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## Ghettocentrism and the Essentialized Black Male Athlete<sup>1</sup>

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Over the past four decades, the intertextually rendered spectacles of professional sport culture in the United States have become an instructive and impactful window into the practices and politics of commercially inspired popular racial representation. At the vanguard of this trend—albeit manifesting in differing ways—has been the National Basketball Association’s (NBA) and the National Football League’s (NFL) attempts to creatively manage their incontrovertible blackness. These leagues, within both of which black athletes have come to the fore both statistically and symbolically, have sought to either create (NBA) or sustain (NFL) their popular appeal among what remains a predominantly white mainstream American audience: the leagues and their ancillary promotional armatures have seemingly become preoccupied with “making Black men safe for White consumers in the interest of profit” (Hughes 2004, p. 164). Looking to further the understanding of this phenomenon, the present analysis keys on the relationships among sport, space, and the commercial politics of racial representation. In doing so, it contextualizes the (re)invention and policing of blackness within and through the promotional vortex (Whannel 1999; Wernik 1991) of the contemporary NBA and NFL. More specifically, this chapter examines the various ways that notions of the “urban” and the “street” have been used as both highly commercialized, and equally politicized, cultural metaphors framing the manner in which African Americans (and African American males in particular) are represented and understood in contemporary American culture. As such, a further aim of this discussion is to illustrate how the promotional circuses that have come to constitute these sport leagues play a significant role in the “ongoing battle over representations of the black urban experience” (Kelley 1997, p. 8) and thus

contribute to ongoing travails impacting the lived experience of the contemporary American racial formation.

Whereas S. Craig Watkins used the notion of the “ghettocentric imagination” to illustrate how some strands of black cinema “mobilize complicated meanings about the lived experiences of postindustrial ghetto life” (2005, p. 197), the NBA and NFL’s representational strategies have proved considerably less nuanced and insightful. Indeed, far from offering progressive depictions of race and racial difference, both leagues have become sites for spectacular confirmation of a default, and we would contend, regressive “ghettocentrism” (Andrews and Silk 2010; Leonard 2006a). By the term *ghettocentrism*, we are referring to what has become a pervasive promotional practice within the media sport complex. Specifically, the logics of ghettocentrism refer to the aesthetic and spatially grounded fetishizing and essentializing of black sporting bodies for their perceived, and indeed conjoined, athletic ability and urban authenticity: they are unproblematically assumed to be the products, and/or progeny, of the mythologized (equally romanticized as demonized) American ghetto. Empirically explicating the derivations, complexities, and contradictions of this problematic ghettocentric logic—specifically as mobilized within and through the promotional formations of the NBA and NFL—provides the focus of this discussion.

### CONTEXTUALIZING GHETTOCENTRISM

The ghettocentric representational logics, identified and analyzed within this examination of the NBA’s and NFL’s promotional circuses, derive from the intersection of two interrelated forces, namely, postindustrialism and post-Fordism. These constitutive dimensions of the ascendant late capitalist order (Jameson 1991) have profoundly informed the structure and experience of contemporary American society. However, and of particular relevance for the current discussion, is the postindustrial impact upon the material—and subsequent post-Fordist appropriation and embellishment of the symbolic—dimensions of the contemporary urban landscape. For as Maharaj astutely noted:

The paradox is . . . that the same multinational-capitalist economic practices that led to deindustrialization and the immiseration of black urban communities in the post-World War II United States also produced the black basketball star as commodity and an object of desire for mass consumption; that both the “nightmare” of the urban ghetto and the “dream” of being a celebrity professional athlete are manifestations of the economic and cultural workings of late capitalism. (1999, p. 228)

Hence, it is important to ground this discussion of sporting ghettocentrism within the postindustrial and post-Fordist context, of which it is both a constituted and constitutive element.

