Provocations on Sneakers: The Multiple Significations of Athletic Shoes, Sport, Race, and Masculinity

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CR: The New Centennial Review, Volume 9, Number 2, Fall 2009, pp. 73-107 (Article)

Published by Michigan State University Press
DOI: 10.1353/ncr.0.0075

Provocations on Sneakers

The Multiple Significations of Athletic Shoes, Sport, Race, and Masculinity

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This essay engages the sneaker in hopes of remedying the ambivalence that historians and cultural critics have had toward the shoe as an object of cultural production. As such, I hope to address the shoe as a marker of social identity, as well as interrogate how the sneaker functions within various humanizing and dehumanizing practices. Even though images and representations of footwear existed in modern expressions of Western art and culture since the late nineteenth century, historians and cultural critics have failed to explore properly the complex manner in which shoes have been recontextualized by youth subcultures to serve as objects that separate these cultural groups from outside social control and domination. Although sociologists have engaged the sneaker at the level of the social, historians and cultural critics have not been as forthcoming. As markers of identity, the social and cultural resonances of sneakers need to be taken seriously to fully interrogate sneaker culture as an open-ended critique of identity construction under globalized capital.

CR: The New Centennial Review, Vol. 9, No. 2, 2009, pp. 73–108, ISSN 1532-687x.

On one hand, shoes are commonly perceived as mass-produced commodities within hegemonic systems of mass production and consumption. At the same time, as I argue in this essay, shoes have been habitually re-inscribed by the individuals who wear them. As such, sneakers and the subcultural groups that inscribe them with signification become an ideal vehicle to discuss collective identity and consumptive economic transformation in an expanding capitalist marketplace. Because the sneaker bears a strong historical connection to male consumptive practices, dating to at least the Victorian period, its investigation likewise helps to delineate contemporary masculine identity in a society based on consumption. Furthermore in Western historiography, footwear commonly served a role within Europe's colonizing projects of the past five centuries. This historic position allows us better to analyze contemporary society as the sneaker begins to function in an act of disavowal against the legacy of black and indigenous dehumanization.

Though rooted in historical and cultural studies approaches, my theoretical approach is interdisciplinary, highlighting the discursive interplay among the athletic shoe, race, history, and masculinity, as these are diachronically performed in the United States. This heterodox methodology is more specifically couched in both ethnic studies and visual culture approaches. Since athletics, often read as the racially based biological abilities of individuals, cannot be disentangled from larger discussions of masculinity and race, I concentrate my arguments on how sneakers mediate between their reception by pluri-ethnic subcultures and the marketing of these same commodities as a fixed trait of blackness and indigeneity. Through this essay, I will address a multiplicity of topics, migrating between popular cinema and linguistics, gender analysis and Marxist critique, Victorian fashion and art history, hip-hop and prisons, all as they relate to contemporary sneaker culture. By way of these multidimensional discussions, I will begin to re-vision sneaker culture and its implications for radical theory and practice.

"My Adidas" and the Origins of Masculine Consumption

As basketball journalist and hip-hop theorist Scoop Jackson (2002) stresses, it is impossible to disentangle basketball footwear from the cultural practices that surround the sport. 1985 and 1986 represent watershed years in U.S. sneaker history. In 1985, Nike marketed the Air Jordan I, and the following year Run DMC released "My Adidas," their award-winning homage to the B-boy's shoe of choice, the Adidas Shell-Toe.[1] This song was the third track on the album *Raising Hell*. Responding to the growing popularity of rap music, this album was a market success and peaked at number one on the *Billboard* charts. The success was due in part to the song "My Adidas," which functioned as an unendorsed advertisement for the (then) German shoe company. Although Run DMC would eventually get monetary compensation for their musical 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 as marketing agencies began to see hip-hop as an emerging market.

A year before "My Adidas" was released, the first model of the Nike Air Jordan athletic shoe appeared. Although young people of color had been interested in sneakers for some time, this notable event cemented the (market) power of athletic shoes within mainstream Anglo-American consciousness. As 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" (2002, 53). The market success of the Air Jordan developed alongside Jordan's triumphant career as a professional basketball player. However, the popularity of the Air Jordan line and subsequent rise of sneaker culture must not be attributed to Jordan alone. In fact discourse on sneakers in the United States is a complex field, and Jordan cannot be credited with single-handedly altering the trajectory of its affiliated cultural practice.

Nonetheless, beginning in 1986 the sneaker world became inextricably changed from one where shoes functioned as a secondary accoutrement to

one where sports, celebrity, and sneakers were reciprocal signifiers within basketball culture. Footwear became imbued with a certain amount of social and athletic authority. On many levels, this relationship between athletic shoes and social position is tied to the manner in which corporations market their products as markers of racial 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'" (2002, 142). It becomes important to acknowledge that prior to 1985, the year the initial Air Jordan was marketed, Nike did not actively direct their marketing campaigns toward women. In many regards, sneakers, as integral components of athletics, represented a dominant form of masculinity. Even though Nike presently markets to women, its basketball-centric material is still principally aimed at men. Susan Burris notes that in 2006

> 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 "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. (2006, 91)

This corporate gender bias was recognized by Cheryl Cole and Amy Hribar (1995) in their article "Celebrity Feminism." They note that Nike has avoided producing and marketing apparel for women to avoid tarnishing their masculine corporate identity. Creating a woman's apparel line, as they demonstrate, would have "compromise[d] Nike's authentic and serious sport image" (359). Desiring not to squander its authenticity, Nike assembled its image as tightly positioned between sport, masculinity, and blackness. Presently, only a handful of women have signature sneaker models, including athletes Sheryl Swoopes (Nike) and Candace Parker (Adidas), as well as musician/rapper Missy Elliot (Adidas).

