

**'It's Gotta be the Shoes, Money!': Sneakers, Identity, and Consumption in the
Making of an Authentic (Black) Basketball Culture**

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‘It’s Gotta be the Shoes, Money!’: Sneakers, Identity, and Consumption in the Making of an Authentic (Black) Basketball Culture

Through this concise article, I hope to rectify my personal desire to purchase a new pair of sneakers (usually made under horrific labour conditions, often by children) by addressing the absence of academic scholarship that critically addresses the athletic shoe and its social function. By turning to the sneaker, I hope to remedy the ambivalence of historians and cultural critics toward the shoe, by looking at the shoe in and as cultural production, but more importantly engaging with the shoe as a marker of social identity. Even though representations of footwear began to signify modernity within Western art and culture, at least beginning with Vincent Van Gogh’s series of late-nineteenth century oil paintings, historians and cultural critics have failed to properly look at the mode in which shoes have been re-contextualized by youth subcultures to serve as objects that separate these cultural groups from outside social control and domination. On one hand, shoes are equated with hegemonic mass production and consumption, while inversely they can be re-inscribed by the individuals who wear them. As such, sneakers (known as trainers in the UK) and the subcultural groups which inscribe them with signification become the ideal space to discuss collective identity and economic transformation through consumption.

While I will include a brief historical overview of the history of sneaker culture in the United States, the crux of this article will highlight the discursive interplay between the athletic shoe, race, and masculinity. Since athletics, often read as the racially-based biological abilities of individuals, cannot be disentangled from

larger discussions of masculinity and race, I will focus my arguments on the manner that sneakers mediate between their reception by racially plural subcultures and the marketing of these same commodities as a fixed trait of Blackness. By way of these discussions, I will begin to problematize U.S. constructions of Black masculinity, all through the guise of athletics and athletic apparel.

Michael Jordan, Mars Blackmon, and Me: Shoes as Signifiers of Race

As basketball journalist and hip-hop theorist Scoop Jackson makes apparent, it is impossible to disentangle basketball footwear from the cultural practices that surround the sport.¹ As such, through this historically-based cultural critique of sneakers, I will demonstrate the interconnectedness between athletic footwear, sport, the cultural domain the surrounds sport, race, masculinity and consumption. Although, it may initially appear that these divergent discourses are seemingly irrelevant, through the analysis of sneaker cultural history and advertisements, I hope to demonstrate that these categories are in fact mutually constitutive.

With this in mind, it should come as no surprise that my initiation into basketball culture developed in tandem with my fascination with athletic shoes. In fact, I purchased my first pair of basketball sneakers in 1986 when I began playing organized ball. For many, including myself, 1986 functioned as a watershed year in sneaker history. It is no coincidence that in the same year that I received my first basketball shoes, Run DMC released “My Adidas,” their award-winning homage to

¹ Scoop Jackson, *Sole Provider: Thirty Years of Nike Basketball* (New York: PowerHouse Books, 2004).

the B-boy's shoe of choice: the Adidas Shell-toe.² On 1 January 1986, Run DMC released the album *Raising Hell*, which included "My Adidas" as the third track. Responding to the growing popularity of rap music, this record was a market success and peaked at Number One on the Billboard Charts. The success was due, in part, to "My Addidas," which functioned as an un-endorsed advertisement for the (then) German shoe company. While Run DMC would eventually get monetary remuneration for their efforts, at this point it was unheard of for a corporation to see hip hop culture as a viable source of influence in market economics. This would quickly change.

Coeval with the release of "My Adidas" was the issuance of the first model of the Nike Air Jordan athletic shoe, the most successful shoe in sneaker history (along with the Converse All-Star). Although young urban hipsters had been interested in footwear for some time, this notable event cemented the (market) power of athletic shoes within mainstream consciousness. As Scoop Jackson notes in his history of Nike basketball shoes, Michael Jordan "possessed a gift. More than the high-flyin', death-defyin' 360 degree (Brooklyn) slam dunk, he had the ability to turn a shoe company into a marketing company. He had a vision, not to be bigger than the shoe, but create a linear coexistence."³ However, all credit should not be given to Jordan. In fact sneaker discourse is a complex field and Jordan cannot be accredited with

² B-boy is a term used to signify an active participant in hip-hop culture. Of particular interest to B-boys and b-girls are the five elements of hip-hop: break dancing, MCing, DJing, graffiti, and knowledge or community building.

³ Robert "Scoop" Jackson. *Sole Provider: Thirty Years of Nike Basketball* (New York: PowerHouse, 2002), 53.

single-handedly altering the trajectory of sneaker culture. Then again, he is an integral component of this movement.

Nonetheless, beginning in 1986, the sneaker world became inextricably changed from one where shoes were a secondary accoutrement, to one where sport, celebrity, and sneaker were reciprocal signifiers within basketball culture. In fact, as I will later explicate, footwear became imbued with a certain amount of social and athletic authority. On many levels, this relationship between athletic shoes and social position relates to the manner of how corporations market their products. Part and parcel to this is the nature in which sneaker companies have “marketed” their apparel as markers of masculine identity. As indicated by Ben Carrington, “sport functioned as a key male homosocial institution whereby ‘manly virtues and competencies’ could be both learned and displayed as a way of avoiding wider social, political, and economic processes of ‘feminization.’⁴ It becomes important to acknowledge that prior to 1987, the year after the initial Air Jordan was marketed, Nike did not actively direct their marketing campaigns toward women. In many regards, sneakers, as an integral component to athletics, represented masculinity. Eventhough Nike now markets to women, its basketball-centric material is still entirely aimed at men. Susan Burris notes that

Women’s basketball just does not receive the face time it needs to redefine how the public might respond to female basketball players.

For proof, visit the Nike web site: www.nike.com. Except for the

⁴ Ben Carrington. “Sport, Masculinity and Black Cultural Resistance.” In Sheila Scraton and Anne Flintoff, eds. *Gender and Sport: A Reader* (New York: Routledge, 2002), 142.

“Nike Goddess” link, no female personalities welcome the consumer.

The omission of women here implies that men only play basketball.

Nike’s web rhetoric implies that men are “cool”... Women, however, are an afterthought.⁵

This corporate gender bias was recently recognized by Cheryl Cole and Amy Hribar.

They note that Nike avoided producing and marketing apparel for women as not to tarnish their masculine corporate identity. Creating a woman’s apparel line, as they demonstrate, would have “compromise[d] Nike’s authentic and serious sport image.”⁶

Desiring not to squander its authenticity, Nike assembled its image couched between sport and Black masculinity. Sports is the site where Black men are allowed full access to American masculinity. When discussing professional footballer turned actor and social activist Jim Brown, Keith M. Harris writes that “Brown is visually marked by his athletic body, which, in turn, in the homosocial becomes a sign of masculinity.”⁷

The reciprocity between male consumption and masculinity is not a recent development in capitalist historiography or one directly related to urban, youth subcultures. Rather, as Brent Shannon asserts in “ReFashioning Men,” late-Victorian British marketers needed to expand male consumption and therefore began to

⁵ Susan Burris. “She Got Game, but She Don’t Fame.” In Linda K. Fuller, ed. *Sport, Rhetoric, and Gender: Historical Perspectives and Media Representations* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2006), 91.

⁶ Cheryl Cole and Amy Hribar. “Celenrity Feminism: Nike Style: Post-Fordism, Transcendence, and Consumer Power.” *Sociology of Sport Journal* 12:4 (1995), 359.