Postindustrial is a somewhat misleading term, since the prefix *post* implies the conclusive movement beyond industrial productivity and relations. In actuality, most American cities continue to possess some—oftentimes not inconsiderable—degree of industrial manufacturing interests and employment. Hence, it is perhaps instructive to think in terms of deindustrialization as a constitutive process within the unfolding postindustrial condition. The key point, however, is that since the relatively high levels of productivity and prosperity of the immediate postwar era, the industrial manufacturing base of virtually all cities has dramatically declined, specifically, in terms of employment, manufacturing, and financial indicators. Hence, the levels of mass urban employment guaranteed in the heyday of industrial manufacturing are conclusively a thing of the past. With industries either being rendered obsolete within the new digital economy, becoming less reliant on a mass labor force due to the prevalence of nonhuman manufacturing technologies, moving to more efficient greenfield sites on the metropolitan peripheries, or relocating more cost-effective locations in developing nations, the scale of the urban industrial workforce has drastically diminished. As a result, there is simply no longer a sufficient number of industrial employment opportunities for the now reserve army of the urban working class that provided the labor supply for the industrialization of America in the years between 1850 and 1950.

Urban deindustrialization has been decades in the making, during which time it has wrought significant social, economic, and cultural effects on the broader metropolis. Beginning in the 1950s, and rapidly accelerating following the inner-city civil unrest of the late 1960s, many urban Americans migrated to what became increasingly desirable, and thereby rapidly expanding, suburban communities. However, the opportunity to flee the economically, and latterly socially and ecologically, declining inner city for the “crabgrass frontier” (Jackson 1985) of suburbia was by no means readily accessible to all. This was “white flight” (Frey 1979) in the truest sense of the term. The racially iniquitous distribution of federal housing subsidies, legally sanctioned redlining practices, and discriminatory housing covenants all endured well into the 1970s and precluded many African Americans from buying into the suburban American dream (Pietila 2010). Consequently, a large percentage of the urban African American population were resigned to their plight of being confined in patently struggling inner-city neighborhoods: those with sufficient levels of economic, social, and/or cultural capital were sometimes able to escape, leaving the most vulnerable to life in the unfolding urban dystopia. These were spaces of deindustrial decline whose degeneration was exacerbated by the replacement of the

relative stability and affluence of contracted industrial mass employment, with either large-scale unemployment or the low-skilled, low-wage, hourly commitments of postindustrial service sector underemployment.

With declining income levels (in real and relative terms) among the urban African American populace came a concomitant shift in the balance between home ownership and renting, marked increases in levels of building abandonment, and a habitual degradation in the general quality of neighborhood housing stock. As the employment, economic, and environmental base of such urban neighborhoods declined, so there was also an associated contraction in city taxes revenues, and, crucially, the public services funded by them (including provision for education, recreation, and public health); a process of retrenchment furthered by the seemingly relentless march to the present condition of roll-with-it neoliberalization, which rendered such neighborhoods ever more challenged (Keil 2009). As Williams and Collins noted:

U.S. research has found that poor, segregated African American neighborhoods are also characterized by high mobility, low occupancy rates, high levels of abandoned buildings and grounds, relatively large numbers of commercial and industrial facilities, and inadequate municipal services and amenities, including police and fire protection. (2001, p. 410)

Indeed, policing strategies in such poverty-stricken neighborhoods wherein crime and violence rates have certainly escalated has stigmatized entire local communities by treating them en masse as potential deviants. Such is the only conclusion from the regressive and aggressive police tactics responsible for innovations such as those introduced to 1980s Los Angeles and beyond: "Police helicopters, complex electronic surveillance, even small tanks armed with battering rams became part of this increasingly militarized urban landscape. Housing projects, such as Imperial Courts, were renovated along the lines of minimum-security prisons and equipped with fortified fencing and an LAPD substation" (Kelley 1998, p. 199). Such a militarized approach to policing urban populations and fortifying urban spaces, in concert with the policy rhetoric which justified it, materially and symbolically recreated urban spaces and populations as abject threats to society as a whole (Dumm 1993).

