscitate his image and regain control of his team ownership. However, Sterling's campaign strategy was hopelessly flawed: He alternated between playing the victim, the apologist, and the aggressor, while never fully encompassing any of these roles. The failure of Sterling's damage control was not only his continued exile from the

NBA ranks, but considerable injury to his own reputation and status in society. Little known facts about Sterling's past soon became public knowledge, like Sterling's involvement in several discrimination lawsuits regarding employment and housing and his alleged "refusal to rent to blacks and Hispanics" (Levin para.9). Clippers players, such as Blake Griffin, also claimed that Sterling was a "known racist" and acted like a "weird uncle" (Young para. 4-7). Consequently, the result of Sterling's efforts to clear his name was a public relations disaster, which did nothing to redeem Sterling in the eyes of society.

This essay is designed to investigate the shortcomings of Sterling's apologies and the implications of his controversial comments. To accomplish this goal, it utilizes Kenneth Burke's guilt-redemption cycle. With terms associated with this process, this essay demonstrates that Sterling's expression of regret—his "sacrifice"—was not sufficient to appease his critics in the National Basketball Association (NBA) or in American society at large. To explain the complexity of the Sterling controversy, this essay unfolds in four parts. First, the essay discusses the background of Sterling's remarks. Second, this essay will explain Burke's guilt redemption cycle and its associated concepts. Third, this essay will apply these concepts to analyze Sterling's comments in four acts. Finally, this essay will conclude with closing commentary about the Sterling saga and its future implications.

### Background

Sports organizations can be more or less characterized as controlled by white elites, but dominated by minority players. In the NBA, there is a clear racial gap between the overwhelmingly white NBA owners and the predominantly black players. Approximately 76% of the players are black, while there is only one black majority owner, Michael Jordan, in the entire league (Chalabi para 5). Of course, this isn't a trend exclusive to the NBA. According to

Mona Chalabi, out of the three major sports leagues, including the NBA, MLB, and NFL, there is only one black principal owner out of a total of 92 teams. Prominent positions such as coaching jobs, managers, and league office staff are also largely dominated by white employees. In general, the higher one moves up the sports hierarchy, the more likely a position will be held by someone who is white.

For the most part, racial issues in the NBA have been obscured by a strategy scholars have dubbed “the new racism,” where “extraordinary measures are taken” by those who “fail to account for race in the NBA and society at large” to “explain away racial disparities using non-racial terms and explanations.” For instance, the “overrepresentation of black players” and the “predominately white owners and decision makers” are “not viewed primarily as a manifestation of the persistence of racism in American society.” Instead, it is those who choose to highlight this racial gap who are “going racial” (Martin 101). Using this strategy, the NBA makes itself largely immune to racial criticism by rhetorically undermining its critics. This tactic serves to provide a justification for the status quo, while serving to conceal the underlying racial tension.

In certain instances, when racial tension cannot be easily explained away, the plantation narrative is used to highlight the relative power imbalance between the predominantly white owners and the predominantly black players. In the past, white plantation owners profited from the labor of their black slaves, while today’s NBA owners profit from the labor of their black players. Naturally, this historical analogy holds a great deal of emotional and social capital for those who seek to challenge the status quo. As David J. Leonard explains: “The references to slavery are not literal comparisons, but rhetorical devices that seek to emphasis power, race, and the control of black bodies within modern sporting context. The rhetorical comparison/analogy isn’t simply about physical control but ideological and mental power differentials” (para. 13).

Unfortunately for Sterling, the plantation narrative seems especially appropriate. As a white owner of a predominantly black team, he bears a passing resemblance to the historical role of slave master over his players, at least in terms of the organizational structure of the NBA. In light of the controversy, Sterling's inflammatory comments made this an especially obvious comparison because his words implied a real sense of ownership that went beyond the employer-employee relationship. As one current NBA player explained on his Twitter account: "Sterling basically articulated Plantation Politics...Make money off the Bucks/Lay with the Women/No Association in Public good or bad" (West para. 1). Considering Sterling's mistress describes herself as "black and Mexican" and bucks refers to a kind of male animal, the player's characterization of Sterling seems to accurately portray the common stereotypes associated with white slave masters, who often exploited their slaves for economic or sexual profit, while refusing to acknowledge them as their social equals (*Donald Sterling Racist*).

In this instance, the plantation narrative forced the participants in this drama to accept pre-established roles according to their race and relative power position. Since this socially constructed reality revolved around Sterling, he became the focal point of much racial tension and frustration. By embodying the role of slave master, Sterling inadvertently underscores the racial disparity between the players and management. This perception damaged Sterling's attempts to regain his team and reputation because it aggravated the latent cancer of racism. For a league dependent on so many African American players for economic success, equating an owner to a kind of slave master was detrimental to the NBA's reigning hierarchy. Not only does this racist persona threaten the exalted status of the owners, it also provokes the players into a metaphorical slave revolt. Consequently, Sterling had to be removed to preserve the stability of the league and its organizational structure.

## Method

The Donald Sterling communication crisis may be illuminated with Kenneth Burke's guilt redemption cycle, a process of purging individual or collective guilt through symbolic expression. According to Burke, as symbol using animals belonging to a collective tribe, all human beings experience some sense of guilt, which is a kind of "hierarchical embarrassment" akin to "the theological doctrine of Original Sin" (*Permanence and Change* 278). More than just a fleeting moment of personal discomfort, guilt encompasses a whole range of unpleasant or negative feelings experienced by the individual. Consequently, the primary purpose of communication is to purge guilt, which is the result of a violation of societal norms. This violation includes three related concepts: the established order, the negative, and the human ideal of perfection (McManus 6).