⁷ Keith M. Harris. *Boys, Boyz, Bois: An Ethics of Black Masculinity in Film and Popular Media* (New York: Routledge, 2006), 66.

conceptualize shopping for certain products as an entirely masculine pursuit.

Shannon writes that

because such practices [conspicuous consumption and self display] were traditionally regarded as effeminate by many middle-class men, advertisers and merchants worked aggressively to recast shopping and consumption as attractive activities for men, and the first step was to distance their consumer habits from women's.⁸

During the Victorian period, this was accomplished by essentializing masculinity and the products associated with it. In other words, advertisers constructed an ideal of who was a true man and what it was that he needed? With its coalescence in the late-nineteenth century, urban masculinity began to be associated with the fashioning of one's self in opposition to feminine notions. Since sport has historically been related to masculine social roles the consumption of these products reaffirms the consumer's role as male. John Horne states that "the consumption of sports helps men to develop and reinforce their masculine self-identities."⁹ Moreover, in *The Rites of Men: Manhood, Politics, and the Culture of Sport*, Varda Burstyn observes that "modern sport [is] a masculinist culture rooted in a superseded 'separate-spheres' gender division of labour."¹⁰ When discussing "Sportswomanship" Marlene Watson, affirms that "sport has universally held the connotation of being a masculine endeavor, its participation requiring aggressiveness and competitiveness, both deemed male social-

⁸ Brent Shannon. "ReFashioning Men: Fashion, Masculinity, and the Cultivation of the Male Consumer in Britain, 1860-1914." *Victorian Studies* (Summer 2004): 600.

⁹ John Horne. *Sport in Consumer Culture* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2006), 152. Horne is discussing the work of various sociologists when he stakes this claim.

¹⁰ Varda Burstyn. *The Rites of Men: Manhood, Politics, and the Culture of Sport* (Toronto: University of Toronto, 1999), 32.

personality traits.¹¹ So the fact that Nike ignored marketing commodities for girls and women should come as no surprise, but highlights the replication of an existing discourse about prescribed gender roles.

If sport is commonly read as an entirely masculinist sphere, since the 1970s basketball has been viewed as both masculine and Black. Todd Boyd maintains that basketball is “the embodiment of blackness in contemporary popular culture.”¹² Likewise, Jason Jimerson and Matthew Oware view basketball as the ideal location to investigate and analyze black masculinity.¹³ In an ethnographic and sociological investigation of street vernacular, they articulate that the “cultural association linking blackness to basketball made [basketball] courts great places to study black men.”¹⁴ While these studies in no way attempt to uncover the root of such culturally constructed racial assumptions, they directly outline the manner in which Blackness and basketball are intimately coupled. In many respects, modern and contemporary sneaker advertisements build upon gendered and racial discourses that began circulating during the Victorian era and are contemporarily perpetuated. Adverts need not produce new discourses on race and masculinity, instead they build upon already circulating notions.

¹¹ Marlene Watson. “Sportswomanship: The Cultural Acceptance of Sport for Women versus Accommodation of Cultured Women in Sport.” In Linda K. Fuller, ed. *Sport, Rhetoric, and Gender: Historical Perspectives and Media Representations* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2006), 20.

¹² Todd Boyd. *Am I Black Enough for You?: Popular Culture from the “Hood” and Beyond* (Bloomington: University of Indiana, 1997).

¹³ Jason B. Jimerson and Matthew K. Oware. “Telling the Code of the Street: An Ethnomethodological Ethnology.” *Journal of Contemporary Ethnography* 35:1 (2006), 33.

¹⁴ Ibid.

Nearly a century after the marketing of masculine consumption in metropolitan London, US advertisers continue to maintain an exuberant male identity in opposition to the Victorian cult of womanhood. If, as Joan N. Burstyn describes, Victorian middle-class “[w]omen spent their time organising the household, overseeing the care of their children, shopping for necessities and luxuries, practicing philanthropy, and nurturing friendships, while their male relatives left home each day to earn money for these activities¹⁵. This binary opposition between Western masculinity and femininity is still very active today. During the early-1990s, expanding corporate giant Nike, through the work of the advertising agency Wieden and Kennedy, developed a serial promotion featuring Michael Jordan and the fictive Mars Blackmon character, portrayed by filmmaker and New York Knicks fanatic Spike Lee.¹⁶ In this series of television and print advertisements, Mars Blackmon, the enigmatic character from Lee’s feature-length film *Do the Right Thing!*, questioned white America’s obsession with the biological abilities of the Black athlete by pondering “Yo, Money, is it the shoes?” By using Ebonics or Black vernacular English, seen in white America as the authenticating language of ghetto, Blackmon wondered if Jordan’s abilities were based on physical, cultural, or biological traits. Was it Jordan’s training and time spent as a gym rat? His consumption and use of a specific pair of Nike sneakers? Or was it his “god given” abilities as a Black athlete that made him able to do some “death-defyin” dunks? Michael Eric Dyson argues

¹⁵ Joan N. Burstyn. *Victorian Education and the Ideal of Womanhood* (London: Croom Helm, 1980), 30. It must be pointed out that these same ideals did not apply to working-class and colonized women, as they, like their male counterparts, were expected to become wage earners.

¹⁶ Jackson, 102.

that Black bodies are commonly presented as naturally successful.¹⁷ On the flipside, whites achieve success through hard work and practice. In the previously discussed commercial, through the *mise en scene* linguistic and physical interplay between Blackmon and Jordan, Blackmon finally determines that one's "racial" inability to play basketball, posited as a reflection of Whiteness, could be surmounted by the consumption of Jordan's line of Nike sneakers. By buying Air Jordan sneakers, white Americans are able to transgress their biological failures to play ball through the consumption of sneakers. While pulling from multiple sources, John Horne states that "Blacks 'have been permitted to excel in entertainment only on the condition that they conform to whites' images of blacks.' ...Kusz alternately suggests that Nike exploits black culture in order to sell their products to white youth."¹⁸

It was also during the early-1990s that the feature-length film *White Men Can't Jump!* starring Woody Harrelson and Wesley Snipes was released. The premise of this box office success was that Sidney Deane (Snipes) could work in cahoots with the white baller Billy Hoyle (Harrelson) to hustle unsuspecting basketball players throughout Southern California. The only reason such a scenario could be successful, if we follow the plot and rhetoric of the film, is if the basketball community perceives Hoyle (Harrelson) to have categorically no game. Why cannot Hoyle (Harrelson) play basketball well, because as the title suggests white men can't jump.

¹⁷ Michael Eric Dyson. "Be Like Mike? Michael Jordan and the Pedagogy of Desire." In Henry Giroux and Peter McLaren, ed. *Between Borders: Pedagogy and the Politics of Cultural Studies* (New York: Routledge, 1994), 119-127.

¹⁸ Horne, 155.

Returning to the commercial, Blackmon finally concludes that, “It’s gotta be the shoes, money!” It is not Jordan’s Blackness that makes him a superstar, but instead it is his trainers. After all, why else would Nike pay Jordan (or any other athlete for that matter) to sport their shoes? Through Blackmon’s performative use of language, what Nike would argue as an authentic Blackness, marketers were able to assert the ghetto-fabulous quality of Nike sneakers, while also disavowing Jordan of a racially Black identity. While white consumers could not attain the “biological” ability of Black ballers like Jordan, they could at least perform them by wearing Air Jordan shoes.