Urban industrial America had long been spatially divided along racial lines. In its earlier iterations, African American populations may have been socially separated and relatively economically impoverished; however, they were not as isolated from the rest of the urban populace as they are within the contemporary metropolis. Historically, many urban African American communities were underpinned by meaningful social institutions and networks, which proved important sources of support and identification for local inhabitants. However, the social breakdown resulting from dein-

dustrialization and the attendant evacuation of vital populations, resources, and institutions from such communities lead to what Wacquant (2007) described as the shift from the communal ghetto to the hyperghetto. That is not to romanticize the earlier communal form which was far from devoid of social and economic challenges. Yet, within the contemporary American *hyperghetto*, macroeconomic and political policies have evidently combined to create ever more deteriorating, and increasingly isolated, economic, social, and physical environments. Furthermore, the prevailing “hyperghettoization” (Wacquant 2007) within the American city has generated an African American underclass which—to the relief and sense of ontological well-being of those more fortunate urbanites—inhabits a parallel, but to a large extent separate and self-contained, impoverished inner-city world. According to Massey and Denton (1998), this “American Apartheid” is manifest through one-third of the African American population living in spaces of intense—or hyper—segregation:

They are unambiguously the nation’s most spatially isolated and geographically secluded people, suffering extreme segregation across multiple dimensions simultaneously. . . . Ironically, within a large, diverse, and highly mobile post-industrial society such as the United States, blacks living in the heart of the ghetto are among the most isolated people on earth. (Massey and Denton 1998, p. 77)

Not unsurprisingly, this social and economic isolation has led to increased poverty, crime, and incarceration rates and decreasing education, employment, and health outcomes for what was an already vulnerable community.

As within many impoverished and underserved inner cities, in both developed and developing nations, drug, gang, and both personal- and property-related crime have become rife within America’s hypersegregated urban spaces (Williams and Collins 2001). As Collins identified, criminal behavior is but one response to the challenges of hypersegregation, and it demonstrates that many of those “African American youth living in the belly of the beast of the sole remaining world superpower” (2006, p. 298) are far from passive recipients of the deleterious effects of global macroeconomic policies. Yes, they may be marginalized and disempowered in a broader sense, but such challenging conditions sometimes stimulate creative strategies through which individuals look to overcome, or at the very least forge, some type of sustainable existence within the constraints imposed by their social location. For some, various forms of criminal practice and relations have proved to be ready and pragmatic solutions to the overarching experience of under- or unemployment, financial hardship, social isolation, and, indeed, existential hopelessness. With regard to more sanctioned behaviors, Kelley (1998) discussed a number of expressive cultural practices through

which some urban African American youth have creatively negotiated the constraints imposed upon them by postindustrial urbanism. These include various forms of music, dance, visual art, and the primary focus of this discussion, sport. As Kelley notes, for some urban African American youth who envision limited opportunities in the deindustrialized workforce, basketball is the catalyst for the utilization of the body as a source of pleasurable creative expression and potential capital accumulation. He continues:

I am in no way suggesting that this kind of “play” is emancipatory, revolutionary, or even resistive. Rather, it comprises a range of strategies within capitalism—some quite entrepreneurial in fact—intended to enable working-class youth to avoid dead-end, low-wage labor while devoting their energies to creative and pleasurable pursuits (Kelley 1998, p. 197).

While some sporting entrepreneurs may profit from their incorporation into the basketball-industrial complex (at high school, college, or professional levels), Kelley is right to point out that this system is highly exploitative and both socially and politically damaging in that it implicitly underscores individualistic ideologies or “‘success’ narratives that take racism off the hook by demonstrating that ‘hard work’ in the realm of sports or entertainment is all that one needs to escape the ghetto” (Kelley 1998, p. 197): Leaving those who fail—the overwhelming majority, many of whom will have almost unavoidably neglected their education in favor of “hoop dreams” (Robbins 1999)—to rue the personal/basketball shortcomings that resigned them to their fate, of being evermore entrenched within the hyperghetto.

Interestingly, Collins (2006, p. 304) points to the reliance of the “punishment industry” and the commodification of black male bodies as the “raw materials” of the prison-industrial complex: “It is very simple—no prisoners, means no jobs for all the ancillary industries that service this growth industry. Because prisons express little interest in rehabilitating prisoners, they need a steady supply of bodies.” So, the basketball-industrial complex looks to urban America to supply the “raw materials” of basketball bodies looking to become commodified. These are potentially lucrative urban basketball bodies which, while necessarily no more athletically gifted than their suburban counterparts, have oftentimes been socialized into a very different basketball habitus. Thus, it could be argued, that the various armatures of the basketball-industrial complex have a vested interest in maintaining the existence of, and indeed its access to, the standing—and generationally reproducing—army of urban basketball bodies.

