

## Death of a Celebrity: Kobe Bryant and Post-Millennial Sensitivities

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**Abstract:** On Sunday, January 26, 2020, Kobe Bryant—a retired star of the Los Angeles Lakers basketball franchise—died suddenly and tragically in a helicopter crash. Following his death, Bryant was instantaneously mourned and celebrated as a basketball legend, an inspiration, a role model, a family man, and a Renaissance man; he was secularly and medially canonized. This study analyzes the secular canonization process and aims at extrapolating the post-Millennial element of the narratives of the tributes to Bryant. The article looks into how the reaction to the death of Bryant, who, although a Millennial himself, seemed to embody the post-Millennial image of post-Millennials (Generation Z) i.e., competitive, spontaneous, adventuresome, and curious, reflects the self-image of post-Millennials i.e., loyal, compassionate, thoughtful, open-minded, responsible, and determined.

**Keywords:** Kobe Bryant, media, post-Millennial, secular canonization, celebrityhood

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### Introduction: The Tragedy on January 26, 2020

On January 26, 2020, at 8:24 p.m. European time, TMZ posted the story that Kobe Bryant, at the age of 41, had died in a helicopter crash in Calabasas hills, California. Actually, the first TMZ's news mentioned "Bryant, and five others die in a helicopter crash." The news item was taken down by TMZ after it had been reported that nine people lost their lives in the fatal accident. Then, as the story was developing, and it was revealed that nine people had died in the crash, the manner in which the event was being reported was still "Kobe Bryant among 9 killed" (Jacobco) or "Kobe Bryant and others" ("Kobe Bryant, All Others Aboard Helicopter Died Immediately in Crash, Autopsies Show"). However, as soon as January 27, James Corden, the host of CBS's *The Late Late Show with James Corden*, was among the first TV personalities who, on his show, talked about nine lives lost and each of them being a tragedy.<sup>1</sup>

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1 The reaction of the late-night talk show hosts to the news of the crash seemed to give the lie to CNN's claim that "the story... stunned the world on Sunday" (Darcy) as the story was, for the most part, covered only by the LA based shows. Corden sent his thoughts and prayers to all the families who lost their loved ones in the crash; Stephen Colbert used the opportunity to call for regulation changes and the need to install black-boxes on helicopters, which is not a practice in California; and most emotional of the three, Jimmy Kimmel, instead of his usual show, played clips of Bryant's previous visit to the ABC's *Jimmy Kimmel Live!* in an hour-long tribute. At the same time, the major shows based in New York were silent on the story. Neither Seth Meyers, in his *Late Night with Seth Meyers* on NBC, nor Trevor Noah of Comedy Central's *The Daily Show* mentioned Bryant in their Monday shows. The exception was Jimmy Fallon, who opened his *The Tonight Show* with recalling a beer run with Kobe in the nineties. Similarly, Bryant's death was not addressed on SNL show on the following Saturday, although that week's host, JJ Watt, ended the show wearing Laker's jersey with 24 on it and shouting out "Kobe!"

The linguistic manner, in which the news of Bryant's death was reported, immediately introduces a broader aspect of the subject matter, which is the post-Millennial narrative of the process of secular canonization of Kobe Bryant; the process in which Bryant's celebrityhood and post-Millennial sensitivities were factors. The objective of this study is to analyze the process of the said canonization. The subject of the textual analysis is the discourse of the reaction to Bryant's death featured on traditional media, social media, e.g., tweets or memes, as well as in the direct reactions of fans and the members of the NBA family. The analysis will cover the period from the first announcement by TMZ, which came minutes after the crash, to February 24, 2020 and when the Lakers organization paid an official tribute to late Bryant... and beyond.

### Kobe Bryant's Profile

Ever since his first game in the NBA in 1996, Kobe Bryant was a polarizing figure. His desire to become the greatest player in NBA history was at the same time admired as it was seen as a display of arrogance, especially by the generation of fans of Michael Jordan, whom Bryant hoped to dethrone. These fans hated him with a pure hatred typical of that of "Passionate sports fans [who] not only hate their enemies, they *despise* them" (Delaney and Madigan 174), much as Boston Celtic fans hate the Lakers—the team Bryant joined in 1996, straight from high school. To those fans, there was a lot about Bryant, which made it difficult to truly appreciate him: his feuds with his teammates, coaches and the Lakers management; his claim to be "a Laker for life" and to "bleed purple and gold" only after his requests to be traded were denied; or when he changed his jersey number from 8 to 24, both numbers now retired by the Lakers, which was seen, both, as means of reinventing himself and as an arrogant way of saying "I am better than Jordan."