As Scoop Jackson writes in his uncritical celebration of Nike basketball shoes, Lee used these starkly filmed black-and-white commercials to “introduce Nike to the Mars Blackmon ghetto fan base.”¹⁹ Although Spike Lee was an upwardly mobile filmmaker and New York University alumni, Jackson somehow connects him to the voice of the ghetto. Here we see the conflation of Black social identities and those of the ghetto, a prescribed class identity connected with geographic marginalized. The collapsing of the authentically ghetto, an empty signifier, into the authentically Black, also an empty signifier, becomes the hallmark of the marketing of basketball shoes. In other words, if we follow the rhetoric of hip-hop marketing articulated through this commercial: to be Black is to be ghetto, regardless of class identity. In return, to be ghetto, one must speak a certain vernacular English and don a pair of ridiculously priced athletic shoes as part of ones’ daily performance.

¹⁹ Ibid.

The success of the Air Jordan product line is connected to larger socio-economic events transpiring in the United States and throughout the globe during the late-1980s and early-1990s. If we turn to John Horne: “Jordan [or rather his sneaker line] emerged as black American culture became increasingly commodified. He became part of American ‘soft power,’ and part of the spread of global capitalism.”²⁰ While certain sectors of Black America critiqued Michael Jordan for his acquiescence, Jesse Jackson backed Jordan’s apolitical nature. Accordingly, Jackson asked “Why is it expected of a ballplayer or a boxer to be an astute sociopolitical analyst?”²¹ But Jordan was not needed as a community mouth piece or activist, he was needed to sell sneakers and play basketball.

Needless to say, Air Jordan represented the commodification of Blackness to a globalizing marketplace. Nevertheless, trainers exist, as do many culture products and practices, as double signifiers. They mean one thing within the hegemonic macro-culture (capitalism) and something entirely different within smaller micro-cultures, in this case basketball culture. As such, opposing significations and receptions exist within the athletic shoe, never entirely resolved.

After all, basketball, as do many sports, has historically functioned as a site for the contestation of (Black) male identities. bell hooks maintains that the “competition between black and white males has been highlighted in the sports

²⁰ John Horne. *Sport in Consumer Culture* (New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2006), 81.

²¹ Jesse Jackson as cited in Henry Louis Gates, Jr. “Net Worth.” *New Yorker* (June 1, 1998); 58.

arena.”²² The discourse of basketball is constituted and permeated by discussions of race. “In basketball,” writes Todd Boyd, “race, directly or indirectly, is the conversation at all times.”²³ What Boyd acknowledges is that analyses of basketball culture must take into account discussions of race or rather race is *the subtext* of all basketball discourses. I would expand Boyd’s observations to likewise include masculinities as an additional connotation of basketball. The problematic connections between essentialized Black masculine performativity and basketball are summed up succinctly in the writing of conservative sports journalist Jason Whitlock. When discussing the US Olympic basketball team, almost entirely Black, Whitlock maintains that

You do not have to support a group of Black American millionaires in any endeavor. Despite then hypocritical, rabid patriotism displayed immediately after 9/11, it’s perfectly suitable for [white] Americans to despise Team USA Basketball, Allen Iverson and all the other tattooed NBA players representing our country. Yes, these athletes are no more spoiled, whiny, and rich than the golfers who fearlessly represent us in the Ryder Cup, but at least Tiger Woods has the Good sense not to wear cornrows.²⁴

²² bell hooks. *Outlaw Culture: Resisting Representations* (New York: London, 1994), 31.

²³ Todd Boyd. “Mo’ Money, Mo’ Problems.” In Todd Boyd and Kenneth L. Shropshire. *Basketball Jones: American Above the Rim* (New York: New York University), 60.

²⁴ Jason Whitlock as cited in Dave Zirin. *What’s My Name Fool: Sports and Resistance in the United States* (Chicago: Haymarket, 2005), 166.

Here Black basketball identities challenge Anglo-American norms. But this contestation for the construction of identities is not isolated to ones that are produced from within the Black community; rather this contestation is frequently between members of a pluri-ethnic organic basketball community and the hegemonic forces attempting to colonize and control this autonomous site. In the 1994 essay “The Game,” Clyde Taylor asserts that within US society Black men function as “players” in which the prize “is the soul, spirit, and creative energy of Black men themselves.”²⁵ In many respects, the basketball sneaker, functioning as the intermediary between basketball, hip hop, and other forms of “authentically” Black sites of labour, operates as the example *par excellence* of the “soul, spirit, and energy” of Black masculinity. In response, the role of advertising becomes the extrapolation of Black masculinity so that it may be consumed by white and global patrons. The marketing of clothing perpetuates the capitalist myth that we are who we are by the way in which we actively construct our identities through fashion. Whites can “be Black,” if they walk the walk and talk and talk. That is to say through their everyday performances. This is especially apparent in regards to basketball culture.

From Use-value to Juice-value: Expansion of the Sneaker Marketplace

Beginning in 1917, with the introduction of the Converse All-Star, commonly known as the Chuck Taylor after an early twentieth-century basketball player turned sneaker

²⁵ Clyde Taylor. “The Game.” In Thelma Golden, ed. *Black Male: Representations of Masculinity in Contemporary American Art* (New York: Henry N. Abrams, 1994), 167.

marketer, nearly all basketball players wore a similar model of footwear.²⁶ According to company documents, the Converse Rubber Shoe Company was founded in 1908 by Marquis Mills Converse.²⁷ The first All-Star sneaker was produced in 1917, while Taylor joined Converse in 1921.²⁸ In 1923, six years after the original All-Star production run, Taylor's signature was added to the exterior of the inside ankle of each shoe. During this period until the late-1960s, it did not matter if one was playing pick-up ball at the YMCA, for the junior varsity high school squad, collegiate, or professional, the Converse All-Star held a monopoly on the basketball market. Although other companies, such as P.F. Flyer and Spalding, made styles comparable to the canvas Converse, ballplayers almost exclusively wore the All-Star. In point of fact, at the inaugural NCAA basketball championship in 1939, both squads wore the Converse All-Star. The Converse media relations department writes that between 1930 and 1950 "the nation's interest in basketball surges. Converse and basketball are synonymous as the Chuck Taylor All Star becomes standard issue on pro, collegiate and high school courts nationwide."²⁹ Although this is the telling of history through the perspective of the Converse corporation, it is now entirely misleading. This claim is backed by Alison Gill who writes that "from the 1920s to the 1970s, the All Star grew in popularity alongside the growing interest in basketball as a

²⁶ Abraham Aamidor. *Chuck Taylor, All Star: The Story Behind the Most Famous Athletic Shoe in History* (Bloomington: Indiana University, 2006).

²⁷ Chris Doyle. "The History of Converse."

<http://www.converse.com/LiveFiles/7/11/Timeline.pdf>. 21 April 2007.

²⁸ Ibid.

²⁹ Ibid.

professional and amateur sport, and was sold in sporting goods stores as such.”³⁰ The Converse All-Star were *the* basketball kicks.