Certain sports, particularly basketball, function as sites where black men are commonly allowed full access to "American" masculinity. In popular discourse, sport, race, and gender cannot be disentangled. When discussing professional football player 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" (2006, 66). The reciprocity between male consumption and masculinity is not a recent development in capitalist historiography, nor is it one exclusive 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 conceptualize shopping for certain products as an entirely masculine pursuit. Shannon writes that as 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 (2004, 600).

During the late 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 produced what it was that he needed to fulfill this masculine construction. With its coalescence in the late nineteenth century, urban masculinity began to be associated with the fashioning of one's (male) 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 identity as male. John Horne states that "the consumption of sports helps men to develop and reinforce their masculine self-identities" (2006, 152). 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" (1999, 32). When discussing "Sportswomanship," Marlene Mawson affirms that "sport has universally held

the connotation of being a masculine endeavor, its participation requiring aggressiveness and competitiveness, both deemed male social-personality traits" (2006, 20). So the fact that Nike ignored marketing commodities for girls and women should come as no surprise, but it highlights the replication of an existing discourse about prescribed gender roles as played out through sporting culture. As such, Nike is constricted by existing gender norms even while hegemonically replicating and developing them.

Sport is commonly read as an entirely masculinist sphere. Since the 1970s basketball has been constructed as both masculine and black. Todd Boyd maintains that basketball is "the embodiment of blackness in contemporary popular culture" (1997, 105). Likewise, Jason Jimerson and Matthew Oware view basketball as the ideal location to investigate and analyze black masculinity. 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" (2006, 33).

Although these studies in no way attempt to uncover the root of such culturally constructed racial assumptions, they delve a bit into how consumption, masculinity, racialized identities, and sport are intimately coupled in the Anglo-American imaginary. In many respects, modern and contemporary sneaker advertisements build upon gendered and racializing discourses that began circulating during the late Victorian era and are contemporarily perpetuated through the capitalist visual domain. Advertisements need not produce new discourses on race and masculinity; instead they simply amplify notions already circulating.

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 early twentieth-century basketball player turned sneaker marketer, nearly all basketball players wore a similar model of footwear. According to company documents, the Converse Rubber Shoe Company was founded in 1908 by Marquis Mills Converse. The first All Star sneaker was produced in 1917, and Taylor joined the company in either 1921

or 1922. Although there are a variety of histories about Taylor's life, in *Chuck Taylor, All Star* Abraham Aamidor claims that Taylor played professionally for the Firestone Non-Skids in 1921 and did not join Converse until the following year (2005, 45). In 1923, six years after the original All Star production run, Taylor's signature was added to the exterior of the inside ankle of the mass-produced shoe.[2]

Until the late-1960s, the Converse All Star held a near monopoly on the basketball-shoe market, from the neighborhood court to the Boston Garden. Although other companies, such as P.F. Flyer and Spalding, made styles comparable to the canvas Converse, athletes almost exclusively wore the All Star. In point of fact, at the inaugural NCAA basketball championship in 1939, both squads wore this sneaker. 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" (Converse 2007). Granted, this is history through the perspective of the Converse corporation, but it is not entirely misleading. This claim is backed by shoe historian 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 professional and amateur sport, and was sold in sporting goods stores as such" (2006, 377). For a half-century, the Converse All Star was *the* basketball sneaker.

During the early 1960s, P.F. Flyer released a high-top sneaker model that was similar in style to the Chuck Taylor. Although these sneakers were highly popular within the general marketplace, inside the cultural realm of street and organized basketball, these shoes remained marginal. In Bobbito García's pioneering work on sneakers in New York City, Greg Brown states in oral history testimony 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" (García 2003, 29). According to Brown, by the 1960s there developed an established structure of allowable fashion that "authentic" ballplayers needed to follow to be accepted within its cultural domain. Yet, as Brown demonstrates, once a player gained a certain level of prestige or credibility with their peers, they were

capable of transcending the established structure of acceptable footwear. Serious ballplayers could wear Keds, but never P.F. Flyers. At the same time, everyone else needed to sport Chuck Taylors to allow them entrée into the masculine sphere of hoops culture.

At this point, however, the "classic" sneaker, the Converse All Star, was replaced by an ever-changing selection of athletic shoes produced by a multiplicity of corporations. Why was it unacceptable for ballplayers to wear P.F. Flyers during the 1960s but no problem for them to wear brands such as Nike, Puma, and New Balance after these sneakers gained a level of acceptance and prominence during the mid-1980s? Over the past three decades, we have seen the transition from the existence of a single sneaker worn by virtually all basketball players, regardless of race or gender, to the near saturation of the marketplace with countless lifestyle shoes marketed as signifiers of blackness (and other identities, as in the case of the Nike Air Native N7, which will be addressed later in this essay).

The shoe as signifer has become a common cultural trope. Cinematic examples reproduce racialized assumptions about identity, sport, and footwear. For example, *Hoosiers* (dir. David Anspaugh, 1986), the award-winning basketball film starring Gene Hackman, Barbara Hershey, and Dennis Hopper, reifies the relationship between race and location. In this narrative film about Indiana basketball during the early 1950s, the filmmakers represent rural squads (Hickory, Deer Lick, and so forth) as entirely white, while the urban school (South Bend) is exclusively black. Of course, this demonstrates a Hollywood desire to posit early-1950s U.S. race relations as the binary opposition between white and black, with absolutely no interstices or hybridities, but what is also apparent is that all basketball players within the film wear Converse All Stars. 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 a signifier of sport and identity in the Hoosier state; shoes become a stand-in for basketball. 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.