This process begins with an understanding of "order," which is a "socio-political" hierarchy that constrains the actions of individuals (Burke, *Rhetoric of Religion* 41). Burke compares order to a social "covenant" (*Rhetoric of Religion* 180). Implicit in this covenant is the concept of the negative, which gives humans "the power to be moral" and "by the same token gives them the power to be immoral" (Burke, *Rhetoric of Religion* 291). In the realm of the non-verbal, the "principle of the negative" is very simply what something "is not" (Burke, *Rhetoric of Religion* 18). Translated into moral law, the negative essentially becomes a command of "thou shalt not" (Burke, *Rhetoric of Religion* 89). Consequently, "out of the negative, guilt will arise. For the negative makes the law; and in the possibility of saying no to the law, there is guilt" (Burke, *Rhetoric of Religion* 294). Since humans are "rotten with perfection," they inevitably feel a sense of guilt for saying no to order by not obeying the moral law (Burke, *Language as*

*Symbolic Action* 16). For that reason, the creation of guilt becomes the first stage in the guilt redemption cycle.

In the second stage of the cycle, to renew one's good standing in a social covenant, the individual must choose his/her path of purification through mortification or victimage. Mortification requires blaming and sacrificing oneself to achieve redemption. This process requires "a kind of governance, an extreme form of 'self-control,' the deliberate, disciplinary 'slaying' of any motive that, for 'doctrinal' reasons, one thinks of as unruly" as a "systematic way of saying no to Disorder, or obediently saying yes to Order" (*Rhetoric of Religion* 190). In contrast to mortification, victimage involves blaming or sacrificing an external source to achieve redemption. This process involves the choice to shift the guilt from oneself to a "sacrificial offering" (Burke, *Permanence and Change* 284). This sacrificial offering is known as a "scapegoat" that will act as a "sacrificial redeemer" for the guilty (Burke, *Rhetoric of Religion* 190-200).

Third, the goal of any attempt at purification is redemption, which can take one of two paths. Redemption can result in transcendence, where the temporary "discord" becomes only a "passing note" in history and is no longer felt by the established order, or redemption can result in the suppression of the source of guilt (Burke, *Rhetoric of Religion* 230). In any case, redemption is only a "temporary condition that follows upon purification of guilt" (Bobbitt, *Rhetoric of Redemption* 41). Since guilt is an intrinsic part of human nature, Burke's guilt redemption cycle is endlessly repeated, resulting in the possibility of both destruction and rebirth for the individual and the established order.

For purposes of this study, the *choice* of scapegoat in the process of purification bears some discussion. Burke describes the scapegoat as "a concentration of power," which can



“possess the divinity of a sacrificial king” (*Grammar* 407). However, not all scapegoats are created as equals. In *Permanence and Change*, Burke notes that “civilization is marked by great diversity in both labor and leisure” making “victimage correspondingly fragmentary” (287). This “fragmentary victimage may thus require a ‘total’ victim” to be sufficiently cured (Burke, *Permanence and Change* 287). In other words, fragmentary victimage is the use of insufficient scapegoats to purify oneself of guilt that results from division in an increasingly disjointed and diverse society. In an ideal world, it would be better to choose one complete scapegoat to embody and channel one’s guilt than to use a collection of lesser scapegoats to meet different needs. This need for completeness resonates with the endless pursuit of human perfection, which is embodied in the desire for a perfect victim or perfect cure. However, in reality, a complete or total scapegoat is not readily available in a society that places so many competing demands upon the individual. Nevertheless, human beings tend to look for a complete scapegoat (like Jesus) to deal with the uncertain and fragmentary nature of society, but usually have to settle for a less-than-perfect solution.

In the process of purification, a scapegoat is powerful because it helps to determine whether the violator gets redeemed, through the nature and scope of its sacrifice. In *Permanence and Change*, Burke references the “idea of a personally fit victim” and acknowledges it “could lead to many different notions, such as (1) the ideal of a perfect victim (Christ); (2) the Greeks’ enlightened use of criminals who had been condemned to death, but were kept on reserve for state occasions when some ritual sacrifice was deemed necessary; (3) Hitler’s ‘idealizing of the Jew as ‘perfect enemy’” (217). Expanding upon Burke’s examples, I propose that any successful attempt at purification through victimage requires a victim that will act as an appropriate or suitable sacrificial vessel for the violator’s guilt: I call this vessel a fitting sacrifice.

In contrast to my notion of a fitting sacrifice, as previously mentioned, Burke uses Christ as an example of the “perfect victim” in the *Rhetoric of Religion* (190-200). Though there are many reasons why Christ might fit this role, I deduced three important elements about his sacrifice that stand out: (1) he possessed a great deal of legitimacy, which can be defined as credibility, stature, importance, or influence; (2) he was a voluntary (or passive) victim, which can be defined as a non-threatening victim, who lacks the agency to fight back or who chooses not to fight back; (3) he played a relevant role in the various series of events. By meeting the qualifications of both a perfect victim and a fitting sacrifice, Christ’s death was (supposedly) sufficient to purge the guilt in society; for only the son of God could possibly cleanse the sins of man.

In an effort to distinguish between a perfect victim and a fitting sacrifice, I will define a perfect victim as someone who is legitimate, voluntary, and relevant, who exceeds the qualifications of a fitting sacrifice. However, a fitting sacrifice is merely an appropriate sacrifice with the capability of purging the violator of guilt, who lacks the voluntary nature of a perfect victim. While a perfect victim will theoretically result in total redemption, a fitting sacrifice will merely balance the pollution created in society, resolve the current tension in the established order, and provide at least partial purification.

In many cases, people tend to scapegoat others when they are accused of violations of societal norms, which can often lead to contests of credibility. Credibility is an essential part of rhetoric and often shapes the perception of the audience before any communication takes place. In certain circumstances, credibility becomes the metaphorical weapon that determines the winner in a battle of scapegoats. Whoever has the highest degree of credibility will possess the greatest weapon, giving them the rhetorical advantage to defeat their foes in symbolic combat.

For that reason, one should never try to sacrifice someone he/she cannot metaphorically slay. After all, she who cannot slay may be slain for her attempt.