Case in point, during the early 1960s, P.F. Flyer released a new high-top sneaker model that was similar in style to the Chuck Taylor model. Although these sneakers were highly popular within the general marketplace, inside the cultural realm of street and organized basketball, these shoes were quite marginal. In Bobbito García’s publication *Where’d You Get Those?: New York City’s Sneaker Culture, 1960-1987* (2003), Greg Brown states in an oral history interview that “if you were a serious ballplayer maybe you could pull off some skippies [inexpensive sneakers] like the Deks by Keds, but no way could you wear P.F.s [P.F. Flyers] on the court.”³¹ According to Brown, during the 1960s, and we could extrapolate this data to many decades prior, there has been an established structure of allowable fashion that “authentic” ballplayers must adhere to to be involved within its cultural domain. Yet, as Brown demonstrates, once a player gained a certain level of prestige or credibility by his or her peers, they were able to transcend the established structure of acceptable footwear. Serious ballplayers could wear Keds, but never P.F. Flyers.

Although the purchase of trainers operates in a capitalist marketplace, the manner that sneaker culture engages shoe consumption initiates a re-articulation of an over-determining of market value as the sole basis for sneaker fetishism. Although

³⁰ Alison Gill. “Limousines for the Feet: The Rhetoric of Sneakers.” In Giorgio Riello and Peter McNeil, eds. *Shoes: A History from Sandals to Sneakers* (New York: Berg, 2006), 377.

³¹ Greg Brown as cited in Bobbito García. *Where’d You Get Those?: New York City’s Sneaker Culture, 1960-1987*. (New York: Testify, 2003), 29.

fetishism is paramount to our understanding of sneaker culture, what is of greater import is the correlation between footwear and racialized identities.

Central to my argument at this juncture is to address the manner that the “classic” sneaker, the Converse All-Star, gets replaced by an ever-changing selection of athletic shoes produced by a multiplicity of multi-national corporations. Why could ballers not wear P.F. Flyers during the 1960s, but brands such as Nike, Puma, and New Balance gained a level of acceptance and prominence during the mid-1980s? Over the course of this section, I will discuss the transition from the existence of a single sneaker worn effectively by all basketball players, regardless of racialized or gendered identities, to the near saturation of the marketplace with countless lifestyle shoes marketed as signifiers of Blackness.

Hoosiers (dir. David Anspaugh, 1986), the award-winning basketball film starring Gene Hackman, Barbara Hershey, and Dennis Hopper, for example, reifies the relationship between race and location, in that rural squads (Hickory, Deer Lick, etc.) are entirely white, while the urban school (South Bend) is exclusively Black. While this, of course, demonstrates a Hollywood desire to posit race as the binary opposition between white and Black, with absolutely no interstices or hybridities, what is also apparent is that all basketball players within the film wear Converse All-Stars (illustration 2). In fact, the film’s poster pairs the sneakers with a rural Indiana landscape photograph as representative of the film’s narrative storyline about high school hoops in the state. Within this image, the Converse All-Stars, not an actual basketball, serve as the quintessential signifier of sport and identity in the Hoosier state. An analysis of pre-1970s professional, collegiate, and high school basketball

history, demonstrates that regardless of racial or class identities, players almost exclusively wore Converse (illustration 3).³² Chuck Taylor's were the universal marker of one's involvement in basketball. However, sometime after this period, sneakers and racial identity became cemented together as reciprocal. In *Smithsonian*, the monthly journal of the distinguished Smithsonian Institute, Ed Leibowitz notes that "Chuck Taylor's death in 1969 had signalled the beginning of the decline of the shoe that bore his name...Adidas and Puma would dominate the '70s; Reebok and Nike the '80s."³³ Leibowitz's assessment parallels those made by sneakers fiends and hip-hop heads.

Bobbito García, the hip-hop journalist and former professional basketball player, asserts that this coming together of shoes and identity occurred because of changes in shoe production in the early 1970s. He writes that

Things would drastically change in the early '70s. On the design side Adidas introduced leather basketball sneakers. And on the streets of New York, Keds put a dead end to Converse's sole dominance, forever. With the introduction of the Pro-Keds basketball line, Converse suddenly had unprecedented competition for the title of number one sneaker on the basketball playgrounds.³⁴

For García, the real alteration occurred in sneaker culture in response to the increased market presence of young companies, such as Adidas and Keds, two competitors to

³² Miscellaneous documents and publications located in the collection of "amateur" sport historian Robert Miner, Flint, MI (24 December 2004).

³³ Ed Leibowitz. "Old Sneakers Never Die." *Smithsonian* 32:8 (November 2001), np.

³⁴ García, 10.

Converse. Because of an increase in the availability of shoe styles, consumers were able to “choose” from a wider variety of obtainable footwear. Throughout the 1970s and 1980s, according to Leibowitz, the All-Star was “repositioned as a shoe for nonathletes. It was no longer the choice of NBA or college forwards but of the Rolling Stones on their 1969 ‘Steel Wheels’ concert tour and of high school hipsters turned off by the slick marketing of Nike and Reebok.”³⁵ Appropriately, the canvas Chuck Taylor, once a signifying B-ball stewart, was transformed into a marker of resistance to hyper-slick advertising under late-capitalism.

Within a few years of these new additions to the basketball shoe market, other corporations also began to market and distribute shoes specifically for basketball use. In the early years of the 1970s, Puma, Pony, and Nike were all gaining popularity in urban markets across the United States. It was this phenomenon, alongside the development of hip-hop in New York City, that identity and footwear became interconnected. Scoop Jackson provides backing for Garcia’s comments when he writes that

For thirty years a large part of the game’s [basketball’s] life has vicariously lived thru not just the sport, but the culture of the sport.

Thru the shoes, the players, the commercials...Instilled in the minds of millions: nothing can be accomplished, no success earned ‘without the shoes.’³⁶

While alluding to the Jordan/Blackmon dialogue (“It’s Gotta be the Shoes, Money!”), Jackson succinctly argues that the athletic parameters of basketball cannot be

³⁵ Leibowitz, np.

³⁶ Jackson, 7.

removed from its cultural signifiers, specifically sneakers, and the commercials that market them.

Unlike today, when consumers frequently purchase items based on brand loyalty, during the early years of sneaker consumption (prior to 1986), purchasing patterns were related to use value. Although Marx argues that “in simple circulation...the value of commodities attained at the most a form independent of their use-values,” the use-value of sneakers was also connected to their “juice-value”: the ability for these mass-produced commodities to be both transformative (for the individual) and transformed (by the individual).³⁷ Even if sneaker connoisseurs would strive to locate and procure rare shoes, the use-value of the shoes was still the most important component of their consumption. Nonetheless, shoes had to have fresh colours and smooth design if companies expected them to succeed in the athletic shoe marketplace. Sneakers connoisseurs didn’t want shoes that looked like “butt,” as many have contended. For instance, when professional basketball player Stephon Marbury produced a sneaker line, Starbury, sold exclusively at Steve and Barry’s, it has been unable to catch the favor of sneaker fanatics. All clothing items at Steve and Barry’s are priced at under \$20US, while the Starbury sneakers are priced under \$15US. Although, the goals of Marbury must be commended, the fact that his sneakers are aesthetically unpleasing and constructed with sub-par materials has meant that they remain unmarketable to discerning sneaker heads (the same could be said for Shaquille O’Neal’s shoe sold at Payless Shoes, a discount shoe retailer).

³⁷ Karl Marx, *Das Kapital* as taken from Ed. Robert C. Tucker, *The Marx-Engels Reader* (New York: Norton, 1978), 335.