Chuck Taylors were the universal marker of one's involvement in basketball. In fact, Converse All Stars were the hegemonic sneaker that, through their eventual decline in the shoe market, were resignified as countercultural or even counterhegemonic. 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" (2001, 28). Leibowitz's assessment parallels those made by sneaker fiends, as sneaker connoisseurs identify, and hip-hop heads, as well as historians Bobbito García and Alison Gill.[3]

With the hegemony of Converse in contestation during the 1970s, shoes entered a new and more complex signifying system. García, a hip-hop journalist and former professional basketball player, asserts that shoes and identity became married because of changes in shoe production in the early 1970s:

> 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. (2003, 10)

For García, the real alteration occurred in sneaker culture as a response to the increased market presence of emerging companies, such as Adidas and Keds, two competitors to Converse. Because of an increase in the availability of shoe styles, consumers were able to "choose" from a wider variety of footwear than previously available. 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" (2001, 28). Converse's hegemony became a form of marketplace counterhegemony before it was coopted by marketing firms and reinserted as an alternative hegemony. In other words,

the All Star went from a jock aesthetic to one connected to young hipsters and was then reified in that position. Appropriately, the Chuck Taylor, once a signifiying basketball stalwart, was transformed into a marker of resistance to hyper-slick late-capitalist advertising.

Within a few years of these new additions to the basketball shoe market, other corporations likewise 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 with this phenomenon, alongside the development of New York City hip-hop culture, that identity and footwear became integrated. Scoop Jackson provides backing for García's comments:

> For thirty years a large part of [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." (2002, 7)

While alluding to the Michael Jordan–Mars Blackmon dialogue that transpired in a series of Nike television commercials featuring Jordan and filmmaker Spike Lee, Jackson succinctly argues that the athletic parameters of basketball cannot be 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 pre-1986 period of sneaker consumption, purchasing patterns were more closely aligned with 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, using a phrase I've coined, their juice-value: the ability for these mass-produced commodities to be both transformative for the individual as well as transformed by the individual themselves (Marx 1992 [1867], 256). 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, designers had to create sneakers with fresh colors and avant garde designs if companies expected them to succeed

in the athletic shoe marketplace. Sneaker connoisseurs did not want shoes that were poorly designed and fabricated, 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 was unable to catch the favor of sneaker fanatics.[4] The reasons, I believe, are multiple. For instance, all clothing items at Steve and Barry's are priced exclusively under US$20, and the Starbury sneakers sell for less than US$15. Although Marbury's intentions must be commended, the fact that his sneakers are aesthetically unpleasing and constructed with subpar materials has meant that they remain unmarketable to discerning sneaker heads.[5]

So in many ways, sneaker fiends are not purely responding to capitalist alienation and market fragmentation, as rudimentary Marxism would have it, but are in fact 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 1970s Britain, asserts that style has absolutely no meaning; rather signification is produced through patterns of consumption by the consumer. In this way, consumers, traditionally contexualized as passive (and therefore feminine), began to emerge as fully active agents in the construction of their individual and communal social realities (Hebdige 2005). Similarly, in *Race Rebels: Culture, Politics, and the Black Working Class*, Robin D. G. Kelley discusses how black and Chicana/o youth have used modes of everyday resistance as the site for political contestation and confrontation. When discussing his own experiences working as a teenager at McDonald's, he argues that "*what* we fought for *is* a crucial part of the overall story; the terrain was often cultural, centering on identity, dignity, and fun" (1994, 3). He continues:

> Like most working people throughout the world, my fellow employees at Mickey D's were neither total victims of routinization, exploitation, sexism, and racism, nor were they "rational" economic beings driven by the most basic utilitarian concerns. Their lives and struggles were so much more complicated. If we are to make meaning of these kinds of actions rather than dismiss them as manifestations of immaturity, false consciousness, or primitive rebellion, we must dig beneath the surface . . . deep into the daily

> lives, culture, and communities which make the working classes so much more than people who work." (1994, 3–4)

Sneakers have become one of those sites deep beneath the surface, where sneaker fiends and hip-hop heads place meaning by re-inscribing a sneaker's use-value with a certain amount of juice-value. Of course, who chooses to wear which sneaker depends on the complex interplay of marketing, distribution, aesthetics, and the subsequent re-inscription of meaning after consumption. As I argue later, sneakers need a level of juice-value to attract sneaker fiends. Without fresh aesthetics, why would consumers be interested in the first place?

Use-Value, Consumption, and Absence

It should come as no surprise that athletics and the equipment needed to partake in athletics (use-value), go hand in hand. Without proper equipment, athletes would be unable to engage properly 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, and so forth. In basketball, participants only need three things: sneakers, a ball, and a hoop. 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 previously discussed *Hoosiers* film poster, sneakers commonly serve as metonym for basketball and basketball culture. To insiders of basketball culture, specialized sneakers denote one's particular social position within that community. During the greater part of the twentieth century, this meaning emerged from the wearing of Converse All Stars. In the 1970s and 1980s the Converse monopoly shifted and new models and companies took social control of this domain.

The consumption of sneakers, located within the cultural context of youth culture, 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 entirely new. In truth, at least since the late eighteenth century, shoes have been one of the primary clothing items associated

with masculinity. In his essay "Fashioning Masculinity: Men's Footwear and Modernity," Christopher Breward focuses on men's "classic" footwear as the locus of identity during early efforts to modernize:

> 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. (2001, 116)

Shoes have the ability to imbue a sense of self-respect to those who don "a good pair." By choosing a specific shoe that is respected within one's community, one is able to position himself as "respectable." In fact, as Kelley points out, acts such as these serve as forms of everyday resistance. On the other hand, the nakedness of feet, or rather the absence of shoes, has often represented the absence of one's humanity. When someone lacks the ability to wear shoes, either by force or through lack of resources, their ability to be fully human is also 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 slave narratives, *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, an American Slave* and *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*, touch upon the dehumanizing effects of being shoeless. In his *Narrative*, Douglass notes that "The [slave] children unable to work in the field had neither shoes, stockings, jackets, nor trousers, given to them" (Douglass and Jacobs 2000 [1845], 24). Seen through the eyes of their white masters as nonproductive 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 causing frostbite and the loss of toes. 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 coarse linen shirt, reaching only

to my knees" (2000 [1845], 38). As a result, Douglass's feet became so cracked and weathered that he was unable to walk. The inability to clothe 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 are not simply an issue of antebellum 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 white wage laborers and indentured servants with those of black chattel slaves, Jacobs uses two devices: the similarity of language usage between the groups and the shared absence of clothing. In regard 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 black 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 dehumanized status of poor whites by showing their inability to fully clothe themselves, even though they labor 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: "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!" (Douglass and Jacobs 2000 [1861], 202).