Unfortunately, choosing the wrong scapegoat or an ill-fitting sacrifice can have important repercussions. Just as the punishment must fit the crime, so too must the scapegoat fit the degree of pollution created in society. Ideally, there must be a kind of balance between the pollution caused in society and the size of the sacrifice. If this ratio is imbalanced and the sacrifice is ill proportioned, then the pollution will not be purged from society, leaving the guilt with the violator and giving cause for the established order to constrain the individual's actions. Thereby, presenting a scapegoat too great or insufficient will usually not have the intended effect of purifying one's guilt and will only serve to continue the cycle, creating more pollution in the process. To limit the effects of one's guilt, it is paramount to find a fitting sacrifice as early as possible in the purification stage, though this may be a difficult task. Ultimately, the lack of a fitting sacrifice or perfect victim could lead to a lack of purification, which was the case for Donald Sterling.

Sterling's journey through the guilt redemption cycle unfolded in four acts over the course of a few months in 2014. In Act One, Sterling's initial derogatory comments are presented to the public in the form of leaked recordings to the press in late April, which become the source of Sterling's unresolved guilt. In Act Two, Sterling attempts to purify his guilt in an interview with Anderson Cooper that aired May 12, which only results in more pollution and guilt. In Act Three, Sterling releases a statement to the press on June 10 where he rejects his weak attempts at mortification and embraces a more coherent strategy of victimage. In Act Four, Sterling takes his case to court and testifies on July 9, only to have his strategy fall apart when he

is confronted by a new narrative of mental instability. Ultimately, Sterling's failure to purify his guilt leads to the loss of his team and his high status in society.

### Act One

The controversy started when secret recordings of Sterling's racially charged comments were made public. The first recording was released on April 25, 2014 by TMZ, a popular website about celebrity gossip, but it quickly spread to more mainstream news websites, including *CNN*, the *Washington Post*, *USA Today*, and the *Los Angeles Times*. Shortly after the first recording was released, a second extended version of the recording was released, containing even more disparaging comments towards African Americans, which prolonged the visibility of the story in the news cycle. Though it remains unclear who actually released the recordings, the person responsible for the recording was Sterling's mistress, V. Stiviano, who claimed she taped Sterling with his permission so he could "learn things about himself" (Mandell para. 10). In the resulting fallout, the private nature of Sterling's conversation was largely overlooked. Had the public been more accepting of the Sterling's comments within a private context, or if his comments were less overtly racial in nature, perhaps the controversy could have been smoothed over. Of course, this did not happen. Many interpreted Sterling's comments as blatantly racist and it was this symbolic act that led to his fall from grace.

Analyzing Sterling's comments, it is important to recognize how Sterling fulfills the role of slave master through his symbolic actions. In particular, one must pay special attention to the racial implications of his derogatory language. Telling his girlfriend "it bothers me a lot that you want to promote...broadcast that you're associating with black people," Sterling repeatedly illustrates his intolerance of minorities (*Donald Sterling Racist*). He also asserts: "I support them, I give them food and clothes and cars and houses" (*Clippers Owner*). The notion of Sterling

giving the Clippers players things instead of them earning their wages is one of main pieces of evidence to support the creation of the plantation narrative surrounding Sterling, which was also furthered by Sterling's relationship to Stiviano.

As a white man lawfully married to a white woman, Sterling's choice of a racially "mixed" mistress reinforced his characterization as a slave master, who exploited a young woman who worked for him (*Donald Sterling Racist*). Her role as Sterling's mistress included expectations of submissiveness, which Sterling articulates through his assertion of stereotypes. He tells Stiviano that she's "supposed to be a delicate white or a delicate Latina girl," even though she points out that she's both "black and Mexican" (*Donald Sterling Racist*). This fact makes very little difference to Sterling, who continues to criticize her for publicizing her association with "minorities" on Instagram, insisting: "You can sleep with them. You can bring them in. You can do whatever you want. The little I ask you is not to promote it...and not to bring them to my games" (*Donald Sterling Racist*). Instead, Sterling urges her "to love them privately" (*Donald Sterling Racist*). When Stiviano challenges Sterling by pointing out his own association with "black people," Sterling tells her "I'm not you and you're not me" (*Donald Sterling Racist*). By perpetuating the notion of public disassociation and private acceptance, Sterling seems to implicitly reinforce the historical and hierarchical separation of whites and blacks in society, while also displaying his dominance over Stiviano. He makes it clear that she must abide by certain rules and behaviors that he is not expected to follow, thereby placing himself at the top of a social hierarchy with both "minorities" and his "mixed" mistress occupying a lower rank.

Interestingly enough, Sterling gives no indication that he is aware of the offensive nature of his comments. He repeatedly tells her: "I'm living in a culture and I have to live within the

culture,” implying that one must abide by the dominant norms of the time (*Donald Sterling Racist*). In this case, Sterling does not portray himself as an individual agent capable of making his own choices; he portrays himself as part of a larger society, at the mercy of societal norms, and constrained by the overarching scene. Some of these norms, dictated by the scene, include a certain attitude towards minorities and African Americans. Calling upon longstanding traditions of racial prejudice, Sterling explains: “People feel certain things. Hispanics feel certain things towards blacks. Blacks feel certain things towards other groups. It’s been that way historically and it will always be that way” (*Donald Sterling Racist*). From this perspective, Sterling is not responsible for his racist beliefs because he is merely a reflection of society’s beliefs. Instead, Stiviano and the people who agree with her need to “adjust to the world” and not fight society’s views (*Donald Sterling Racist*). By making these statements, Sterling effectively positions himself as the protector of the established order, while he portrays his girlfriend as a violator of that order, which is somewhat ironic given the dramatic role reversal he undergoes as a result of this conversation.

Naturally, the tragic irony of Sterling’s comments is that he is the one in violation of society’s norms; he is the one who should “adjust” to the world, not his mistress. Yet Sterling is blinded by his tragic flaw: pride. According to Burke, “pride is linked with nobility and nobility with authority” (*Rhetoric of Religion* 109). Due to his immense hubris, Sterling cannot see how his viewpoint fundamentally contradicts the values of the existing culture. Consequently by setting himself above all those he deems inferior, Sterling not only sets himself up for a fall, he also loses his nobility and authority in the process.