If postindustrial forces and processes were responsible for the instantiation of the social, economic, and political conditions out of which emerged the spaces and experiences of hyperghettoization, it was post-Fordist shifts in the dominant regime of capital accumulation that led to the concerted

and mainstream commercialization of urban African American practices, styles, and imagery. Although clearly implicated in broad changes in the scale and scope of industrial manufacturing (Gartman 1998; Allen 1996; Murray 1990), among other things, the shift from Fordism to post-Fordism wrought significant changes on the very constitution and understanding of American consumer society. Precipitated by the crisis of Fordist overproduction and the need to stimulate the consumer marketplace, post-Fordism emerged as an antidote to mass-marketing strategies, which aggregated consumers into a narrow range of groupings based on crude social class classifications. The turn to post-Fordist approaches involved eschewing class-based market stratification in favor of a more aesthetically driven lifestyle and identity-based initiatives that could traverse traditional social class divisions and thereby render commodities appealing to a broader and more fluid range of consumer constituencies.

Of key importance within the process of exploding the class-cultural monoliths of Fordist mass marketing was a clear commitment to, and engagement with, issues of otherness and difference. In Davidson's terms, capitalism—specifically in its post-Fordist iteration—has “fallen in love with difference” (Davidson 1992, p. 199). Or, as Gilroy outlined:

It may not have been adequately politicized, but with the demise of mass marketing it has certainly become a dominant commercial consideration. Its corporate life has been fueled by the fact that in the era of targeted precision marketing, the appeal of black faces and styles need no longer be restricted to black consumers. These profound changes have stimulated demands for exotica and authentic inside information that have been met enthusiastically by a new contingent of cultural brokers: a hip vanguard in the business of difference (Gilroy 2001, p. 242).

Clearly, post-Fordism is not simply concerned with a more explicit engagement with minority (read: racial/ethnic) market segments; in addition, and of more relevance for this discussion of sporting ghettocentrism, it was the incorporation of minority subjectivities into the discourses and logics of mainstream marketing. This precipitated a “profound cultural revolution” prefigured on, and responsible for, the commercial mobilization and representation of the “languages of the margin” (Hall 1992, p. 34). Ghettocentrist marketing can thus be understood as an exemplar of how the “old Fordist imagery, of a very few exclusive set of identities” is being compounded by post-Fordism’s “new exotica” through which it becomes possible to enact and experience “the pleasures of the transgressive Other” (Hall 1992, p. 31). Representations, embodiments, and performances of blackness are now redolent throughout the cultural economy as signifiers of a form of alterity that adorn commodities with a symbolic value that speaks to seemingly authentic notions of difference (Hall 1992, p. 31).

The strategic ghettocentrism evident in the marketing and promotion of a litany of products and services (and not simply those possessing a generally established *urban* orientation), blatantly essentializes, and in doing so pathologizes, the African American populace. *African American* and *black* have become adjectives euphemistically, and seemingly indelibly, associated with the inner city (another raced euphemism), unemployment, crime, poverty, welfare dependency, drugs, and, for that matter, basketball (Cole and King 2003; Cole and King 1999; Cole and King 1998; Cole 1996). Black sporting bodies, and particularly (if not exclusively) those of African American males are thus routinely represented within the post-Fordist cultural economy as signs of inextricably conjoined racial-spatial difference that become mobilized in authenticating and advancing the symbolic value, and hence the exchange value, of particular branded commodities (Hall 1992). Indeed, such is the mass-mediated prevalence of this ghetto-centric logic that—despite the presence of celebrated escapees, and more significantly the not inconsequential rise of the African American middle-class and upper-middle-class populations—middle American sensibilities routinely succumb to the assumption that the overwhelming majority of African Americans reside socially and economically in the islands of abject underclass poverty, crime, and despair, blithely referred to as *ghettos* within the promotional vernacular. However, within late capitalism's visually propelled culture, any disparity between image and reality becomes largely inconsequential. As Yousman noted:

[W]hether or not the images represent the life experience of most Blacks is immaterial. What is most important is not authenticity but the appearance of authenticity. For Whites who grow up imaging the Black world as a world of violence and chaos, the more brutal the imagery, the more true-to-life it seems to be. (2003, pp. 378–79)

Recourse to the raced urban simulacra belies the fact that post-Fordism is no more progressive in its willingness to engage, and indeed champion the experience of the racial other, than earlier phases of capitalist evolution. Whether referring to the mainstream commercial exploitation of specifically “urban” creative forms, expressions, and embodiments, such as music, dance, art, or sport, the post-Fordist corporation is simply motivated by an acknowledgement that within the contemporary moment, “Black equals cool equals revenue” (Hughes 2004, p. 172).