While the poor whites were able to align themselves with the elites because of white privilege, Jacobs articulates that, like the impoverished slaves, the poor whites had 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. In fact, as Jacobs illuminates, the absence of footwear becomes the most damning absence in the poor whites quotidian attire.

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." She continues by quoting Jacobs directly: "After all, aren't all men and women 'made of one blood'—the human blood?" (1996, 221). Solidarity must be created among oppressed groups. So for Jacobs, the absence of footwear bridges the failures of racial difference via class similarities and economic 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. These, of course, are legacies of the expansion of colonialism and imperialism as dominant systems of the modern era.

Incidents that connect shoes to European notions of humanity are not isolated to the atrocities committed in the Americas, but are a global phenomenon emerging from colonial and capitalist relations. In *The Proposition* (2005), an Australian western directed by John Hillcoate, the film addresses late nineteenth-century settler-indigenous relations in a Queensland frontier community. As the film reaches its climax, there is a particular scene when the character Two Bob, an indigenous house servant for the colonial sheriff, is relieved of his duties. As he leaves the home of his former employer, the camera zooms in on Two Bob's feet as he slowly and deliberately removes his shoes before walking off into the bush.

Cinematically speaking, the shoes become a site of contestation between settler and indigenous societies. Two Bob's ability to wear shoes was tied to his role as a laborer operating under a capitalist economy in a settler society, yet his particular shoes also positioned him as subordinate and inferior to his white employer. By removing his shoes, seen by Two Bob as a connection with European colonial relations, he self-consciously asserted his voice in an act analogous to the process of casting off the yoke of colonial domination. With the subsequent global shift in commodity production, sneakers not only begin to signify one's ability to mediate Western society, they were also directly moored to an unequal mode of production, as we well know. Through the expanding global market economy, specific communities continue to be marginalized. By way of this economic transition, we see that the conditions of sneaker production, although manufacturing mere consumer commodities, become a crucial part of asserting communal autonomy through cultural practices that are anything but meaningless.

In turn, as these disparate examples begin to uncover through colonial and cultural historiography, one's ability to wear shoes is intertwined with one's ability to be human. Through these two dialectical processes of humanization and dehumanization, one emerging from a colonial system that does not allow its Others to be humanized through wearing shoes, the other forcing settler sociability onto an indigenous and shoe-less civilization, form the core of footwear signification. Sneakers, in particular, symbolize both the humanity of the wearer and the oppression of those who fabricated them. Through this contestation, sneakers concurrently humanize and dehumanize, just as these brief examples demonstrate.

Although I am not attempting to affix contemporary sneaker consumption to overtly resistant practices that counter past legacies of dehumanization, I am, however, associating one's fetishization of shoes to one's social status within society. Since the sneaker functions as a site where we may investigate the discursive practices of class, gender, race, and sexuality, it in fact takes humanity to task.

It therefore becomes an intriguing fact when African Americans become successful and productive laborers by partaking in a leisure activity such as basketball. Through this process, they are then transformed into *models of masculinity*, in many ways a nuanced contradiction. In "Shopping for Pleasure: Malls, Power, and Resistance," John Fiske describes six characteristics that represent masculinity and femininity under recent capitalism. The following table outlines the function 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 (2000, 313)

Since, the consumption of sporting apparel is positioned as feminine on multiple fronts (*spending* money on the *consumption* of *leisure* products

often by *disempowered* individuals), the marketing of sneakers must fixate on constructing sneakers as authentically masculine.[6] Therefore, the sneaker must: (1) operate in the *public sphere* and (2) signify the *freedom* of (3) the *production* of a new identity. By doing so, sneaker culture continues to operate within hegemonic notions of masculinity, albeit a masculinity that attempts to counter racial and class oppressions. Hyper-masculine black athletes, only recently accepted as masculine by Anglo-American society, become spokespersons for the consumption of leisure products such as sneakers.[7]

White Men, Blackmon, and Consumption

Nearly a century after the marketing of masculine consumption in metropolitan London, U.S. advertisers continue to maintain an exuberant male identity in opposition to the Victorian cult of womanhood. 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 activities. (1980, 30)

This binary opposition between Western masculinity and femininity is still very active today. 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.

Beginning in early 1989, expanding corporate giant Nike, through the work of the advertising agency Wieden+Kennedy, developed a serial promotion featuring Michael Jordan and the fictive Mars Blackmon character, portrayed by filmmaker and New York Knicks fanatic Spike Lee. In this series of television and print advertisements, Mars Blackmon, the enigmatic character from Lee's first feature-length film *She's Gotta Have It* (1986), questioned white America's obsession with the biological abilities of the black athlete by pondering, "Yo, Money, is it the shoes?" By using African American Language (AAL), as Geneva Smitherman (2001) describes black articulations of English, seen in white America as the authenticating language of the black

community, Blackmon wondered if Jordan's abilities were based on physical, cultural, or biological traits. Following Blackmon, the audience wondered what made Jordan so damn good. Was it Jordan's training and time spent in the gym? Was it his baggy shorts? Was it 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 perform "death-defyin'" dunks?