There is no more hate towards Kobe Bryant in the basketball fandom and the attitude towards him did not change with his death. It had been a gradual process during which Bryant managed to win five NBA championships, 2008 NBA Most Valuable Player award, and two NBA Finals MVP awards in 2009 and 2010. He was also an 18-time All-Star, a 15-time member of the All-NBA Team, a 12-time member of the All-Defensive Team, all of which made him one of basketball legends. Roland Lazenby's *Showboat: The Life of Kobe Bryant* portrays Bryant as a difficult person who had matured and changed over the years. The book helped the readers understand how driven and motivated Bryant had been in basketball, which even the Celtics fans had to respect. Bryant retired in 2016 and the same drive, commercially sold as Mamba mentality, and meticulous approach he had had for basketball translated into his post-NBA life. For example, as Bryant was inching retirement, he published a poem entitled "Dear Basketball" in *The Players' Tribune*. The poem became a basis for an animated short film directed and animated by Glen Keane, with music by John Williams – the Academy Award winning composer. Bryant, who narrated the film and supervised its production, was awarded, as a producer, by the Academy of Motion Pictures with an Oscar for Best Animated Short Film in 2018. Jordan never got an Oscar for *Space Jam*.

Nevertheless, Kobe Bryant's legacy is a polarizing one because of one episode of Bryant's life which his fans tend to overlook—the 2003 rape allegations. That year,

Bryant was accused by a nineteen-year-old hotel employee in Colorado of raping her. During a press conference two weeks after the accusation, Bryant, confessed, while holding hands with his wife Vanessa, to having extramarital sexual intercourse with the woman whose name remains undisclosed. “Bryant admitted that he preferred rough sex and had grabbed her by the neck” (Lazenby 898), however, he claimed the intercourse was consensual. The case never got to criminal court as a settlement of undisclosed financial number was reached in a civil court, after which Bryant issued a public statement saying: “Although I truly believe this encounter between us was consensual, I recognize now that she did not and does not view this incident the same way I did. After months of reviewing discovery, listening to her attorney, and even her testimony in person, I now understand how she feels that she did not consent to this encounter” (Draper), which, in fact, is an admission of having a non-consensual sexual intercourse, i.e., rape.

The attitude of basketball fans towards Bryant must be conflicted just as Bryant himself was conflicted, or as Lazenby puts it: “Bryant... had his conflicts, but his manner and graciousness meant that despite all the public tribulation and negativity of his life, he was building a base of growing admiration in and around the game” (1020). A great basketball player, an Oscar winner, a devoted father who was difficult, arrogant, selfish and potentially a rapist—this was the portrait of Kobe Bryant, which had been painted in the course of twenty-four years.

Seemiller and Meghan, in their study on “Generation Z” present a twofold characteristic of post-Millennials, which includes the way post-Millennials see themselves as well as their view of their post-Millennial peers. In the study, post-Millennials see their peers as “competitive, spontaneous, adventuresome, and curious” (13), while their self-image is that of “loyal... compassionate... thoughtful... open-minded... responsible... determined” (8-11). Bryant, although a Millennial (Dimock) himself, embodied some of those qualities. As a basketball player, Bryant was known to be hyper-competitive, determined and curious, and, as a public figure, he could also be described as spontaneous, adventurous and curious—be it in a positive (storytelling) or negative (rape accusations).

However, when it was revealed that Bryant had rented the helicopter to go to a basketball game of his daughter’s team, the team he had been coaching, and that his daughter, Gianna, as well as other girls and their parents were on the board when the helicopter crashed into the hills of Calabasas, there was a major shift in the narratives of Bryant’s legacy—not as a basketball star, but as a man. At that point, the narratives moved from memories of a competitive, driven and ruthless basketball assassin to a loving father, and Bryant’s special relationship with one of his four daughters—Gianna, who was dubbed “heiress” to Kobe’s basketball legacy, and who “didn’t get to live her full life or achieve her grandest hoop dreams” (Fader), was continuously emphasized. Bryant was even hailed as the champion of female sports due to him coaching his daughters’ team and his support to the WNBA.

Such narrative shift of reporting is not surprising for two reasons. One, the common “do not speak ill of the dead” principle, which is a colloquial manner of describing a psychological response which makes the mourners to remember only the good things about a lost one. For example, in May 2020, one of Bryant’s former

teammates, Jeremy Lin, during his visit to an *Inside The Green Room* podcast, told a story of how injured, i.e. not playing and not practicing, Bryant made an appearance at a Lakers practice. Lin recalled:

He comes in... sweatsuit, he has a sling for his hurt shoulder, and he has these shades on... and Carlos Boozer says ‘Kob, good to see you bro... we haven’t seen you in a bit, how come you came today’ and [Kobe] was just stonefaced, and he was like ‘I just came by to say bye to some of you bums who are going to get traded tomorrow.’ (Fernandez)

Had this story been publicized during Bryant’s playing days, it would have been yet another example of his arrogance and pettiness; three months after his death, the story is yet another good-natured anecdote on Bryant’s distaste for losing, laughed off by Lin and the podcast’s hosts. The second reason is that Bryant was a fixture of a celebrity culture, in which celebrities function as “an apparently privileged group” (Redmond, Holmes 90), especially athletes, such as Kobe Bryant, who are “accustomed to a culture of individualism, where individual players and star-performers are regularly singled out for special attention and treatment” (Smart 41).