Sterling’s fall was swift and brutal. On April 29, 2014, approximately “three days after the scandal broke,” Adam Silver publicly condemned Sterling, banned him for life from the

NBA, fined him 2.5 million dollars (the maximum amount under the NBA Constitution), and promised to do everything possible to “remove” Sterling from the elite club of NBA owners (Shelburne, “Donald Sterling Receives” para. 1-6). As the main symbol of his nobility and authority, Sterling’s ownership of the Clippers was intrinsically linked to his identity. As a result, Sterling suffered from what Burke calls a “diminished identity” or “identity deficit,” often associated with the loss of status or power (Anderson 168). Thus, Sterling’s symbolically constructed identity was crushed by the symbolically constructed plantation narrative that painted him as a racist, modern-day slave owner and provided the justification for taking away Sterling’s symbol of power.

In an effort to reconstruct his identity, repair his reputation, and regain his status in society, Sterling sought to purify his guilt to achieve redemption. In the following section, I will discuss Sterling’s first disastrous attempt at purification in his interview with Anderson Cooper.

### Act Two

In the days following Adam Silver’s announcement, the NBA and its players seemed to breathe a collective sigh of relief. Many people felt that Silver’s brand of punishment was just, that Sterling had been dealt with accordingly, and that the new Commissioner handled the controversy in a timely and effective fashion. After Sterling’s ban, the NBA Finals continued with few distractions and the mounting tension had been diffused. The whole episode could have ended quickly, but Sterling was unable to accept this new reality and tried desperately to change it. In his interview with Anderson Cooper, Sterling was faced with the immense task of deconstructing his negative public persona and rebuilding his credibility, but he only ended up cementing his role as the antagonist of his own drama.

Analyzing Sterling's interview with Anderson Cooper, it's important to examine Sterling's various attempts at both mortification and victimage, while also looking at his choice of scapegoats. Though Sterling's stated purpose for this interview was to apologize (via mortification), his real purpose seems to be exonerating himself from any kind of responsibility (via victimization). In the beginning of the interview, Sterling sounds genuinely remorseful, saying "I made a terrible, terrible mistake. And I'm here with you today to apologize and to ask for forgiveness for all the people that I have hurt" ("Exclusive Interview"). These comments indicate a clear attempt at mortification. However, as the interview goes on, he begins to portray Stiviano as the real instigator of his racist comments. Telling Cooper "I don't know why the girl had me say those things," Sterling begins to blame Stiviano for his racist comments, even though she was the one challenging his views ("Exclusive Interview"). Very quickly, it becomes clear that Sterling is trying to make his estranged girlfriend a scapegoat, which indicates a shift to victimage.

Sterling's choice to use Stiviano as a scapegoat was a poor one. Sterling portrays her as a "street person," who was "just setting me up" ("Exclusive Interview"). Since scapegoats are symbolically constructed by those who seek to purge their guilt, these vessels must be endowed with the power to purify by their creators, which creates the need for credibility. However, by portraying Stiviano in such a negative light, Sterling ends up undermining the vessel meant to purify his guilt. Not only does she become tainted by her alleged relations with Sterling, she becomes tainted by Sterling himself and therefore she did not possess the kind of legitimacy or credibility that would make her a powerful enough vessel to purge Sterling of the enormous pollution he created. For that reason, Stiviano was more of a fragmentary scapegoat, not a fitting sacrifice, and she did very little to further his cause.



Aside from his mistress, Sterling also tried to scapegoat Magic Johnson, who was briefly mentioned in the previous Sterling recordings. Unlike Sterling, who has a history of racist allegations and controversy in his past, Johnson is a beloved figure in the NBA community and an important cultural figure in society-at-large. As one of the greatest basketball players of all time, Johnson was already famous when he contracted HIV and became a leading spokesperson for the cause. In fact, Johnson's HIV announcement has been called "the single most significant major new event and crucial turning point in the history of the epidemic" (Treichler 85). His role in raising awareness and debunking the common myth of HIV as a "gay disease" helped to reduce its stigmatization and led to greater mainstream acceptance (Treichler 6). In addition, Johnson's numerous philanthropic efforts and successful business ventures made him a respected entrepreneur, while his charismatic personality allowed him to remain extremely popular in the public eye. However, Johnson's role in the Sterling saga was relatively minor until Sterling inexplicably made him the target of much of his pent up animosity.

In the Anderson Cooper interview, Sterling asserts that Johnson is a bad role model because "he's got AIDS" and frequently conflates HIV with AIDS, even though Johnson does not actually have AIDS ("Exclusive Interview"). Though the common perception of HIV and AIDS has changed, Sterling still uses Johnson's diseased status as an indictment against him as an individual. In particular, Sterling uses the negative stereotype of HIV as proof of Johnson's promiscuity and lack of morality, telling Cooper "...what kind of a guy goes to every city, he has sex with every girl, then he catches HIV and — is that someone we want to respect and tell our kids about? I think he should be ashamed of himself. I think he should go into the background" ("Exclusive Interview"). Furthermore, Sterling questions "what does he do for the black people? Doesn't do anything" ("Exclusive Interview"). In contrast to African Americans, Sterling

contends that “Jews, when they get successful, they will help their people” (“Exclusive Interview”). To drive home his point, Sterling (who happens to be Jewish) claims he spends “millions on giving away and helping minorities,” while “some of the African-Americans...they don’t want to help anybody” (“Exclusive Interview”).

Sterling’s characterization of Johnson is astonishing not only for his personal attacks on Johnson’s character, but also for Sterling’s choice of scapegoat. Of all people, why on earth would he choose to attack Johnson, when Johnson played such a small role in the Sterling controversy? Though he possessed more credibility than Sterling’s mistress, Johnson could hardly be considered a fitting sacrifice because he lacked the collective authority to purge Sterling of his guilt. On the other hand, he was not a person that could be easily slain, which meant he could also fight back. Since Johnson was not a voluntary victim and had no intention of letting Sterling off the hook, he only managed to heighten Sterling’s guilt and intensify the drama. Furthermore, by choosing to discredit an innocent bystander for reasons pertaining to Johnson’s sexuality and his role in the black community, Sterling lost this contest of credibility and damaged his already weakened reputation. Not surprisingly, Sterling’s choice to scapegoat Johnson only served to reaffirm his racist persona and create more pollution for Sterling to overcome.