So in many ways sneaker fiends, as sneaker connoisseurs identify, are not purely responding to capitalist alienation and market fragmentation, but in fact were transforming the nature of the entire system by placing new signification on the consumption of footwear. Scholars such as Dick Hebdige, who wrote about Working-class punk rock culture in 1960s Britain, asserts that style has absolutely no meaning, rather signification is produced through patterns of consumption by the consumer. In this way, consumers, traditionally contextualized as passive (and therefore feminine) fully emerge as active agents in the construction of their individual and communal social realities.³⁸ Sneaker fiends and hip-hop heads placed meaning on sneakers by re-inscribing their use-value with a certain amount of juice-value.

Use-value, Consumption, and Absence

It should not come as a surprise, then, that athletics and the equipment needed to partake in the activities (use-value), go hand in hand. Without the proper equipment, athletes would be unable to properly engage in the activities of their sport. To participate in baseball, for instance, it is assumed that its practitioners will have access to the needed equipment: a ball, a bat, a glove, four bases, etc. In basketball, participants only need three things: sneakers, a ball, and a goal. Since the goal must be permanently fixed in its location, the ball and shoes become the signifiers that one is actively involved in the activity. As can be seen in the *Hoosiers* film poster, sneakers commonly serve as metonym for hoops and b-ball culture. So to insiders of

³⁸ Dick Hebdige. *Subcultures: The Meaning of Style* (New York: Routledge, 2005).

basketball culture, specialized simply sneakers denote ones social position within that community. During the greater part of the twentieth century, these shoes were Converse All-Stars. In the 1970s and 1980s the near monopoly shifted and new models and companies took social control.

The consumption of sneakers, then, located within a particular cultural context, basketball, is an act that posits a unique proposition to those able to understand its meaning. The mode with which constituents of this community consume footwear is not something entirely new. In verity, at least since the late eighteenth-century, shoes have been the one clothing item associated with masculinity. In his essay “Fashioning Masculinity: Men’s Footwear and Modernity,” Christopher Breward focuses on men’s “classic” footwear as the locust of identity during early efforts to modernize. He writes that

Contrary to popular knowledge (which erroneously suggests that masculinity and clothes are irreconcilable states), the acquisition of a pair of good shoes has long been held to be one of the most important considerations undertaken by any self-respecting male follower of fashion.³⁹

Shoes, then, have the ability to imbue a sense of self-respect to those that don “a good pair.” By choosing a specific shoe, respected within the basketball community, one is able to position themselves as respectable. On the other hand, the nakedness of feet, or rather the absence of shoes, has often represented the absence of one’s humanity.

³⁹ Christopher Breward, “Fashioning Masculinity: Men’s Footwear and Masculinity”, Eds. Ahari Benstock and Suzanne Ferriss, *Footnotes: On Shoes* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers, 2001), 116.

When someone lacks the ability to wear shoes, either by force or lack of resources, their ability to be fully human has also been negated.

In innumerable slave narratives, the authors recount the absence of footwear as one of the multitude of atrocities accrued to enslaved Africans under the slavocratic system operating in the Americas. Two of the most recognized canonical slave narratives, *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, an American Slave* and *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*, touch on the dehumanizing effects of being shoeless. In *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, an American Slave*, Douglass notes that “The [slave] children unable to work in the field had neither shoes, stockings, jackets, nor trousers, given to them.”⁴⁰ Seen through the eyes of their white “masters” as non-productive property, children were seen as unworthy of needing footwear (or other clothing for that matter), even in winter when temperatures would frequently drop below freezing.

During the winter months, the absence of shoes among the dehumanized slaves produced atrocious results, often times causing frostbite and the loss of digits. Again, in his narrative, Douglass recounts his experience as an older child, when he was forced to endure the winter months with “no shoes, no stockings, no jacket, no trousers, nothing on but a course linen shirt, reaching only to my knees.”⁴¹ As a result, Douglass’ feet became so cracked and weathered that he was unable to walk.

⁴⁰ Frederick Douglass, *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, an American Slave*, in Ed. Kwame Anthony Appiah, *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, an American Slave & Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl* (New York: Modern Library, 2000) , 24.

⁴¹ Douglass, 38.

The inability to clothes himself can be seen as an oppressive device used to dehumanize those individuals already seen as subhuman by hegemonic forces.

But the dehumanizing effects of being shoeless is not simply an issue of Southern racial politics, even though it was most certainly tied to an economic system reliant on chattel slavery. In *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*, Harriet Jacobs uses the absence of footwear as a signifier of class. In an attempt to relate the lived experiences of wage and indentured labourers with those of chattel slaves, Jacobs uses two devices: the similarity of language usage between the groups and the shared absence of clothing. In regards to language, Jacobs applies either “standard” or “vernacular” English to position the speaker within a specified social role. In her text, poor whites speak the same “vernacular” English, as do most slaves. So while seen as racially inferior during this period, Jacobs reveals that they were actually no better or worse (economically or culturally) than enslaved Blacks.

Likewise, Jacobs displays the de-humanness of poor whites, by showing their inability to fully clothe themselves, even though they labour outside the bondage of chattel slavery. When discussing the response that white America exhibited to Nat Turner’s insurrection, the author contrasts the fashion of the gentry, with those of the white working- and lower-classes. Jacobs wrote that “the citizens and the so-called country gentlemen wore military uniforms. The poor whites took their places in the ranks in everyday dress, some without shoes...Poor creatures!”⁴²

⁴² Harriet Jacobs, *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*, in Ed. Kwame Anthony Appiah, *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, an American Slave & Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl* (New York: Modern Library, 2000), 202.

While the poor whites were able to align themselves with the elites because of their White privilege, Jacobs articulates that they, like the impoverished slaves, have been dehumanized through the system of (wage) slavery. By pointing out the dishevelled appearance of poor whites, including their deficiency of footwear, the reader is able to discern a class-system within the text that transcends the Black/White binary structure of U.S. racial politics. Literary critic Martha J. Cutter argues that Jacobs's subversion of racialized norms is her most successful transformation of late-nineteenth century slave economy discourse. Cutter notes that Jacobs "asserts the arbitrariness of the construction of race."⁴³ She continues by pulling directly from Jacobs: "After all, aren't all men and women 'made of one blood'—the human blood?"⁴⁴ So for Jacobs, the absence of footwear bridges the failures of racial difference via class similarities and alliances. But racial oppression was not the only oppression placed on Black men and women, they were also dehumanized as a disempowered and enslaved people.

It therefore becomes an intriguing fact that many (although a small percentage of the population) African Americans become successful and productive labourers by partaking in a leisure activity such as basketball. Especially since they are then transformed into models of masculinity. In "Shopping for Pleasure: Malls, Power, and Resistance," John Fiske describes six characteristics that represent masculinity and femininity under late-capitalism. The following diagram outlines the function

⁴³ Martha J. Cutter, "Dismantling 'The Master's House': Critical Literacy in Harriet Jacobs' *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*", *Callaloo* 19.1 (1996), 209-225. 221.

⁴⁴ Ibid.

and reception of femininity and masculinity in contemporary Anglo-American culture:

Masculine	Feminine
Public	Private (Domestic and Subjective)
Work	Leisure
Earning	Spending
Production	Consumption
Empowered	Disempowered
Freedom	Slavery ⁴⁵

Since, the consumption of sporting apparel is positioned as feminine on multiple fronts, the marketing of sneakers must fixate on constructing themselves as authentically masculine.⁴⁶ Hyper-masculine Black athletes, only recently interpreted as masculine in Anglo-America, become spokespersons for the consumption of leisure products, such as trainers.