On the other hand, the sensitivity of post-Millennials is that of a compassion and thoughtfulness, which while encouraged mourning Bryant, to a certain extent denied him his privileged status. While to some a basketball star legend lost his life on January 26, to others a father was killed in a crash with his daughter and their friends and the pilot. The complex character of Bryant’s persona and his past juxtaposed with the hagiographic narratives which followed his premature death resulted in a discrepancy in how he was viewed by post-Millennials and by his peers. In other words, the question of Kobe Bryant’s legacy is that of conflicted emotions Bryant’s persona has evoked.

### **Secular Canonization of Kobe Bryant**

What immediately followed the early news of Bryant’s death was a series of tributes to the basketball legend. The first tributes came from the NBA players, who had games scheduled that Sunday, many of them visibly shaken by the news. These players used Bryant’s jersey numbers to honor him; the games began with players violating the 8-seconds and 24-seconds rules, which was followed by standing ovation from the spectators. Tray Young of the Atlanta Hawks even managed to change his own jersey to one with number eight on it. Those who did not play that day, as well as the retired NBA stars and anyone involved with the NBA took to traditional and social media expressing their shock and despair. The Lakers canceled their Sunday game, then held a tribute on Friday night which included a speech by LeBron James. There was a palpable sense of loss in the NBA on January 26—the league lost one of its great ones.

An important aspect of the story was the timing. The day before the crash, LeBron James (now of the Lakers) passed Bryant as the third highest scorer in NBA history. That same day, Bryant posted his congratulations to James on Instagram and Twitter and the two had a talk on the phone on Sunday morning. The social media posts proved to be Bryant’s last ones—just hours later he was dead. There was a time

in twenty-oughts when there was a discussion whether Kobe Bryant was actually a greater player than Jordan. Then came LeBron James and the G.O.A.T. (Greatest Of All Time) debate shifted to James vs. Jordan, and Bryant was somewhat forgotten. Bryant's premature death and the tributes to him as an inspiration, a role model and a basketball legend reminded people of his basketball greatness and brought him back to the conversation. Even more than that, in his death, Bryant became a symbol of basketball. When the Naismith Basketball Hall of Fame announced, on February 14, that it would induct Bryant posthumously and one year before he was eligible to be an inductee (Lyons), suggestions were expressed that the NBA should change its logo featuring a silhouette of a legendary Laker, Jerry West to one featuring a silhouette of another legendary Laker, Kobe Bryant. One fan, Nick M, actually started a petition and is still collecting signatures to change the logo. As of December 2020, he has collected more than 3 million signatures; his goal is 4.5 million ("Sign the Petition"). For a brief moment, Bryant was basketball, and basketball organizations of different sorts paid honors to a great player whose only connection with their programs was the game of basketball. For example, Moravia athletic director, Todd Mulvaney, told *The Citizen*—a local newspaper in Auburn:

I was devastated when I heard the news and still am. I was a huge Kobe fan. He's a (Michael Jordan) disciple. What he's done for the game, he's like an ambassador. I don't know Kobe, but I feel like I did. It's a sad time for all of us that are in the basketball community because Kobe meant that much to a lot of people. (Ritzel)

and on February 4, an Italian team NPC Rieti, for which Bryant's father had played, retired Kobe Bryant's 24 jersey number ("Italian Team Retires Kobe Bryant's No. 24 in Tribute"). Then, in April 2020, ESPN released *The Last Dance* and Jordan was "the man" again.

The flood of tributes, which broke out on Sunday, January 26, focused on him as a basketball legend and basketball's great and featured a blend of sports and music. Annual Grammy Awards ceremony was taking place at Staples Center (home of the Lakers) the day Bryant died, and thousands gathered in front of the arena not so much to get a glimpse of their favorite musicians, but to hold a vigil in honor of Kobe Bryant. The Grammys ceremony took on a somber tone, and a number of tributes to Bryant were included in the ceremony. Alicia Keys and Boyz II Men opened the ceremony with a performance of *It's So Hard to Say Goodbye to Yesterday*; Lil Nas X, Lizzo and DJ Khaled also incorporated tributes to Bryant into their performances. Apart from the Grammys ceremony, musicians used their platform to commemorate Bryant. For example, Lil Wayne added a moment of silence on his recent album *Funeral*; Guns N' Roses, while performing a concert in Miami, dedicated *Knockin' on Heaven's Door* to Bryant and all the victims of the crash; Wiz Khalifa and Charlie Puth performed *See You Again* at a Lakers game. Kid Rock, however, decided to honor Bryant not with music but with his rifle which he named after Bryant and then subsequently Rock shot a deer in Bryant's honor.

Athletes of various sports expressed their admiration of Bryant mostly by posting tributes on social media and customizing their sports apparel, equipment and,

naturally, their sneakers. There were also other forms in which athletes honored Bryant and his daughter. For example, the PGA Tour star Justin Thomas announced Thursday that he would auction off Kobe Bryant-themed wedges he used at the Phoenix Open to benefit the MambaOnThree Fund (Chiari). There were even attempts to find Bryant's supernatural impact on the sports being played after his death, as was the case with a putt by Tiger Woods.

