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*“In this majestic study of basketball as ritual, religion, and culture, Woodbine plunges into the courts of Boston with an insider’s savvy to catalogue the urban sport’s pulsating (and potentially transcendent) dialogue.”* —**Publishers Weekly Starred Review**

## **New Book *Black Gods of the Asphalt* Explores Street Basketball as an Urban Religion Searching for Meaning in the Inner City**

Onaje X. O. Woodbine, Ph.D., grew up in Boston’s rough Roxbury neighborhood, where his basketball skills, and his spirit, were nurtured on basketball courts. He returned to those courts as a philosopher and theologian to document the “lived religion” of street hoops. His new book, *Black Gods of the Asphalt: Religion, Hip-Hop, and Street Basketball* (Columbia University Press, \$30.00 cloth, May 24, 2016), explores the spiritual dimensions of the rare freedom that young black men find on the court. “The ways the players move, style, and display their bodies on the court say something profound about their search for ultimate meaning in the world,” Woodbine writes.

Woodbine spent four years playing alongside and interviewing players in the Mattapan, Roxbury, and Dorchester neighborhoods of Boston, places pervaded by “a general sense of terror.” He shows what it’s like “to lace up sneakers, stand on cracked asphalt, hold a ball in sweaty palms, and let the injury of race ride one’s body into the ground.”

A “known” player who grew up on these same Boston courts, Woodbine had instant credibility in a community mistrustful of outsiders. A high school stand-out, he was recruited by Yale University, where in his sophomore year he led the team in scoring and was voted one of the top ten players in the Ivy League. He caused a stir when he quit the team, choosing instead to pursue his studies in philosophy and religion.

In addition to enabling young black men to work through the violence of inner city life, street basketball is awash with spiritual experiences. Ballplayers pass through a gateway on the court that “allows them to slip between present time and a time that is ‘out of joint’ with everyday life on the streets,” Woodbine says. Tyshawn, one of the players Woodbine interviewed, says, “It’s just like you forget...everything else on the outside world.” Another, Marlon, describes it this way: “I feel like a free spirit...I feel like my soul overtakes my body.” “Nothing is going to take you off of this cloud that you are on and the wave that you are going on. It’s electrifying,” says another athlete, Jermaine.

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In *Black Gods of the Asphalt*, Woodbine describes the sense of transcendence, ritual, community, and healing to be found at neighborhood games, including:

- how Boston's inner city courts have become "sites of memory," where players and fans memorialize their dead;
- the ecstatic dimensions of the dunk, in which black youth take flight above the asphalt;
- the relationship between gangs and basketball players, who, as symbols of hope for the community, are often exempt from participating in gang activities;
- the influence of Christian faith, along with African spiritual roots and ancestor spirits;
- the roles played by figures such as tricksters and MCs, masters of black talk whose humorous play-by-play reveals "the latent meaning in every crossover, shake and bake, and stutter step performed on the asphalt"; and the layers of onlookers, from the outer ring of gangsters and hustlers, to entrepreneurs selling snacks and drinks, to the inner ring of families, friends, fans, and other players;
- the stories of individual players who seek to break the cycle of violence in their community, and who find a second chance at life;
- the role of women as a catalyst for change and healing on the courts, a theme in the stories of almost every player Woodbine interviewed;
- the celebratory nature of the game, "the ways street basketball games, like blues music, do not make you sad even though they are grounded in and infused with sadness."

In *Black Gods of the Asphalt*, Woodbine offers a rare portrait of a passionate, committed, and resilient group of athletes who use the court to display a dimension of their humanity that urban reality cannot corrupt. The book has been adapted into a stage play, which dramatizes the rhythms, styles, and search for meaning that infuses street basketball. The BGOTA stage play will be performed at Phillips Academy Andover, where Woodbine teaches philosophy and religious studies, in May, and at The Oprah Winfrey Leadership Academy for Girls in South Africa, in June, 2016.

#### **About the Author**

**Onaje X. O. Woodbine, Ph.D.** teaches philosophy and religious studies at Phillips Academy in Andover, Massachusetts, where he lives on campus with his family. A Boston native, he received his BA degree in Philosophy from Yale University, and his MA in theological studies and Ph.D. in Psychology of Religion from Boston University. Woodbine specializes in African and African American religious thought. He served as African Diaspora Scholar in Residence for Project on African American Religious Research and Education (PAARRE) at the BU School of Theology, and was awarded a Fulbright-Hays Scholarship Abroad to study language, religion and culture in Nigeria, West Africa. *Black Gods of the Asphalt* is his first book.

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*Black Gods of the Asphalt: Religion, Hip-Hop, and Street Basketball*

by Onaje X.O. Woodbine

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