As with many other public figures, Sterling also used the media as a scapegoat. In Sterling’s opinion, “it’s all the media pushing it...I believe it 100 percent...People call me by the thousands and give me support” (“Exclusive Interview”). Aside from the dubious nature of Sterling’s claims, using the media as a scapegoat is almost always a bad idea. The media possesses a high degree of legitimacy due to its prominence in our democratic society and the high value placed on freedom of speech and the press. However, it does not fulfill the role of a

voluntary or passive victim, while the fragmentary nature of the media makes it an unstable vessel for purification. Consequently, the media lacked the status of a total victim that would have been able to purge Sterling of his guilt. Furthermore, by making an enemy of the media as a whole, Sterling managed to unite all the various fragments of society against him and alienated all the agenda setters that would frame the narrative of the controversy. This ensured Sterling's statements to the public would be portrayed in the worst light possible and provided the media with little incentive to stop its portrayal of Sterling as a modern day slave owner.

Taken altogether, Sterling's mix of rhetorical strategies (mortification and victimage) only served to muddy his message and lead him astray, while the fragmentary nature of Sterling's scapegoats proved to be a significant problem. He did not provide a fitting sacrifice to purge himself of guilt because he refused to offer himself as a martyr and those he tried to scapegoat were unsatisfactory. By using his ex-mistress and Johnson as his primary scapegoats, Sterling not only sends out a mixed message, he limits the effectiveness of his strategy of victimage. His apologies are overlooked in the face of his inflammatory comments about others, while he confirms the symbolically constructed persona of a racist with a "plantation mentality" that he was trying to deny ("Exclusive Interview"). All of these errors made Sterling's first attempt at purification a failure. As a result, Sterling only succeeded in damaging his already weakened reputation, undermining the purpose of the interview, and creating more controversy in the process.

Despite failing his first attempt at purification, Sterling was not one to give up so easily. He made another attempt to achieve redemption by adopting a more coherent strategy of victimage. In the following section, I will analyze Sterling's second attempt at purification in the form of his statement released to the press.

## Act Three

After his disastrous interview with Anderson Cooper, Sterling was a man with few options. He was vilified by the media, cast out by the NBA, and his reputation was in shambles. When it became clear he would not be allowed to retain his ownership of the Clippers and would be forced to sell his team, Sterling expressed his discontent through a statement released to press on June 10<sup>th</sup> entitled: “WHY I AM FIGHTING THE NBA? THE NBA WANTS TO TAKE AWAY OUR PRIVACY RIGHTS AND FREEDOM OF SPEECH.” In this instance, he dramatically changes his rhetorical tactics, while losing any presumption of purifying his guilt through mortification.

Analyzing Sterling’s strategy of victimage, one must take a closer look at his choice of scapegoats, detailed in his letter. Unlike his previous attempt at purification, Sterling’s choice to scapegoat the NBA and Adam Silver indicates a more targeted and rational approach of attack. By making these two entities the focus of his animosity, Sterling finally begins to articulate a coherent strategy, which aimed to unburden him from the unpleasant task of mortification and self-flagellation. He attempts to turn the tables on the NBA and accuses the league of “violating my rights,” as a way to avoid examining the “NBA’s own discriminatory practices” and the “larger social issues” at stake (*WHY I AM FIGHTING* para. 4-5). Consequently, Sterling intends “to fight these despicable monsters” by refusing to sell his team (*WHY I AM FIGHTING* para. 7). In this instance, Sterling presents himself an active agent whose unwillingness to sacrifice himself clearly puts him at odds with the established order.

Sterling’s choice to scapegoat the NBA is both inevitable and problematic. Unlike some of his previous scapegoats, the NBA possessed a high degree of legitimacy, as one of the most well-known and successful sports leagues in the country. Naturally, this made the NBA a

potentially powerful vessel of purification. In this regard, the league was certainly capable of purging Sterling's guilt, which made it a fitting sacrifice. However, the NBA was not a voluntary scapegoat, which made it a less than perfect victim. Consequently, using the NBA as the vessel to purge Sterling's guilt when the organization was openly hostile towards him posed a considerable risk.

As an extension of the NBA, Adam Silver became another one of Sterling's scapegoats. Sterling claims that Silver was "content focusing his energy on violating my rights, attempting to take my property, and signing autographs for TMZ" (*WHY I AM FIGHTING* para. 5). Since Silver was the individual who ultimately handed out the lifetime ban to Sterling, he was a natural target for Sterling's wrath. However, Adam Silver was no more willing to act as Sterling's voluntary scapegoat than the organization he represents. In fact, it was Sterling's choice to scapegoat Adam Silver that helped Silver gain prominence and legitimacy at the expense of Sterling's own reputation. By taking on the "priestly role as Mediator," Silver helped "'absolve' the guilt" from a society feeling the bitter ramifications of racism, while circularly "intensify[ing] the very sense of guiltiness (or 'conscience') for which [he] provide[d] the absolution" (Burke, *Permanence and Change* 234).

This mutual struggle between Sterling, the NBA, and Adam Silver to scapegoat each other eventually devolved into a contest of credibility. Since most people watching the controversy unfold on television or in the media never met Donald Sterling or any of the parties involved, the public had to depend on the parties' perceived credibility in order to make an informed judgment. Since Sterling was portrayed as a racist with a plantation mentality, it was fairly easy for Adam Silver and the NBA to win this contest of credibility. As a result, Sterling's own credibility continued to decline.

Though Sterling's scapegoats like the NBA and Adam Silver backfired, he finally began choosing fitting sacrifices that at least had the potential to purify him of guilt. However, these scapegoats lacked the purely sacrificial nature required of a perfect victim, which created a zero-sum game for Sterling. Anyone he chose to target ended up benefiting from their negative association with him, while he looked worse in comparison. Hence, there is a considerable risk associated with choosing the wrong scapegoat; this individual (or group of individuals) can redeem or damn the person seeking purification.