Some might think there was a higher power at work when Tiger Woods strode down the first hole at Riviera Country Club in Los Angeles Thursday. Close to where basketball great Kobe Bryant died in a helicopter crash last month, Woods fizzed his second shot into the green to leave an eagle putt of 24 feet eight inches. Remarkably, those are the two jersey numbers worn by Bryant during his glittering 20-year career with the LA Lakers. (Hodgetts)

The blend of athletic and musical displays of appreciation for late Kobe Bryant continued during the Super Bowl LIV played on February 2 and throughout the NBA All-Star weekend held two weeks later. In football, the players of both the Kansas City Chiefs and San Francisco 49ers customized their clothes, uniforms, and cleats to pay tribute to Bryant. There was a minute of silence for Bryant and the crash victims before the game, during which players and coaches lined up on opposite 24-yard lines, signifying the Bryant's jersey number (Stephen). The halftime show featuring a joint performance by Shakira and Jennifer Lopez included a number of subtle tributes, such as: a giant cross, which lit up in purple and yellow (the colors of the Los Angeles Lakers) during *Let's Get Loud* song performed by Lopez, her daughter, Emme, and a children's choir. However, to some these tributes felt too subtle and, via social media, they expressed their disappointment. One Twitter user posted, "So Jennifer Lopez and Shakira used that they were doing a tribute to Kobe Bryant as an excuse to get their views up during the halftime show not only that but then they proceeded to do NO Kobe Bryant tribute like they said they would...but are we surprised?" (@piccoladiamond).

The NBA, with help from musicians, honored Bryant in a number of ways during the 2020 All-Star weekend (February 14-16) in Chicago. On Saturday, the league's commissioner, Adam Silver, announced that the league's All-Star Game Most Valuable Player Award has been permanently named for The NBA All-Star Game Kobe Bryant Most Valuable Player Award'; Queen Latifah opened the All-Star weekend with a performance in honor of Bryant with a rendition of *Love's in Need of Love Today*; Dwight Howard displayed number 24 on top of the iconic Superman symbol during the Slam Dunk contest. On Sunday, Jennifer Hudson performed a song dedicated to Bryant and the other victims of the crash prior to the actual All-Star Game; during the game itself, players of one team wore number 24 on their jerseys in honor of Kobe while the other team wore number 2 in honor of his daughter, Gianna. Team LeBron's Kawhi Leonard, who was named All-Star Game MVP, said "Words can't explain how happy I am for it. Able to put that trophy in my room, in my trophy room, and just be able to see Kobe's name on there, it just means a lot to me. He's a big inspiration in my life. He did a lot for me" (O'Brien). There were others honoring Bryant and the tributes were posted and commented on with a ubiquitous *#MambaForever* on social media. And, of course, there were customized sneakers.

Sneaker culture was one of the major and obvious forms of paying respect to Bryant, who during his career had had his own lines of signature Adidas and then Nike basketball shoes. On January 26, hours after news of the helicopter crash had been reported, players across eight NBA games that day took the court wearing pairs of Bryant's sneakers. Similar tributes could be observed throughout the NBA (and other leagues as well) since the fatal Sunday. For example:

In their first home game after Kobe Bryant's untimely death, the Washington Wizards won the opening tip against the Charlotte Hornets, and the basketball found its way into the hands of Isaiah Thomas.

... Thomas dribbled in place for eight seconds before his team was sanctioned for an intentional eight-second violation. Following the turnover, the Hornets inbounded the ball and dribbled out their own intentional 24-second shot clock violation, as the crowd at Capital One Arena chanted—"KO-BE! KO-BE! KO-BE!"—all while Thomas stood by himself, staring down at his sneakers. On his feet were a pair of 'Finals MVP' Nike Zoom Kobe 4s—the same pair Bryant wore the night he and the Los Angeles Lakers claimed an NBA title in 2009. (Dodson)

On Tuesday, March 3, the Lakers and 76ers met up for the first time since Bryant's passing. The game was in Los Angeles and the 76ers coaching staff used this as an opportunity to pay their respects to Bryant—all of the team's coaches wore Kobes during the game (Barnewall). Brooklyn Nets point guard Spencer Dinwiddie announced that his Mark II signature shoe will honor Kobe and Gianna Bryant, and that the proceeds from the first nine days of the sneaker's sales will be donated to the MambaOnThree Fund, started by the Mamba Sports Foundation to help families of the crash victims (Daniels). LeBron James, for the first time since he entered the NBA in 2003, played a game in another player's signature shoes—Kobes, and the San Antonio Spurs star DeMar DeRozan even made a pledge: "I'll never play in another player's shoes as long as I'm in the league from now on. That's how much I love Kobe's shoes" (Dodson).