Bondage as Blackness

As Harriet Jacobs points out her in her autobiographical text, the inability to possess footwear need not be read simply as a signifier of race, but rather of a specific economic condition, albeit one connected to racialism. Likewise, slavery in and of itself, is void of any meaning, but rather is imbued with signification in relationship to an economic system. Moreover, the gendered roles outlined by Fiske relate to role of men and women under capitalist economics. As such, contemporary gender practices are very much an economic construct and therefore cannot be removed from class.

⁴⁵ John Fiske, “Shopping for Pleasure: Malls, Power, and Resistance.” In Juliet B. Schor and Douglas B. Holt, eds. *The Consumer Society Reader* (New York: The New Press, 2000), 313.

⁴⁶ For instance, money is spent on basketball shoes that are meant for a leisure activity by a disempowered and formerly enslaved community.

Contrary to essentialist notions of “ethnic nationalisms” as being incapable to transcend class or gender identities, during the early 1970s Black nationalist George Jackson located African (American) slavery not within the stagnant category of Blackness, but instead within the fluid order of capitalist economics. For Jackson,

Slavery is an economic condition. Today’s neo-slavery must be defined in terms of economics... Chattel slavery is an economic condition which manifests itself in the total loss or absence of self-determination... The new slavery, the modern variety of chattel slavery updated to disguise itself, places the victim in a factory... working for a wage.⁴⁷

To move from chattel slave, lacking proper resources and clothes to engage in self-determination, toward a modern wage-labourer, void of any true transformative power, becomes a workable transition. Part and parcel to being a wage labourer is contained in the need and desire to consume commodities. While slaves were entirely unable to purchase most material possessions, both by structural restraints, as well as economic incapacities, the hyper consumption of products, often made under deplorable conditions, is one of the “freedoms” of contemporary working-class Americans. The fact that I cite from the prison writings of George Jackson is not inconsequential to the larger arguments of this article. Jackson, as an imprisoned Black revolutionary, was seen as a threat to the status quo. In many ways this included both gender and racial stratification, both embodied in sneakers.

⁴⁷ George Jackson, *Soledad Brother: The Prison Letters of George Jackson* (Chicago: Lawrence Hill Books, 1990 [1970]), 251.

In addition to the contemporary slavery of wage labourers, the non-proportionate rate of incarceration among Black and Latino men is most certainly an extension of bondage under a system of slavery. This modern bondage, similar to slavocracy, replicates a system of forced labour, mandating that prisoners work the menial tasks within prison walls frequently for wages well below minimum federal standards. Under the pretences of authenticity, the prison experience, like that of slavery, is commonly used to authenticate contemporary Black experience, particularly Black masculinity. Consequently, Jackson is the *example par excellence* of Black masculinity, even if he is attempting to counter its privilege.

In popular discourse, bondage is Blackness. For instance, conservative African-Americans, such as Supreme Court Justice Clarence Thomas, have discursively related their personal “injustices” to the institution of slavery as a method to legitimate their elite experience as authentically Black.⁴⁸ After all, race is a codified means of ignoring the persistence of class warfare. Similar to the pimping of slavery by elite black men, the marketing of hip-hop and its related cultural accoutrements uses the prison experience to authenticate itself as genuinely ghetto (and therefore Black). Since the ghetto is somehow more real than the suburbs or rural communities, meaning more Black, it becomes the site of contestation for

⁴⁸ During the Anita Hill trial, where Supreme Court Justice Clarence Thomas was accused of sexually harassing Anita Hill, Thomas stated that “This is not an opportunity to talk about difficult matters privately or in a closed environment. This is a circus. It is a national disgrace. And from my standpoint, as a black American, as far as I am concerned, it is a high-tech lynching for uppity-blacks who in any way deign to think for themselves, to do for themselves, to have different ideas, and it is a message that, unless you kow-tow to an old order this is what will happen to you, you will be lynched, destroyed, caricatured by a committee of the U.S. Senate, rather than hung from a tree.”

marketing agents. The occasional incarceration of rap artists and athletes only serves to legitimate their ghetto credibility and therefore their Blackness within market fragmentation. 50 Cent, whom I will briefly discuss later in this article, is but one example where an athlete's or rap artist's incarceration functions to demonstrate authenticity.

The Absence of Race

When making this leap from chattel slavery to wage-slavery, as well as from the absence of footwear to the hyper-consumption of commodities (including sneakers), we need to be careful in our transition. Although my transition is based in capitalist economic structures as the foundation that establishes inequitable social relations between working-classes and elites, the identities of subjects within the fluid category of class must not be made stagnant, as has been done in regards to race. Racial traits are not fixed, as has been argued, but are constructed in response to larger economic systems. The history of slavery is the patrimony of modern Black America (as well as enslaved Native Americans, indentured Europeans, East Indians in the Caribbean, etc.), but the cultural experiences of Blacks under chattel slavery is not the same as those under wage-slavery.

Thus, we must not essentialize *cultural* traits as somehow Black, with others practices being seen as white. Both of these constructs are fictive and function as responses to economic inequalities of the modernizing late-capitalist world. As I hope this article demonstrates, cultural practices are sinuous and the relationship between Black and white artistic production never operates in binary terms. The

history of hip-hop and basketball, for instance, are ones of urban plurality, frequently comprised of Black, Latina/o, and white youth. By collapsing either basketball or hip-hop into the category of Blackness, the ability of these entities to problematize hegemonic notions of race is negated.⁴⁹

If we return to George Jackson's comments, it becomes apparent that slavery has been an unending practice, if mostly in discursive form. The relationship between professional basketball players and National Basketball Association (NBA or the League) teams, as well as corporate sponsors, can be seen as a continuation of the neo-slavery system, albeit a system where these wage-slaves earn multi-million dollars salaries. New York Times columnist William C. Rhoades articulates this well in *\$40 Million Slaves: The Rise, Fall, and Redemption of the Black Athlete*.

In fact, recent studies indicate that there remains an economic discrepancy between the salaries of non-superstar white and Black players. In "Colorline on the Court?" by David Leonhardt states that there is in fact an eighteen-percent barrier between white and Black player salaries.⁵⁰ As such, even the highly paid wage labourers of the NBA see the effects of U.S. racial inequalities on a daily basis. This, nonetheless, has not deterred the popular media from perpetuating myths about

⁴⁹ The conflation of Blackness and hip hop continues to occur. Although it would seem as though intellectuals would be the first to attack the notion that hip hop was/is an exclusively Black phenomenon, this is unfortunately not the case. During a panel entitled "Hip-Hop and Activism" at the 2005 Hip Hop Theatre Festival in Washington, DC, a member of the panel placed attacks on non-Black artists and musicians for stealing a cultural form that was not "theirs". For this panelist, hip hop somehow emerged in isolation from larger historical contexts as a purely "Black" artform. The role that economics played was completely absent from the panelist's argument. 16 July 2005, "Hip-Hop and Activism: What's the Connection", 2005 Hip Hop Theatre Festival, Provisions Library, Washington, DC.

⁵⁰ David Leonhardt, "Colorline on the Court?", *Business Weekly* 22 December 1997, 6.