However, Sterling's efforts weren't all in vain. He managed to formulate a very relevant argument regarding freedom of speech, privacy rights, and the protection of property. These rights are guaranteed to every American citizen and carry a great deal of cultural ethos. By tapping into these pillars of American identity, Sterling tried to increase his own legitimacy, while implicitly raising questions about the rights of individuals: Can these rights really be violated even in the face of public disapproval? As Americans, aren't we collectively responsible to ensure the rights of individuals aren't violated? By tacitly asking these unstated questions, Sterling broadens the scope of his argument in an effort to transform the scene, changing the nature of the controversy from a contest between an individual and the NBA to one between the NBA and the timeless American ideals he supposedly represents. He also attempts to redefine his role in the drama by constructing a new persona of the rebellious American hero who fights for his beliefs. This new narrative serves as Sterling's justification for taking a stand against the NBA, while also challenging the previous plantation narrative, which painted him as a modern day slave owner.

Though Sterling's statement to the press was by far his strongest effort to purge himself of guilt, he once again failed to win significant public support to persuade the NBA to drop its

ban. Perhaps the nature of the press release prevented its effectiveness, or his dramatic change in tactics failed to take root. More likely, Sterling found his best strategy a little too late. Never one to quit, Sterling continued his quest for purification in a courtroom. However, this change in scene did him little good. Lack of direction and inconsistency proved to be Sterling's final downfall, along with a little help from his wife.

#### Act Four

In order to reverse this overwhelming tide of hierarchical disapproval, Sterling's last resort was to use the court system to regain his ownership of the Clippers. However, Sterling was outmaneuvered by his estranged wife, Shelly Sterling, who was proclaimed the sole trustee of the Sterling Family Trust, after "two doctors declared [Donald Sterling] mentally incapacitated" (Fenno para. 6). By creating a new narrative of mental instability, Shelly Sterling helped relegate Donald Sterling from a powerful and influential man to one incapable of basic mental capacities. As a result, Shelly Sterling provided the agency for the NBA to remove Donald Sterling as an agent capable of intentional action. Eventually, she made a deal with the NBA to sell the team to ex-Microsoft CEO Steve Ballmer and subsequently agreed to "indemnify the NBA for any litigation costs related to her husband's lifetime ban from the league, his \$2.5-million fine and the franchise's sale" (Fenno para. 4). Her actions not only allowed the NBA to remove Sterling and sell his team, but also gave the organization financial protection against her husband. Not surprisingly, Donald Sterling challenged the ruling of his mental incapacity and remained intent on suing the NBA for his lost ownership. What followed was a flurry of lawsuits filed by Donald Sterling, Shelly Sterling, and the NBA, which culminated in Sterling's testimony in court.

On the surface, Sterling's strategy to change the nature of the scene was not a bad one. He realized he could not win a substantial amount of public support, so it makes sense that he

would seek a setting more conducive to his style of rhetoric. In the public sphere, Sterling's various attempts at deliberative rhetoric were disastrous. In the courtroom, Sterling held a clear advantage. As a former lawyer, Sterling was more familiar with a forensic style of rhetoric and the rules of the legal system. Consequently, there was a need for a new type of discourse and corresponding narrative. Since the law cannot punish someone for being a racist, Sterling's opponents were forced to adapt and find a new justification for removing Sterling from his ownership. At this point, the narrative of mental instability became dominant.

Responding to the allegations of mental instability in court, one can see how Sterling fails to adequately scapegoat his chosen victims, mainly because he lacked the credibility needed to contest their claims. Though the NBA remained a fitting sacrifice, Sterling did nothing to increase his own credibility throughout his testimony to challenge the organization's rhetorical advantage. By claiming the NBA had "control of the media" and frightened his wife into selling the team, Sterling's comments took on an increasingly conspiratorial tone, which made it harder and harder to accept Sterling's comments as the truth ("Donald Sterling Court Transcript"). Needless to say, Sterling was unsuccessful in his attempt to change the sacrificial dynamic between the NBA and himself.

Sterling also targets the doctors that deemed him mentally incapacitated; claiming they were "adversaries," "hired guns," and that one of the doctors was even "intoxicated" at the time of his examination ("Donald Sterling Court Transcript"). These borderline ridiculous allegations only served to further erode Sterling's waning credibility, while making his opponents look more rational in comparison. Even if Sterling could have successfully scapegoated the doctors and won his case, it is doubtful the doctors' sacrifice would have been enough to purify his guilt. The public would have been outraged at the perceived lack of justice for a racist like Sterling, who



broke the unwritten code of societal norms. Therefore, the doctors did not meet the qualifications of a fitting sacrifice(s) and only served as way for Sterling to channel his anger.

Looking at Sterling's scapegoats, it quickly becomes clear the nature of scapegoating is transformed by the scene. One of the interesting aspects about the court system is that it creates a situation where people are almost forced to scapegoat each other. The oppositional nature of a trial and the witnesses called forth to support or discredit the other side makes conflict an implicit part of the legal system. In this case, how could Sterling not scapegoat the NBA or the doctors, if they were trying to scapegoat him? As a form of self-preservation, Sterling could not allow his opponents to gain the upper hand. Therefore, Sterling lost his ability to choose his victims when he changed the scene, constraining his actions as an agent.

Worst of all, Sterling's performance in the courtroom seemed to demonstrate the very instability characteristic of the impaired mental state he was trying to disprove. Sterling went from describing his wife as "beautiful," "talented," and maintaining "that he was still in love with her" to calling her a "pig" two hours later (Cook para. 5). He also claimed that his refusal to sell the team was not based upon his "ego," but for a legitimate "economic reason" (Shelburne, "Donald Sterling Testifies" para. 26-28). Later on, he contradicts this logical reasoning by stating: "Make no mistake today, I will never, ever, sell this team. Until I die, I will be suing the NBA to try and make them pay for the terrible violations of antitrust they have imposed on me and my family" (Cook para. 1). Sterling's emotional response and not-so-subtle pledge of undying vengeance on the institution that wronged him all but undid the effect of his more rational response. Thus, Sterling's varied and uneven communication strategy managed to only confirm the charges of mental instability levied against him and gave more justification for his removal.