Cultural critic Michael Eric Dyson argues that black bodies are commonly presented as naturally successful (1994). On the flipside, white athletes are seen to achieve success only through hard work and practice. Linda Tucker further articulates this in her article "Blackballed: Basketball and Representations of the Black Male Athlete" (2003), and Stone, Perry, and Darley relay the common stereotype that "White males do not possess the physical capabilities that Black males possess and therefore are not skilled in sport" (1997, 291). Jon Entine's popular *Taboo: Why Black Athletes Dominate Sports and Why We're Afraid to Talk About It* (2001) reaffirms these racializing discourses.

Returning to the Jordan-Blackmon commercial, through the mise-en-scène linguistic and physical interplay between Blackmon and Jordan, Blackmon finally determines (or so we are meant to believe) that one's "racial" inabilities 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 could transgress their biological failure at basketball through consumption. Although this is a slight theoretical leap, it follows that for race to function in the first place, we must suspend logic to maintain its status as nonfictive. Pulling from multiple sources, sport sociologist John Horne states, "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" (2006, 155).

In one of the Nike series, Blackmon concludes that, "Money, it's gotta be the shoes!" Accordingly, it is not Jordan's blackness that makes him a superstar, but instead it is his sneakers, something that, unlike race, may be consumed. Through Blackmon's performative use of language, what Nike

may argue is an example of authentic blackness, marketers were able to assert the authenticity of Nike sneakers, while also disavowing Jordan's black identity. White consumers could not attain the "biological" ability of black athletes like Jordan, but they could at least perform on his level by wearing his signature sneakers.

As Scoop Jackson writes in his uncritical celebration of Nike basketball shoes, Lee used these black-and-white commercials to "introduce Nike to the Mars Blackmon ghetto fan base" (2002, 53). Although Spike Lee was an upwardly mobile filmmaker and New York University alumnus, Jackson somehow connects him to the voice of the ghetto. As such, we see the conflation of multidimensional black social identities with those of the ghetto, a prescribed class identity connected with geographic marginalization. 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.[8] In other words, if we follow the rhetoric of hip-hop marketing articulated through this commercial: to be black is to be ghetto, to be ghetto is to be black.[9] These identities transcend class identities and fixate solely on race. In return, to be ghetto, one must speak AAL and wear a pair of ridiculously priced athletic shoes as part of one's daily performance. Identity is not something biologically mediated, but instead one that we may consume and perform.

The success of the Air Jordan product line is connected to larger socioeconomic events transpiring in the United States and throughout the globe during the late 1980s and early 1990s. Turning to sociologist 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" (2006, 81). While certain sectors of black America critiqued Michael Jordan for his political acquiescence, Jesse Jackson backed Jordan's apolitical nature: "Why is it expected of a ballplayer or a boxer to be an astute sociopolitical analyst?" (Gates 1998, 58). As Jackson maintains, Jordan was not needed as a community mouthpiece or activist; rather he was simply an athlete. Radical sports journalist Dave Zirin vehemently disagrees with this sentiment:

> There is a reason that figures like Jackie Robinson, Billie Jean King, Muhammad Ali, and Martina Navratilova are considered to be figures that have far transcended the sports page. Sports are theoretically a meritocracy so it has always been fertile ground to challenge the idea that some are inherently unable because of their gender, ethnicity, or sexual orientation. (King 2008, 337)

Elsewhere Zirin has argued that "we need to revise our expectations of Jordan and other athletes like him." He continues:

> It is simply not in his interest to embarrass the Nike brass or puncture his own profits. Unfortunately, the kids in Southeast Asia don't have the luxury to wait for him to change his mind. If we want to change sweatshops and child labor, we have to look to someone else, perhaps even ourselves. Simply put, it's all right to want to Be Like Mike with our basketball shorts on. But we have to strive for better when we leave the locker room. (Zirin 2005, 248)

For consumers, Air Jordan represented the commodification of blackness to a globalizing marketplace. Even so, sneakers exist, as do many consumer products and cultural 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 sneaker culture. As such, opposing significations and receptions exist within the athletic shoe. These antagonisms are never entirely resolved and do not need to be. After all, as I have made apparent, basketball has historically functioned as a site for the contestation of (black) male identities. Cultural critic bell hooks maintains that the "competition between black and white males has been highlighted in the sports arena" (1994, 31). More so than any other sport, basketball discourse cannot escape race and is constituted and permeated by discussions about it.

"In basketball," writes Todd Boyd, "race, directly or indirectly, is the conversation at all times" (2000, 60). For Boyd, basketball culture must take into account discussions of race, or rather, race is *the subtext* of all basketball discourses. 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 U.S. Olympic basketball team, made up almost entirely of black players, Whitlock maintains,

> You do not have to support a group of Black American millionaires in any endeavor. Despite the hypocritical, rabid patriotism displayed immediately after 9/11, it's perfectly suitable for 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. (Zirin 2005, 166)

Here certain black male identities challenge hegemonic norms, but this contestation of identities is not isolated to those produced 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 his 1994 essay "The Game," Clyde Taylor asserts that within U.S. society black men function as "players" in which the prize "is the soul, spirit, and creative energy of Black men themselves" (1994, 167). In many respects, the basketball sneaker, functioning as the intermediary between basketball, hip hop, and other forms of "authentically" black sites of labor, operates as the example *par excellence* of the "soul, spirit, and energy" of black masculinity. In response, the role of advertising extrapolates various definitions of black masculinity so that they may be consumed by white and other nonblack patrons. The marketing of clothing perpetuates the capitalist myth that we actively construct our identities through objects that we consume and associated quotidian practices.

Bondage as Blackness

As Harriet Jacobs points out in her autobiographical text, the inability to possess footwear is not simply read as a signifier of race, but rather denotes

a specific economic condition, albeit one connected to racialized discourse. 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's typology relate to the roles of men and women under capitalist economics. As such, contemporary gender practices are very much an economic construct and therefore cannot be removed from a class analysis.