DeRozan spoke as a player but also as a fan, one of multitudes of fans, who honored Kobe Bryant in more or less traditional forms of eulogies. Already on Sunday, January 26, outside the Staples Center, there were candles, flowers, pictures, and all sorts of memorabilia laid in front of the Staples Center, which, at that point began to be referred to as "the house that Kobe built" (Anderson). "Every item that was left at the Kobe Bryant memorial outside the Staples Center came with a handwritten note. In total, those who gathered outside the Los Angeles Lakers' homecourt left 1,353 basketballs and over 25,000 candles, as well jerseys, flowers, shoes, paintings and stuffed animals" (Mathur).

Various Kobe Bryant fans used the means at their disposal to honor and remember him in different, more or less traditional manner. For example, a nail artist, Audrey Noble, blogged about using fingernails as a tribute to Bryant and posted photos of her work explaining: "Never did I think I could mesh my love for beauty and Kobe together, but after his passing, I found myself saving beautiful nail art dedications to him on my Instagram. Sports, a lot like beauty, transcend any box you might want to put them in" (Noble). Also, already on January 26, 2020, the first murals appeared, and this form of honoring Bryant took on a life of its own. In the weeks following

Bryant's death various forms of pictographic works of art were created by Bryant's fans all over the world. There were the graffiti ones in Los Angeles and other American cities ("Murals Paying Tribute To Kobe Bryant Around L.A. And Where To Find Them"), a sand artwork on an Australian beach (Coë), and a street basketball court one in the Philippines (Roy). The online community of teachers of English language honored Bryant by offering English lesson activities worksheets about Bryant ("Find the Mistakes: Kobe Bryant"). A fashion model, Olivia Culpo honored Bryant when she walked the runway at the Philipp Plein fall 2020 show during Milan Fashion Week on February 22. The model wore a purple and gold basketball jersey that had Bryant's jersey number 24 on the front. However, not all tributes were welcomed. For example, when another model, Jordyn Woods, posted a workout video on Instagram, she was attacked for using the Mamba Sports Academy gym to get extra attention. Comments to her post included, "This seems very clout-ish, Mamba Sport Academy? Since when...?" one user wrote, and another follower chimed in "I agree with you. It was totally timed. Thank u for saying what we were all thinking" (Bombay).

Another form of tributes, which is unique to the Internet as a medium, were Internet memes, some of which plainly paid respects to the late star while other expressed admiration in a humorous manner typical of the medium. The main theme of the memes was the assumption that, in the afterlife, Bryant is in heaven. There, he still plays basketball, which annoys other residents (including God) as Bryant uses of their halos as a rim. Other memes reflect two characteristic aspects of the medium: 1. Bryant's tragic death is used as a comment to current events, in this case as yet another example why 2020 is the worst year ever; 2. The use of humor that is very dark and could be viewed as in poor taste and disrespectful—one comment to a giant grass mural of Kobe Bryant reads, "he would need a helicopter to see it."

Internet memes as a modern form of communication, as well as all the other forms of tributes reflect a significant characteristic of the Generation Z, which is existing through the prism of technological communication tools. As Dimock puts it: "In this progression, what is unique for Generation Z is that all of the above have been part of their lives from the start.... Social media, constant connectivity and on-demand entertainment and communication are innovations Millennials adapted to as they came of age. For those born after 1996, these are largely assumed" (5). In addition to memes, and Facebook and Instagram posts publicizing the tributes, there were even social media trends. For example, after a touching story about Bryant's love for his daughters was told by ESPN's SportsCenter anchor Elle Duncan, #GirlDad became a trend on Twitter and hundreds of posts using the hashtag were posted by celebrity fathers and non-celebrity ones (Carter).

### **Devil's Advocates**

The above mentioned hailing of Bryant as a role-model champion of women must have resulted in the 2003 rape case to resurface. Soon after the media and people involved in female athletics (be it high school varsity coaches or WNBA stars) began praising Bryant for how much he did to promote women in sports with him coaching Gianna used as a token of his support for female athletes, a number of women brought back

the topic of the 2003 rape allegations. There was a school principal from Washington Camas High School, Liza Sejkora, who, in a now-deleted Facebook post, wrote as soon as on January 26, “Not gonna lie. Seems to me that karma caught up with a rapist today,” after which she was forced to take an absentee leave due to a backlash from school’s student and Internet community. Sejkora did apologize saying she regretted writing the post. “I have some personal experience that generated the visceral reaction. This was a situation where I didn’t think before I posted, and I’m terribly regretful about that” (Mansell). Nevertheless, the backlash continued, and she eventually resigned from her post.

Abigail Disney, on January 29, tweeted, “I haven’t said anything about Kobe so far because I felt some time needed to pass before weighing in. But yes, it’s time for the sledgehammer to come out. The man was a rapist. Deal with it” (@abigaildisney), and much like Sejkora was accused of being insensitive and spiteful. So was an actor, Evan Rachel Wood, who had tweeted: “What has happened is tragic. I am heartbroken for Kobe’s family. He was a sports hero. He was also a rapist. And all of these truths can exist simultaneously” (Ritschel). Again, it was too soon for such comments as evidenced in one of the replies: “Would it kill you to have some empathy for the family who are grieving not only Kobe but their daughter as well? It hasn’t even been 48 hours yet” (Ritschel).