Unfortunately for the embattled Sterling, his last attempt to purify his guilt and challenge the established order failed. Sterling lost the contest of credibility in the courtroom, which allowed his intended sacrifices to slay him with their symbolic actions. By turning him into someone mentally unsound, the NBA now had the excuse it needed to write him off and expunge him from their ranks. Eventually, the judge accepted the doctor's testimony and sided with Sterling's wife. In the end, Sterling's case was thrown out, his team was sold, and he was left in disgrace.

### Conclusion

This paper has explored the controversy surrounding Donald Sterling in relation to Kenneth Burke's guilt redemption cycle. The drama unfolded in four acts. In Act One, Sterling's symbolic actions created guilt that may be explained with a plantation narrative, which placed him in the role of slave master. In Act Two, Sterling tried to purify his guilt through a combination of mortification and victimage that included a variety of insufficient scapegoats. In Act Three, Sterling embraced a more thorough strategy of victimage by focusing on two fitting sacrifices. In Act Four, Sterling reiterated his strategy of victimage only to be defeated by a narrative that portrayed him as mentally unstable. Throughout his journey, Sterling continued to refine and change his communicative strategies, but he ultimately failed to achieve redemption because he could never find a fitting sacrifice or perfect victim to purify his guilt.

This essay's particular focus on the concept of the scapegoat merits consideration because the choice of scapegoat is a key decision in Burke's guilt redemption cycle. In order to purge oneself of guilt using the strategy of victimage, I proposed that one must offer a fitting sacrifice (or scapegoat) to offset the pollution created in society. As a corollary to this point, I also argued that an unfitting sacrifice would only cause a further imbalance and hence more

pollution in the established order. Though a fitting sacrifice can be sufficient, the ideal sacrifice would be a perfect victim, someone legitimate, voluntary, and relevant in nature. However, since perfect victims are scarce, the process of victimage usually devolves into a contest of credibility, where the winner-takes-all in a high stakes game of redemption and damnation. For Sterling, his choice of scapegoats damned him because they retained the capability of fighting back. In other words, he should have never attempted to sacrifice an enemy he could not slay. In doing so, Sterling demonstrated both the risk and consequence of using improper scapegoats through his symbolic actions. Thus, the true nature of scapegoats is one of power and not passivity.

In regards to the future implications of this essay, I believe my notion of a fitting sacrifice provides a useful supplement to Benoit's theory of "image restoration," which rests on the belief that "image, or reputation is so important to us that threats to our image impel us to attempt to restore our reputation" (Benoit 251). In his theory, Benoit outlines several broad image restoration strategies, including denial, evasion of responsibility, reducing the offensiveness of the event, corrective action, and mortification (253). In Benoit's opinion, "when one commits an offensive act, it is often best to employ mortification," though he admits "mortification cannot be guaranteed to improve one's image" (263-264). In contrast to mortification, Benoit argues that denial, shifting blame, and minimization do not typically work to preserve an apologist's image (Carveth 17). Though I generally agree with Benoit's conclusion about the benefits of mortification, I feel that shifting the blame (which is part of Benoit's strategy of denial and equivalent to Burke's strategy of victimage) can be successful if one can find a fitting sacrifice or (better yet) a perfect victim. Furthermore, using the qualifications of a fitting sacrifice or perfect victim provides a predictive element to Benoit's strategy, which can help determine whether one should undertake the risky strategy of victimage. In Sterling's case, he obviously lacked the

sufficient credibility needed to slay his fitting sacrifices (Adam Silver and the NBA), while his fitting sacrifices also lacked the voluntary nature of perfect victims. Therefore, it is not surprising that Sterling's strategy of victimage failed.

Taken altogether, the Donald Sterling communication crisis can be considered a tragedy without a hero. There is very little to redeem Sterling, including his flawed communication strategy. This paper is not meant to defend Sterling or take away any of the guilt he probably rightly deserves; it merely serves as an objective analysis that looks at the dramatic implications of his symbolic actions. By exposing the underlying tension between the individual and society, the NBA owners and the players, and the hypocrisy of racism existing in a (supposedly) post-racial society, Sterling created significant pollution in society. Therefore, Sterling had to be punished because (as Burke would say) the cult of the kill demands a sacrifice. Consequently, Sterling was transformed into society's scapegoat; the symbolically constructed vessel meant to purge society of its racist guilt. However, Sterling's banishment did little to actually address the lingering effects of racism in society, which echoes a lesson Burke articulates in his book *Philosophy of Literary Form*: "Revolution is avoided by making revolution the norm" (134). By blaming an individual, society can ignore its own collective responsibility for the continuation of racism, while providing its members with a sense of change, but no real solution.

## Works Cited

- Anderson, Floyd, Andrew King, and Kevin McClure. "Kenneth Burke's Dramatic Form Criticism." *The Art of Rhetorical Criticism*. Pearson/ Allyn and Bacon, 2004. Print.
- Benoit, William L. "Hugh Grant's Image Restoration Discourse: An Actor Apologizes." *Communication Quarterly* 45.3 (1997): 251-267. *Communication & Mass Media Complete*. Web. 3 May 2015.
- Bobbitt, David A. *The Rhetoric of Redemption: Kenneth Burke's Redemption Drama and Martin Luther King, Jr.'s "I Have a Dream" Speech*. Lanham, Md.: Rowman & Littlefield, 2007. Print.
- Burke, Kenneth. *A Grammar of Motives*. Berkeley: University of California, 1969. Print.
- Burke, Kenneth. *Language as Symbolic Action: Essays on Life, Literature, and Method*. Berkeley: U of California, 1966. Print.
- Burke, Kenneth. *Permanence and Change*. Los Altos: Hermes Publication, 1954. Print.
- Burke, Kenneth. *Rhetoric of Religion*. Boston: Beacon Press, 1961. Print.
- Burke, Kenneth. *The Philosophy of Literary Form: Studies in Symbolic Action*. 3rd ed. Berkeley: University of California, 1973. 132-137. Print.
- Carveth, Rod, and Claire Ferraris. "Afterthekiss.Com Is No Valentine Gift": Snickers' Super Bowl Ad And Benoit's Image Restoration Discourse." *Conference Papers -- National Communication Association* (2007): 1. *Communication & Mass Media Complete*. Web. 3 May 2015.
- Chalabi, Mona. "Three Leagues, 92 Teams and One Black Principal Owner." *FiveThirtyEight*. 28 April 2014. Web 10 May 2015. <<http://fivethirtyeight.com/datalab/diversity-in-the-nba-the-nfl-and-mlb/>>