Contrary to essentialist notions of "ethnic nationalisms" as being incapable of transcending class or gender identities, during the early 1970s black nationalist George Jackson located African (American) slavery not within the seemingly fixed category of blackness, but instead within the fluid order of capitalist economics.[10] 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. (1990 [1970], 251)[11]

According to NikeWatch, a campaign by Oxfam Australia,

> Nike continues to get its gear made in countries and free trade zones where it is illegal, extremely difficult, or prohibited for workers to organise into trade unions. It is near impossible for workers to get better conditions (such as better pay) when they cannot get together and form a united, organised group to approach their boss. (Oxfam Australia 2009)

With little prospect of collective bargaining, the relationship between chattel and wage slavery is all too real.

To move from chattel slave, lacking proper resources and clothes to engage in self-determination, toward a modern wage laborer, devoid of any true transformative power, becomes a workable transition. Part and parcel of being a wage laborer is contained in the need and desire to consume commodities. Whereas slaves were entirely unable to purchase most

material possessions, both by structural restraints and by economic incapacities, the hyperconsumption of products often made under deplorable conditions is one of the "freedoms" for contemporary working-class North 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 both Anglo-America and the capitalist hegemon. In many ways, this hegemony, which included gender and racial stratification, is embodied in both sneakers and their connotations.

In addition to the contemporary slavery of wage laborers, the nonproportionate rate of incarceration among black and Latino men is most certainly an extension of bondage commenced under a system of chattel slavery. This modern bondage, similar to slavocracy, replicates a system of forced labor, 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, figures such as Jackson serve as the embodiment of white perceptions of black masculinity, even though they attempt to counter it.

In popular discourse, bondage is blackness. For instance, conservative African Americans such as Supreme Court Justice Clarence Thomas or former Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice, have discursively related their personal "injustices" to the institution of slavery as a method to legitimate their elite experience as authentically black.[12] After all, race is a codified means of ignoring the persistence of class warfare. Similar to the evocation of slavery by elite African Americans, 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," meaning more black, than the suburbs or rural communities, it becomes the site of contestation for marketing agents. The occasional incarceration of rap artists and athletes only legitimates their ghetto credibility and therefore their blackness within market fragmentation.

The Absence of Race

The relationship between professional basketball players and National Basketball Association (NBA) 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-dollar salaries. *New York Times* columnist William C. Rhoden articulates this well in his book *Forty Million Dollar Slaves: The Rise, Fall, and Redemption of the Black Athlete*, where he begins to question the ethical nature of professional athletics (2006). He writes:

> The elevated compensation of some players obscures the reality of exploitation and contemporary colonization. Black players have become a significant presence in major team sports, but the sports establishment has tenaciously resisted that presence percolating in equal numbers throughout the industry in positions of authority and control. (xi)

In fact, studies indicate that an economic discrepancy remains between the salaries of nonsuperstar white and black players. In "Colorline on the Court?," David Leonhardt cites an 18 percent barrier between white and black player salaries (1997, 6). As such, even the highly paid wage laborers 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 blacks as innately talented, while whites succeed because of hard work and perseverance (Dufur 1997).

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 then-German corporation Adidas. Unfortunately for him, Adidas was uninterested and Jordan was "forced" to sign a lucrative deal with Nike. As the mythic historical narrative is told, Jordan travelled to the Nike headquarters in Bend, Oregon, where he was unimpressed, but nonetheless signed a five-year, $2.5 million endorsement contract (Sneakerhead). Although there had been previous signature models of sneakers, specifically the Converse Chuck Taylor, the 1985–86 release of the Nike Air Jordan I fortified the robust connection between superstars and signature commodities. During previous

decades, professional athletes were regularly under contract to wear certain models, but these models were not uniquely designed for that individual. During the 1980s, both Larry Bird and Ervin "Magic" Johnson wore the Converse Weapon, but each had specific color matches for their uniforms (white with green for Bird; white with purple and yellow for Johnson). With the 1986 expansion of sneaker distribution, the Air Jordan took shoe aficionados by storm. In an attempt to maintain control over its high-paid wage laborers, the NBA attempted to ban Jordan's signature model because its red and black colorway was considered distracting to the game; instead, the League wanted its athletes to wear white shoes. Nike even produced a television commercial appealing to consumers' abilities to purchase the shoe, even though it had been banned by the NBA. This sneaker ban, however, failed and athletes soon moved away from the austerity of white sneakers.

With the release of his signature shoe and known for his acrobatic ability to conduct moves while in the air, Jordan was transformed by graphic designers and marketers from a sentient being with human capabilities to an asymmetrical geometric form absent of humanity. In other words, Jordan became a brand, complete with his own logo. As an icon, however, he lost all human agency. What originally began as a photo-shoot for the cover of a magazine was recontextualized by designers who then removed all human presence in the desire to create a purely aesthetic form.[13] The original magazine photograph featured Michael Jordan slam-dunking a basketball with this legs spread apart. Nike, in hopes of creating a regional market, localized this image by appending 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 popular poster.

Additionally, graphic designers removed all contextual references to Jordan the human being, by creating a stylistic rendering or abstracted logo of Jordan. This logo, known as "Jumpman," eliminated all references to race and agency, therefore dehumanizing its original subject in the process. In fact, this deracializing of Jordan is not isolated to the Jumpman logo, but is a common occurrence with celebrity black athletes. For instance, 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 Washington

and David Karen noted the increased investigation into the deracination of mainstream athletes by the popular media: "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" (2001, 195). Based on historical practices in the United States, one's athletic (or artistic) capabilities aid in the process of deracialization. Race, then, appears to function as a meritocratic system.