These three women openly called Bryant a rapist, however, within one week from the crash, the hysteria over Bryant’s death reached the point when even mentioning the 2003 allegations resulted not only in criticism but also in threats. Such was the case when Gayle King interviewed a WNBA star, Lisa Leslie, about her relationship with Bryant for CBS’s *This Morning*. During the interview King asked Leslie about the 2003 allegations, which part of the interview, as King claims, was tweeted by the network out of context. The response to the clip included aggressive tweets from two recording artists: 50 Cent and Snoop Dog, and a message from LeBron James. James tweeted: “Protect @LisaLeslie at all cost! You’re a real Superhero!! Sorry you had to through that s\*%#!!! We are our own worse enemies! #Mamba4Life” (Heller), which meant accusing King of unfair questioning. 50 Cent’s comments to the clip included statements such as: “Then how would you see it, Gayle? How the fuck would you see it, bitch?” (Heller). Snoop Dog’s Instagram video was the most emotional and aggressive of the three. In the clip he posted, Dog rants:

Gayle King. Out of pocket for that shit. Way out of pocket. What do you gain from that? I swear to God, we’re the worst. We’re the fucking worst. We expect more from you, Gayle. Don’t you hang out with Oprah? Why ya’ll attacking us? We your people. You ain’t coming after fucking Harvey Weinstein, asking them dumbass questions. I get sick of ya’ll. How dare you try to tarnish my motherfucking homeboy’s reputation, punk motherfucker? Respect the family and back off, bitch, before we come get you. (Heller)

King referred to the story as jarring and Snoop Dog issued an apology.

By February 8, two weeks after Bryant’s death, the state of denial about this particular episode from Bryant’s life lead a New York Post journalist, Phil Mushnick, to pen an article entitled “Is it safe to speak the truth about Kobe Bryant?” in which he wrote:

Since the sudden, tragic death of Kobe Bryant two weeks ago, I've thought of the many men who, in just the past three years, have had their careers and reputations destroyed or seriously stained by allegations of sexual harassment or assault...

Some accusations are of alleged acts decades old.

Guilty as alleged? Who knows? But the accusations will chase them the rest of their lives.

Thus I wonder what their thoughts are on the instant and continuing posthumous deification of Bryant.

Phil Mushnick goes on to describe the allegations and Bryant's apology and how Bryant never suffered any consequences of his 2003 deed, and finishes his article with: "So here it is: Kobe Bryant was a great basketball player who loved his kids. Many of us have half of that covered. But he was not what he has become—what the nation and most media insisted he become—since Jan 26." Similar sentiment to Mushnick's was shared by a journalist, Marcos Bretón, who, on February 8, in his opinion column "We should be able to talk about Kobe Bryant's rape case without receiving death threats" described the hate and threats of, as he referred to them, "Bryant avengers" aimed at Felicia Sonmez of the Washington Post, and Gayle King of CBS, who had dared to talk about Bryant's past (Bretón). Bretón's opinion on the matter is similar to that of Mushnick's as he writes:

Michael Eric Dyson recorded an almost 10-minute passionate and nuanced video on Instagram not only elaborating on how Bryant dealt with the case, and grew as a human being after it, but also criticizing the reaction to the recent reports about it, and defending Gayle King and Oprah Winfrey. Bryant was complicated. The emotional response is, too.

However, unlike Muschnick, Bretón admits that he feels the tragic loss, but he wants Bryant's story to be told in full.

Muschnick, Bretón, Sonmez, King, Wood, Disney and many others may have played the role of the devil's advocates in the process of, as Mushnick put it, "posthumous deification of Bryant" but their voices were drowned in the chorus of glorification voices of people of sports, media, entertainment and fans. And when during the Celebration of Life Memorial Service on February 24, Bryant's widow, Vanessa Bryant, in her eulogy stated that Bryant was a husband she had not deserved, Bryant's shameful past was buried with him.

### **The Post-Millennial Saint**

The Memorial Service at Staples Center dubbed Celebration of Life was a culmination point of honoring Bryant as it cumulated all the previously described forms of tributes. The ceremony was broadcast by major television stations, there were thousands of fans outside and inside the Staples center, the service was hosted by ABC's Jimmy Kimmel, Beyoncé performed two songs for Kobe, whom she loved, so did Alicia Keys and Christina Aguilera. There were numerous NBA stars of past and present, as well as other celebrities from all walks of fame in the audience. The eulogies delivered

by Vanessa Bryant, Sabrina Ionescu, Diana Taurasi, Rob Pelinka, Geno Auriemma, Jimmy Kimmel, Shaquille O'Neal, and Michael Jordan all glorified different aspects of Bryant's great personality.