*Clippers Owner Donald Sterling Racist Rant (UNEDITED) No. 2 Audio Tape*. Perf. Donald Sterling. *YouTube*. N.p., 27 Apr. 2014. Web.

Cook, Everett. "Donald Sterling to Shelly: 'Get Away from Me, You Pig!'" *Los Angeles Times*. Los Angeles Times, 14 July 2014. Web. 20 Sept. 2014. <<http://www.latimes.com/sports/sportsnow/la-sp-sn-donald-sterling-court-20140709-story.html>>.

"Donald Sterling Court Transcript from Tuesday, July 9." *Los Angeles News Group*. N.p., n.d. Web. 20 Sept. 2014. <<http://www.dailynews.com/sports/20140709/donald-sterling-court-transcript-from-tuesday-july-9>>.

*Donald Sterling Racist Comments Audio W/ Subtitles*. Perf. Donald Sterling. *YouTube*. N.p., 26 Apr. 2014. Web.

"Exclusive Interview with Donald Sterling; Donald Sterling Blasts Magic Johnson; Spike Lee Comments." *Anderson Cooper 360*. Anderson Cooper. 12 May 2014. Web. Transcript.

Fenno, Nathan. "NBA files counterclaim against Donald Sterling." *Los Angeles Times*. 12 August 2014. Web 10 May 2015. <<http://www.latimes.com/sports/sportsnow/la-sp-sn-nba-donald-sterling-20140812-story.html>>

Leonard, David. "What's in a Name? The 'Plantation' Metaphor and the NBA." *NewBlackMan*. 25 Dec. 2011. Web. 10 May 2015.

Levin, Josh. "Yes, Donald Sterling Sees His Basketball Team as a Plantation." *Slate Magazine*. N.p., 29 Apr. 2014. Web. 20 Sept. 2014. <[http://www.slate.com/articles/sports/sports\\_nut/2014/04/donald\\_sterling\\_racism\\_yes\\_the\\_clippers\\_owner\\_sees\\_his\\_basketball\\_team\\_as.html](http://www.slate.com/articles/sports/sports_nut/2014/04/donald_sterling_racism_yes_the_clippers_owner_sees_his_basketball_team_as.html)>.

Mandell, Nina. "V. Stiviano says she recorded Donald Sterling to help him learn things about himself." *USA Today*. 22 May 2014. Web 10 May 2015.

<<http://ftw.usatoday.com/2014/05/v-stiviano-says-she-recorded-donald-sterling-to-help-him-learn-things-about-himself>>

Markazi, Arash. "Clippers Stage Silent Protest." *ESPNLosAngeles.com*. 28 Apr. 2014. Web. 10 May 2015.

Markazi, Arash. "NBPA Thinks Owner Vote Will Be 29-0." *ESPNLosAngeles.com*. 29 Apr. 2014. Web. 10 May 2015.

Martin, Lori. "The New Plantation?: Racism on the Hardwood." *White Sports/Black Sports: Racial Disparities in Athletic Programs*. Santa Barbara: ABC-CLIO, 2015. 100-101. Print.

McManus, Robert. "Master Harold . . . And The Boys" As Redemptive Metaphor." *Conference Papers -- National Communication Association (2007): 1. Communication & Mass Media Complete*. Web. 5 July 2014.

Moore, Matt. "Sponsors Pull Support from Clips after Alleged Sterling Remarks." *CBS Sports*. 28 Apr. 2014. Web. 10 May 2015.

Shelburne, Ramona. "Donald Sterling Receives Lifetime Ban." *ESPN*. 30 Apr. 2014. Web. 1 June 2015. <[http://espn.go.com/nba/story/\\_/id/10857580/donald-sterling-los-angeles-clippers-owner-receives-life-ban-nba](http://espn.go.com/nba/story/_/id/10857580/donald-sterling-los-angeles-clippers-owner-receives-life-ban-nba)>.

Shelburne, Ramona. "Donald Sterling Testifies at Trial." *ESPN*. 9 July 2014. Web. 3 June 2015. <[http://espn.go.com/los-angeles/nba/story/\\_/id/11193098/donald-sterling-defends-mental-state-los-angeles-clippers-trial](http://espn.go.com/los-angeles/nba/story/_/id/11193098/donald-sterling-defends-mental-state-los-angeles-clippers-trial)>.

Treichler, Paula A. *How to Have Theory in an Epidemic: Cultural Chronicles of AIDS*. Durham: Duke UP, 1999. 1-477. Print.

West, David. "David West." *Twitter*. 26 Apr. 2014. Web. 10 May 2015.

*WHY I AM FIGHTING THE NBA? THE NBA WANTS TO TAKE AWAY OUR PRIVACY*

*RIGHTS AND FREEDOM OF SPEECH*. Donald Sterling, 10 June 2014. Web. 11 May 2015. <<http://i2.cdn.turner.com/cnn/2014/images/06/10/sterling.statement.pdf>>.

Young, Kenley. "Blake Griffin: 'Known Racist' Donald Sterling 'was like a Weird Uncle'" *Fox Sports*. 16 Oct. 2014. Web. 10 May 2015.