Blacks as innately talented, while whites succeed because of hard work and perseverance.⁵¹

Michael Jordan happened to be one of the innately, physically gifted, based on his biological Black body. In 1984, fresh out of his stellar career at the University of North Carolina, NBA rookie superstar Michael Jordan attempted to get a shoe contract with German multinational corporation Adidas. Unfortunately for him, Adidas was uninterested and Jordan was “forced” to sign a lucrative deal with Nike. As the legend goes, Jordan travelled to the Nike headquarters in Bend, Oregon where he was unimpressed, but nonetheless signed a five-year, \$2.5 million endorsement contract.⁵² Although there had been previous signature models of sneakers, specifically the Converse Chuck Taylor, the 1985-86 release of the Air Jordan I would begin to fortify the oblique connection between superstars and their signature commodities. During previous decades, professional athletes would be under contract to wear certain models, but these models were not particular to that individual. For instance during the 1980s, Larry Bird and Ervin “Magic” Johnson wore the same model shoe, but each had specific colour-matches for their uniforms (white with green for Bird; white with purple and yellow for Johnson). With the expansion of the distribution of the sneaker in 1986, the Air Jordan took shoe aficionados by storm. In an attempt to maintain control over its high paid wage labourers, the NBA attempted to ban Jordan’s signature model, because it was entirely red and black. Until this point, the League wanted its’ athletes to only wear white shoes that would not distract

⁵¹ M. Dufur, “Race Logic and ‘Being Like Mike’: Representation of Athletes in Advertising, 1985-1995”, *Social Forces* 30:4, 345-356.

⁵² <http://www.sneakerhead.com/jordan-brand-history.html>, 07 May 2005

from the game. This sneaker ban, however, did not work and countless athletes now have individual shoes in a variety of color matches and designs.

With the release of his signature shoe, Jordan, known for his acrobatic ability to conduct moves while in the air, was transformed by graphic designers and marketers from a human being with human abilities, to an asymmetrical geometric form absent of humanity. In other words, Jordan became a brand, complete with logo, instead of remaining an active ball-playing agent. What originally began as a photo-shoot for the cover of a magazine, was later re-contextualized by Nike, before completely removing all human presence in the desire to create a purely aesthetic form (illustrations 4 and 5).⁵³

The original magazine photograph featured Michael Jordan slam-dunking a basketball with his legs spread apart. Nike, in hopes of creating a regional market, localized this image with the addition of the Chicago skyline to represent Jordan's team affiliation, the Chicago Bulls. This image was released as a print advertisement and subsequently sold as a poster.

Finally, graphic designers removed all contextual references to the human being Jordan, by creating a stylistic rendering or abstracted logo of Jordan. This logo, known as Jumpman, removed all references to race and agency, therefore dehumanizing its original subject in the process. In fact, this deracializing of Michael

⁵³ If we look at the advertising by Nike's Jordan advertisements as a cohesive corpus, we would notice a strange alienation where Jordan's body no longer stands-in for itself. Instead, Jordan's body, as a Black body, is not entirely human, but rather more akin to a mechanical machine. His "ability" to jump made him the perfect candidate to be transformed into an airplane. So as with much of his corpus (pun intended) of advertisements, Jordan's body is not a human body at all. Jordan has been transformed into an industrial machine used for commerce and warfare. The exact uses of the Black body within larger U.S. contexts.

Jordan is not isolated to the Jumpman logo. Journalists have likewise noticed that Jordan, similar to other popular Black athletes, was positioned into a discourse, as if he were raceless. In 1991, Robert E. Washington and David Karen note the increased investigation into the deracination of mainstream athletes by the popular media. Washington and Karen write that “some black superstars (e.g. Michael Jordan, David Robinson) have achieved cross-over status, which allows them to shed their racial identity and cash in on their celebrity.”⁵⁴

Even though U.S. society is fixated on race, media and advertising professionals attempt to posit US society as a colour-blind one. This “shedding of racial identity” that Washington and Karen refer to is simply a cipher for Whiteness; Jordan and Robinson are acceptable because they are raceless, or rather because they become white. This type of non-raced acceptance of Black athletes by white fans, further perpetuates hegemonic notions of multicultural tolerance.

Tolerance is mediated by pre-existing structures and assumptions about acceptability. Presently, media moguls use projections of Black bodies as modes to authenticate their products as “street credible,” yet during the mid-1980s race functioned slightly differently within the media. The removal of Jordan, and his physical body, from its inclusion on his line of Nike shoes, made the products they adorned much more easily consumable by white America. His transference from a Black male, therefore seen as physically threatening, to a raceless “Michael” or “MJ” is made compete by the construction of an abstracted logo. This is further finalized by the Gatorade “Be Like Mike” campaign, where Jordan becomes recognized purely

⁵⁴ E.M. Swift as referenced in Robert E. Washington and David Karen, “Sport and Society”, *Annual Review of Sociology* 27 (2001), 195.

by his first name, as if he is a common acquaintance. Historically, academics have referred to women and people of colour by first names, while those held in high regard (predominantly white) are always evoked by using their last names. By naming Jordan Mike, he is removed from any position of privilege and relegated to the status of an everyday acquaintance. Jerry Reinsdorf, owner of the Chicago Bulls, once asked rhetorically “Is Michael Jordan black?” before answering unequivocally that “Michael has no color.”⁵⁵

Although, the Jumpman photograph was originally used for a magazine photo-shoot, Nike continued to use this exact composition, which they altered by including the Chicago skyline beneath Jordan. Here, the likeness to a mechanical airplane (non-human) is made transparent. Jordan, as a super-human, physical “specimen”, is able to transcend the normal human capabilities of race, while simultaneously being converted into an abstracted version of Blackness. Discursively, the transformation of Black athletes into “machines” is a common one, albeit problematic. Although high-flying balers were discursively associated with air or space travel, Jordan advertisements transformed him into the actual plane. The 1983 Nike Air Force 1 advert showcased six professional basketball players all wearing flight suits. Within this image, they players are read immediately as pilots. Inversely, the Jumpman poster of a similar 1986 advertisement featuring Jordan standing on an airport runway begin to transition Jordan from a human with supernatural powers into a synthetic machine and finally into an icon.

⁵⁵ Jerry Reinsdorf cited in J. Kornbluh. “Here Comes Mr. Jordan.” *TV Guide* 22 April 1995, 26.

This transformation from a living, breathing entity, with all the precariousness that may entail, to an (deracinated) icon, occurs through the creation of the Jumpman logo. The method of conversion from human to symbol parallels the transformation we see with the mainstream memory of slavery from one where human bodies are physically abused, tortured, and killed into simplified aesthetic imagery. Through this abstracting process during the mid-nineteenth century, the nuanced horrors of slavery were co-opted by white abolitionists by stripping away all human agency from representations of Black subjects. Historian Marcus Wood discusses this progression away from the African (American) as human, to a location where their likeness simply serves as a signifier within a discursive system constructed by whites. For Wood, graphic images of slavery in fact have little to do with the dominant societies opposition to racial oppression.⁵⁶ Instead, the imagery serves to discursively strip Blacks of their humanity. According to Wood, as part of this dehumanization process the Black body has been translated into an aesthetic device. When writing about the iconography of the abolitionist movement, he writes that “in purely aesthetic terms the slaves have no human presence at all; in terms of compositional balance the white spaces where the slaves are not are as important as the black spaces of ink which represent their bodies.”⁵⁷

Likewise, Jordan’s human presence has been completely erased from the marketing of Air Jordan sneakers, although his celebrity status remains. Although globalized consumers would have been cognizant of Jordan’s phenotypic identity as

⁵⁶ Marcus Wood, *Blind Memory: Visual Representation of Slavery in England and America, 1780-1865* (London and New York: Routledge, 2000).