Even though U.S. society concentrates on race, media and advertising professionals attempt to portray it as a color-blind one, even if, as Bill Ayers and Bernadine Dohrn highlight, the 2008 presidential election failed to preclude a fundamental shift in U.S. racial politics (2009). This "shedding of racial identity" that Washington and Karen refer to is simply a cipher for whiteness. Accordingly, Jordan and Robinson are perceived as acceptable to white America because of their personal racelessness. This type of nonraced acceptance of black athletes by white fans further perpetuates hegemonic notions of multicultural tolerance.

Tolerance is mediated by preexisting 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 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 transformation from a black male (seen as physically threatening to white America) to a raceless "Michael" or "MJ" is made complete by the construction of an abstracted "Jumpman" logo. Jerry Reinsdorf, owner of the Chicago Bulls, once asked rhetorically "Is Michael Jordan black?" before answering unequivocally that "Michael has no color" (Kornbluh 1995, 26).

Nike's use of the Jumpman photograph continued for some time. Its likeness to a mechanical airplane is transparent. Unlike shoeless slaves, Jordan is not seen as subhuman, but as a nonhuman object. Discursively, the transformation of black athletes into "machines" is a common, albeit problematic, one. Although high-flying athletes regularly have been associated with air or space travel, Jordan advertisements transformed him into an actual plane. As point of fact, the 1983 Nike Air Force 1 advertisement

showcased six professional basketball players all wearing flight suits. Within this image, the players are immediately constructed as pilots; the *humans* that fly the planes. Inversely, the Jumpman poster of a similar 1986 advertisement featured Jordan actually standing on an airport runaway and began the transition process where Jordan was transformed from a human with supernatural powers into a synthetic and raceless machine.

This transformation from a living, breathing entity, with all the precariousness that that may entail, to an 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 iconography. Through this process of abstraction used primarily during the mid-nineteenth century, the nuanced horrors of slavery were coopted by certain white abolitionists by stripping away the human agency from representations of black subjects. Historian Marcus Wood discusses this progression away from the African (American) as human until that human likeness simply serves as a signifier within a hegemonic discursive system. The system, of course, was constructed predominantly by whites.

For Wood, graphic images of slavery in fact have little to do with the dominant society's opposition to racial oppression (2000). Instead, the imagery discursively strips blacks of their humanity, even as its creators attempt to position themselves as antiracist. According to Wood, as part of this dehumanization process the black body has been translated into a thoroughly 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" (2000, 29). As historian Elsa Barkeley Brown articulates in her seminal critique of white feminist historiography, all identities are relational and are expressions of the dialectic tension between them (1991).

For Nike, Jordan's human presence has been completely erased from the marketing of Air Jordan sneakers. While this transpires, his celebrity status remains. Although globalized consumers would have been cognizant of

Jordan's phenotypic identity as black, this actual knowledge is dislocated and alienated from the products he is contracted to endorse. In turn, the wearing of Nike Air Jordan sneakers is void of any racialized signification.

As this brief analysis demonstrates, the connection between sneakers, race, and masculinity is one that cannot be easily discounted. In fact, this connection traverses multiple chronotopes and time periods, from Victorian England to 1950s America to contemporary global basketball 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 signification 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 or absence of his or her shoe.

Sneakers, Race, and Social Justice

As we have seen, hyper-masculinized black athletes have become the spokespeople for the consumption of leisure products such as sneakers. In many ways, I believe that through sneaker consumption, consumers are entering into a set of established practices that prevent certain emancipatory activities, even if they do not entirely circumscribe them. Sneakers become a specter of freedom, as seen in Fiske's diagram, even if it is an inherently capitalist-oriented freedom. In the end, although sneakers may allow us to assemble new and productive identities, capital continues *to control the means to control the means of production.* Until these are in the hands of the workers, sneakers are just another form of capitalist subjugation. Although I wish to conclude otherwise, envisioning sneaker culture as the means to enable a sustainable and socially just future may never happen without the demolition of our present economic system. Even if, as Kelley, maintains, oppressed peoples engage in multiple acts of everyday resistance.

Before I conclude, allow me to discuss briefly the 2007 release of Nike's Air Native N7, a sneaker made wholly for the biological specificity of the American Indian foot. In a press release of September 25, 2007, Nike intimates that

the sneaker "honors the traditional Native American Seventh Generation philosophy, an approach that respects the impact of decisions made today on seven generations" (Nikebiz). Literary scholar and *Indian Country Today* columnist Scott Lyons critiques the sneaker for its inherent return to a nineteenth-century model of "scientific racism" by connecting the turn toward a "Native American foot" with the "craniological" findings of figures such as Samuel Morton (Lyons 2007). Likewise, Lyons links the media pandering of Nike with the reality of their global labor practices. In a successful rhetorical maneuver, Lyons asks: "How many indigenous people are now working in those sweatshops in Nicaragua and elsewhere?" This, however, is not the type of question that corporations such as Nike are even attempting to ask. Instead, they only appeal to marginalized and colonized communities when they may be transformed into consumer communities.

Much in the vein of other identity and lifestyle products, the Air Native N7 is marketed exclusively toward Native individuals and is only available through tribal clinics and businesses. According to Sam McCracken, Nike's Native American Business Manager, this sneaker fills a particular market niche within Indian Country because American Indians have a biologically distinct foot shape (this is Nike's logic, not my own). According to podiatrist Rodney Strapp, "Indians tend to have a wider forefoot…but their heels are about average" (Newman 2007). Although based on "research," albeit a small sampling of only 200 people, this rhetoric begs many questions. In the February 2008 issue of the *Journal of Sport and Social Issues*, editor CL Cole writes in the "On Issues" section, that "Nike has a team of American Indian spokespeople praising the shoe and its special sales program—wholesale pricing to tribal organizations—to inoculate itself from accusations of racism" (2008, 3).