The Celebration of Life, which was organized by Vanessa Bryant and the Mamba and Mambacita Sports Foundation was meant as the celebration of Kobe and Giana Bryant, as well as the seven other victims of the crash, which was somewhat undercut by the fact that on the day of the ceremony, Vanessa Bryant filed a lawsuit against Island Express Helicopter Inc. for negligence on the part of the pilot who died in the crash, and she was seeking compensatory and punitive damages (Pettersson). In response, a representative of Ara George Zobayan (the pilot) filed court papers that circumstances surrounding the fatal flight were caused by the passengers' own behavior and their decision to fly on that day (Pagones).

While all victims of the fatal helicopter flight were honored and remembered the focus of the Celebration of Life was on Gigi, and even more so, Kobe Bryant. While Vanessa Bryant talked about Gianna as her wonderful and loving daughter, in other eulogies she was remembered mainly for how much she resembled her father in her individualism, determination and love of basketball—the sport in which she was meant to accomplish as much for herself and women in general as her father did in the NBA. One of the most moving moments of the ceremony was when a WNBA star, Diana Taurasi, said of Giana's basketball skills: "I mean, who has a turnaround fadeaway jumper at 11? LeBron barely got it today" ("Kobe Memorial: Read all the speeches"). The joke brought laughter to the people gathered at Staples Center and perfectly reflected the competitive spirit of sports, of basketball, the one Gianna inherited from her father and that of post-Millennials according to post-Millennials.

Kobe Bryant's special relation with Giana was a constant feature of all the eulogies that night, as was the downpour of praises of Bryant himself as a basketball player and a human being. In Vanessa Bryant's words, to her, Kobe was a "sweet husband, and the beautiful father of our children. He was mine. He was my everything.... He was the most amazing husband. Kobe loved me more than I could ever express or put into words.... He was charismatic, a gentleman. He was loving, adoring and romantic" ("Kobe Memorial: Read all the speeches"). Shaquille O'Neal remembered Kobe as a loyal friend and a true renaissance man and even though their relationship was complex, Kobe was O'Neal's little brother ("Kobe Memorial: Read all the speeches"). Bryant was also remembered as a little brother by Michael Jordan, who praised Bryant's passion which at times aggravated him but also made him love Kobe, who had a way to get Jordan, as evidenced by the tears and a joke that even then Bryant turned Jordan into another "crying Jordan meme" ("Kobe Memorial: Read all the speeches").

Similar praises and anecdotes were told by all the speakers at the Memorial Service, but perhaps the most glorifying one came from Lakers general manager Rob Pelinka. Pelinka said that Bryant had texted him on the morning of January 26 asking if he knew a baseball agent. Bryant said he wanted to help secure an internship with the agent for a friend's daughter. Pelinka's comment on his last interaction with Bryant was: "Kobe's last human act was heroic. He wanted to use his platform to bless and shape a young girl's future. Hasn't Kobe done that for all of us?" (West). A few days

later, a baseball agent Scott Boras decided to honor Kobe Bryant's final request and create an internship for Alexis Altobelli, the daughter of John Altobelli and the sister of Alyssa and Keri, who all had died in the crash. Pelinka's narrative and Boras's reaction transformed a simple act of using one's contacts into an act of heroism, which does not diminish Bryant's noble intentions, however the manner the story was presented was hyperbolic and hagiographic.

However, the Celebration of Life was not the culminating point in the process of canonization of Kobe Bryant. Soon after the ceremony was over and the social media comments on the event quieted down, America moved on, first, to Coronavirus pandemic crisis and then to the death of George Floyd and its aftermath, and, in the midst of the wave of protests following Floyd's murder, the narrative deification process of Kobe found its climax.

On June 12, 2020, Netflix released *8:46*—a special by Dave Chappelle. It was not so much a comedy special as Chappelle's reflections on Floyd's death, police brutality and the reality of being black in America. At one point of the monologue, Chappelle makes a claim that Bryant saved the nation from itself on the night of the last game of his career. After recounting a story of how a black, former military man killed five (although Chappelle mentions nine) white police officers in Dallas in 2016, Chappelle says:

The night that those nine police officers were killed felt like the end of the world. The only reason that it wasn't the end of the world, in my opinion, is because at the very same time that was happening, Kobe Bryant was playing his last game as an LA Laker. And as scary as all that shit was, I kept flipping back to see if Kobe would drop 60. And he did. Oh, and he did.... And I watch this n\*\*\*a [Bryant] dribbling and saving this god-damned country from itself. ("8:46 - Dave Chappelle" 23:32–24:12)

Chappelle's reasoning is that on that night, when the police officers were murdered in an act of retribution for a death of yet another black man from the hands of the police, the only thing that prevented the riots, was the fact that America was watching Kobe getting sixty points for the last time in his career. In fact, Bryant's final game took place three months before the police officers were killed at a protest in Dallas, which was the incident Chappelle referred to. In his special, Chappelle merges the two events into a one night timeframe and changes the number of officers killed, which makes it possible to perceive his comments the way Tyler Lauletta of *INSIDER* did; Leuletta wrote that "[Chappelle] speaks to a larger point of sports offering relief in a time of national distress" (Lauletta).