⁵⁷ Wood, 29.

Black, this actual knowledge is dislocated and alienated from the products he is contracted to endorse. So the wearing of Air Jordan sneakers is void of any racialized signification. The Jumpman iconic image reduces the nuances of race and capital in (post)modern society into an easily digestible symbol, presumably void of meaning. This goes along with post-modernist and post-structuralist misconceptions that contemporary visual culture can be entirely ambivalent.

While marketers need to construct the racelessness of many Black professional athletes to make them acceptable to hegemonic audiences, the authenticity of the ghetto is equally used to sell Blackness to young consumers. The making of a “street credible” product-line endorsed by rapper 50 Cent is an important example of the manner in which race is constructed by the mass media.

In media representations of 50, as he is commonly known, the most common touched upon theme is his “troubled” childhood in Queens, New York, where he engaged in the distribution of narcotics and was shot multiple times in response to his involvement in gang activities. The 3 April 2003 issue of *Rolling Stone (RS)* featured 50 Cent in the cover story. Before even reaching the main body copy of the article, readers were keyed into why *RS* was interested in 50 Cent. He was seen as embodying a violently authentic Blackness. This is accomplished through a complex use of text and image. Mieke Bal maintains that visual culture, including art and graphic design, may be read through the status of signs in communication, a process called semiosis.⁵⁸ For Bal, although image and language communicate in distinct ways, the reading of written language, as well as visual imagery, is an active process

⁵⁸ Mieke Bal. *A Mieke Bal Reader* (Chicago: University of Chicago, 2006), 294.

of reception.⁵⁹ That is to say an act of assigning meaning. By including text and image together, the designer is able to better direct a specific interpretation of the RS cover.

For instance, the subheading on the cover states that “At twelve, he was a crack dealer. At twenty-three, he was nearly shot to death. Now, at twenty-six, he is a hip-hop ruler. And old rivals want him dead.”⁶⁰ Although this is not a common experience in the twentieth-century, the media uses these facts to its advantage. For them, 50 Cent graces the cover as a codified symbol of Blackness. In many ways, 50 Cent functions as a metonym for Blackness.

Additionally, the cover photograph positions 50 Cent as a young, angry Black man looking over his shoulder as if always “watching his back.” The cover text states that 50 Cent is “mastering the art of violence,” with the 0 in the rapper’s name having been converted into the target of a handgun.⁶¹ Through these devices, it becomes apparent what 50 Cent’s popularity in the mainstream media is grounded in: his maintenance of an essentialized Black (male) identity. This is particularly grounded in a Black masculinity that is embodied in authentic ghetto violence.

In the mainstream imaginary, 50 Cent does not simply come from the ghetto (Queens, New York), but he also physically embodies it. To be Black, as perpetuated by media representations and stated previously, is to be ghetto. And to be ghetto, is to be violent!!! For this reason we see the “mimicry” of essentialized Black culture

⁵⁹ Ibid.

⁶⁰ Toure, “The Life of a Hunted man”, *Rolling Stone* 913 (3 April 2003). This citation was taken from the RS website: http://www.rollingstone.com/news/story/_/id/5939379?rnd=1115691406212&has-player=true

⁶¹ As depicted on the cover of *Rolling Stone* 913 (3 April 2003).

by hoards of white youth (commonly known by the derogatory and pseudo-racist designation “wiggers,”) who flock to ascertain their identities through dominant constructions of Blackness.⁶² Blackness, as operating within the U.S. hegemon, is not about countering the privilege of Whiteness, as it should, but rather it purely replicates pre-established norms of Black culture. In many ways, Blackness has little to do with phenotype, but is discursively constructed by those in power to make phenotypic difference (race) relevant to Black oppression.

It must be re-established that *Whiteness only exists in reference to its absences*. In semiotic terms, names (as signs) only exist because of their “difference from all other signs, each is meaningful and understandable only within those structures of difference.”⁶³ Following semiotic logic that signs only signify through difference, if Black is violent, than white is non-violent. So by articulating an authentic Black identity as a violent one (through individuals such as 50), the connection between Whiteness and (historic) acts of violence (such as genocide, colonialism, slavery, etc.) are all nullified. In a sense, by using violence as an authenticating tool of Blackness, white consumers reify the discourse that negates the historical legacy of slavery and white violence. In contrast to the abstraction of Jordan’s body, we finally have the Black body front and centre; this time, however, the body is couched in terms of modern bondage: the prison system and authentic violence.

⁶² I have intentionally used the concept of mimicry to refer to the hegemonic construction and replication of Black identity by white youth.

⁶³ Malcom Barnard. *Approaches to Understanding Visual Culture* (New York Palgrave, 2001), 153.

A 2005 issue of *Slam*, the self-proclaimed hip hop hoops magazine, presents a two-page advertisement for 50 Cent's line of Reebok sneakers.⁶⁴ The left page (page 9) presents a dimly lit 50 sporting his trademark scowl. The right page (page 10) portrays a close-up of fingerprints, presumably 50 Cent's prints from his time served in prison (if we believe that he really was imprisoned). At the top of this page are printed in a sans serif typeface "'Where I am from, there is no plan B. So, take advantage of today because tomorrow is not promised.' –50 Cent." Below this quotation is a modified blackletter (Olde English) script featuring all lower-case letters proclaiming that "i am what i am."

The interplay between image and text serves as the quintessential portrayal of Blackness. Within this advertisement, the black body is seen as one with propensities to violence. The Black male, as biologically other, is unable to negate the ability to become violent, but this violent behaviour is simultaneously connected to the environmental constraints of, as 50 Cent states, "where I am from." Through contextual analysis, it is easily apparent where 50 Cent comes from: the ghetto.

As this advertisement maintains, Blackness is both biological, as well as environmental. So within one sneaker advertisement, everything comes to a head. The authenticity of the Reebok shoe is made real by 50 Cent's capacity to be violent as well as the rap artist's connection to the sites of violence and bondage: the ghetto and prison. The allusion to the ghetto is textual, while the reference to prison is conducted by way of the inclusion of the bodily marks seen in his fingerprints.

⁶⁴ *Slam*, arguably the most intelligent basketball magazine, uses hip-hop "vernacular" as a method of legitimating itself. *Slam* 87 (May 2005), 9-10.

As this brief analysis demonstrates, the connection between athletic sneakers, race, and masculinity is one that cannot be easily discounted. In fact, this connection traverses multiple chronotopes and time period, from Victorian England to 1950s America to contemporary global b-ball culture. Although cultural critics have failed to draw proper connections between the divergent relational meanings of these constructs, this by no means reveals the incompatibility of their discourse. Inversely, as I have hopefully demonstrated, there exists an irreversible semiotic meaning within an individual's footwear. Whether this is intentional, as with sneaker connoisseurs, or a structural necessity, as with slaves, the agency of an individual can be seen in the power of his or her shoe (or its absence). It is for reason's such as this that I always maintain an ample supply of fresh sneakers in my quiver. After all, I never know what discursive acts I may need my kicks to accomplish.