Similarly upon hearing about these new kicks, Spokane/Coeur d'Alene novelist Sherman Alexis told the *New York Times* that "the first thing I did was I laughed until I cried" (Ibid.). Sadly, Alexis's reaction should be that shared by all engaged citizens, both Indigenous and non-Native. Mark Parker, President and CEO of Nike, Inc., states that "the Nike Air Native N7 marks an important moment for us and is a great example of what can be achieved when we challenge ourselves to innovate for a better world" (Ibid.).

In "Sneakers for Social Justice?" Dave Zirin considers Stephon Marbury's Starbury line of athletic shoes. For Zirin and his supporters, the low market-value of Starbury merchandise demonstrates a fundamental shift away from hyper-corporatization and the excessive consumer cost-values associated with urban fashion and sporting apparel. Since these products are marketed toward urban poor and working-class youth, for Zirin this market modification highlights Marbury's desire for, at least on some level, economic justice. Nonetheless, Zirin is quick to point out the labor atrocities that continue to occur in Steve and Barry's factories, the parent corporation for Starbury.

According to their now defunct corporate website,

> Steve & Barry's® is about change. It's about changing the way that consumers shop for their clothes and changing the way that retailers cater to them. Steve & Barry's is about stripping away the gloss and giving consumers something real. The fact is that great clothing doesn't really have to cost that much (Steve and Barry's).

What we begin to see here is the recognition within corporate America that working-class and poor folks consume athletic apparel and need not spend exorbitant amounts on these products. Yet what remains absent from this capitalist logic is the full disclosure of the continuing and gruesome labor conditions under which these products are commonly manufactured. Following a Marxist critique of capital, Steve and Barry's corporate rhetoric still functions to mystify consumers about the appalling conditions under which these commodities were produced.

The recent marketing strategies surrounding the Nike Air Native N7 and the Starbury line raise questions about larger societal trends: Does the development of the Nike Air Native N7 point to the construction of a more inclusive and socially just society? Or is this merely the perpetuation of nineteenth-century Mortonian scientific racism? Moreover, as is the case with the Starbury line, do low consumer costs truly demonstrate that we live in an egalitarian and socially just society? Or are these simply a nuanced form of capitalist logic constrained by the realities of the ever-expanding neoliberal model of free-flowing global capital?

In the end, can sneakers aspire radical transformations toward a more humane and just society? Or is it simply globalizing capital that will continue to mystify and alienate in a Marxian sense? As this essay documents, throughout the modern era, sneakers have come to signify a particular form of gendered and racialized identities in the U.S. that operate based on one's consumptive and productive practices. Since the fabrication of the first Air Jordan, the sneaker market has been significantly altered, allowing for more robust and diverse sneaker signification. With these substantial changes, however, sneakers have come to exemplify the heterodox application and multidimensional creation of masculine identity, emerging both from the practices of everyday resistance and from dominant modes of being. Although I wish sneakers contained larger implications for radical politics, their relation to emancipatory practice is marginal at best, even if consumptive practices by marginalized youth enable the sneaker to counter the racist logic of marketing tactics. To this day, Blackmon's rhetoric with Jordan remains continuously pertinent, leaving us still wondering if "It's gotta be the shoes."

NOTES

I would like to extend generous appreciation to Pero Dagbovie, Kirsten Pai Buick, Andrew Ascherl, Estrella Torrez, and the various peer reviewers who have shared their thoughtful comments on this essay. Aspects of an earlier draft of this essay were presented at the University of Toronto in conjunction with *To Remember is to Resist: 40 Years of Sport and Social Change.*

1. "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.
2. Converse maintains that the signature was placed on the shoe in 1923, while Aamidor places the manufacturing change nine years later.
3. Although outside the purview of this essay, it may be important to begin thinking about the linkages between the decline of Converse in 1969 and the Third World liberation and civil rights movements of that same year.
4. Throughout the last few decades, scores of professional basketball players have signed shoe contracts with marginal sneaker companies, often producing inexpensive shoes. During the 1990s, Spalding released a Hakeem Olajuwon sneaker, and Payless continues

to sell Dunkman, Shaquille O'Neal's line.

5. The economic crash of 2008 in no way helped the ailing situation of Steve & Barry's, and the corporation liquidated all assets in late 2008.
6. For instance, money is spent on basketball shoes that are meant for a leisure activity by a disempowered and formerly enslaved community.
7. Heavyweight champion Jack Johnson (1878–1946) is an exemplar of the situation where blackness and masculinity collide within the dominant ideology. His 1910 fight against James Jefferies was billed as the "Fight of the Century" and emerged as a struggle for and against racial stratification.
8. It should be noted that being "ghetto" also carries extremely negative connotations within parts of the black community. There is, for instance, an entire genre of joking known as "the dozens," that begins with the phrase "Yo mama so …" with "fat," "dumb," or "ghetto" representing equally insulting descriptions. This also becomes an area of concern when class is brought into the analysis. Neither of these terms are adequately problematized in mainstream discourse.
9. Of course, notions of thuggery or thuggishness also play themselves out in relation to hegemonic articulations of black masculinity.
10. Blackness is an always changing and fluid notion, although it is commonly reduced to an array of essentialized and often fixed traits.
11. Similar connections are made by noted Caribbean historian and former Prime Minister of Trinidad and Tobago Eric Williams in *Capitalism and Slavery*.
12. During the Anita Hill trial, where Supreme Court Justice Clarence Thomas was accused of sexually harassing his female colleague, Thomas stated, "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 kowtow 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."
13. If we look at the advertising for Nike's Air Jordan as a cohesive corpus, we 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 mechanized machine. His "ability" to jump made him the perfect candidate to be transformed into an airplane, as was done in print and television advertising. 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.

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