However, Chappelle's narrative, while beatifies Bryant as a miracle-maker and a savior and expresses the comedian's admiration of Bryant—"I loved Kobe Bryant. He died, the night, the day I won a Grammy, he died. That's why I didn't show up at the Grammys. Because Kobe died. They had both of his fucking jersey numbers hanging up, 8, 24. That's my birthday. I cried like a baby" ("8:46–Dave Chappelle" 24:12–24:33)—also carries a dangerous subtext. 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. It is ironic that Chapelle’s comments came in the same monologue in which he stated that it is not the time for celebrities to speak for the street as the street was speaking for itself.

### Conclusions

Who gets to be a secular saint in the Post-Millennial age? Are there any candidates “better” or as deserving as Kobe Bryant? On Friday, February 14, three weeks after Bryant’s death, two former volleyball stars Carrie McCaw and Lesley Prather and their twelve-year-old daughters, Kacie McCaw and Rhyann Prather died in a car crash which happened when they were traveling to a club volleyball tournament in Kansas City (Silverman). Their death, so similar in circumstances to the Calabasas crash, was reported on but it was not the breaking news as in the case of Bryant. Arguably, the combination of being an athlete and dying tragically is not enough for one to be canonized by the media if one was not a celebrity and a household name.

It would seem that being a public figure, or even a celebrity (sic!) is a required condition, just as theological obedience is when it comes to the saints of the Catholic Church. The secular requirement was not met by the Wuhan doctor who tried to warn the world of the impending threat of the coronavirus pandemics. The very pandemics that almost two months later made Americans question the privileged status of NBA stars as evidenced in TIME magazine’s article “Why Can the Utah Jazz Get Coronavirus Testing, But I Can’t?” (Gregory). Doctor Li Wenliang died on February 7—two weeks after Bryant’s death. Had he been a celebrity-physician, perhaps Dr Wenliang could have become a post-Millennial martyr saint.

There were other martyrs and heroes who lost their lives in 2020 alone. George Floyd was murdered on May 25—four months after Bryant’s death and his death sparked a social movement which hopes to combat systemic racism in the United States. Jacob Blake was shot in the back seven times by a police officer on August 23, which led NBA players to suspend Playoffs as a form of protest against police brutality. Chadwick Boseman’s premature and tragic death after four years of battling colon cancer, during which time he portrayed heroes on screen (actual—baseball’s Jackie Robinson, and fictional—Marvel’s Black Panther), immediately led to him being referred to as a “superhero on screen and off” (Penrice).

The stories of Wenliang, Floyd or Boseman, each have a narrative potential for a post-Millennial hagiography; however, it is the Bryant’s story which captures the zeitgeist of the post-Millennial age. Seemiller and Grace, in their study of Generation Z, somewhat optimistically and perhaps romantically predict that:

Generation Z sees the world through multiple screens, but... they recognize that societal issues are much larger than just themselves. With their loyalty, determination, and responsibility as well as realistic outlook on life inherited from Generation X, this generation is committed to those around them and motivated by making a difference. Add to that their characteristics of care and compassion, and you can expect Generation Z to use both their heads and their hearts to solve the world’s problems. (17)

The process of Bryant's secular canonization reflects the characteristics of post-Millennials mentioned above. First, the multiple screens; every mural, every customized apparel or a shoe, every expression of admiration of late Kobe Bryant, which have been mentioned in this paper, and multitudes of other, have been publicized through social media. The clash between the critics of Bryant's shameful past and those who would not have his name tarnished reflected both, loyalty and determination as well as realistic outlook on Bryant. His devotees used their hearts; the devil's advocates used their minds. Ironically, both sides emphasized the same societal issue—women's rights. Bryant was hailed as a father and a champion of women in sports by the fans, and the MeToo representatives attempted to remind the public of his dark past. One coin, two sides. Both sides also expressed care and compassion.

Kobe Bryant though flawed, or perhaps because of his troubled past and difficult personality, to many, embodied the strive for excellence, which is at the core of the American Dream, which combined with his celebrity status and his tragic and premature loss of life made him for a perfect character of a narrative of a post-Millennial saint. The question remains whether this narrative, this created in real time by both, traditional and social media, hagiographic tale of Kobe Bryant has a potential of becoming one for posterity or one of the short-lived Instagram posts. As soon as in February 2020, The Naismith Memorial Basketball Hall of Fame announced that they would posthumously enshrine Bryant into its ranks. By doing so, the organization chose to ignore its own rule that states that a period of five years must pass since a player's retirement for them to be eligible to become a Hall of Famer. The enshrinement ceremony of Class 2020 is set on May 13-15, 2021, and it is fair to say that Kobe Bryant's spirit will hover over the event and his legend will continue.

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