### THE GHETTOCENTRIC NBA

Kelley rightly identified the fact that “representations of the ghetto as a space of play and pleasure amid violence and deterioration are more than

simply products of the corporate imagination" (1998, p. 196). Equally, and specifically with regard to basketball, it would be remiss not to underscore the fact that the commercial media has played a significant role in normalizing—to the extent of essentializing—the relationship between race (African American) and space (urban) in the eyes of the viewing and consuming public. Basketball has long been the game of choice for America's ethnically shifting urban throng (Reiss 1991), and clearly the game was noticeably African Americanized, as that population came to dominate inner-city America in the mid to late decades of the twentieth century (Boyd 2003). However, that is very different from the routine assumption made by the popular media that any black player within the professional or intercollegiate ranks is assumed to be the progeny of the hyperghetto, with all the stereotypical assumptions that arouses. The plain fact that the majority of NBA players do not harken from such surroundings (Leonard 2010) clearly becomes obfuscated under the symbolic weight of basketball's overdetermining ghettocentrism.

Michael Jordan's ubiquitous, and to some degree league-defining, imaged identity displayed a complex relationship with his own blackness, which was indicative of the prevailing racial ideologies driving the New Right's ideological hegemony of the 1980s and 1990s (Andrews 2001; Jeffords 1993). However, over the past decade, blackness, or rather carefully managed and marketed expressions of urban blackness, have become an important feature driving the post-Jordan NBA (Lane 2007; Leonard 2006b; Markovitz 2006; Leonard 2004; Tucker 2003). However, within the intertextual NBA universe, it is possible to discern contradictory approaches to the league's racial problematic. As in other cultural industries, so within the NBA, the commodification of the urban black body in particular has become a defining feature of its commercial strategizing. The league has efficiently responded to a new commercial cultural order by mobilizing the representations of race and racial difference it had previously shunned (Carrington, Andrews, Jackson, and Mazur 2001; Hartmann 2000; Maharaj 1999; Goldman and Papson 1998; Boyd 1997a; Boyd 1997b; Cole and Andrews 1996; Sandell 1995). In doing so, the league was mirroring broader trends within American popular culture associated with the rise of post-Fordism's diversified regimes of capital accumulation (Harvey 1989). From the 1970s onward, Hollywood acknowledged the commercial value of incorporating a "ghettocentric imagination" within their output (Leonard 2006a, p. 23). Subsequently, films depicting life in America's inner cities, particularly *Boyz n the Hood* (1991), *New Jack City* (1991), and *Menace II Society* (1993) successfully engaged black audiences as they simultaneously capitalized upon white America's fear/fascination with urban spaces and communities (Denzin 2002). Similarly, from the early 1990s onward, the NBA became subsumed by its own ghettocentric imagination. Today, it is

virtually impossible to avoid ghetto-centric logic across the multiplicity of elements that constitute commercial basketball culture: it has become the game's default promotional code.

Allen Iverson arguably represented the most vivid embodiment of basketball's then emergent ghetto-centric logic in the mid to late 1990s. In branding terms, his association with the imagery and rhetoric of the street added a layer of gritty realism and sporting/cultural authenticity from which the highly spectacularized NBA had become somewhat distanced (Andrews 2006). Iverson entered the NBA with the Philadelphia 76ers in 1996, already possessing a public persona that went beyond his exploits on the collegiate basketball court, following two seasons at Georgetown. Iverson had garnered a degree of notoriety while still in high school due to him having served time in jail for his alleged involvement in a interracial bowling alley fight in his hometown of Hampton, Virginia. Despite his subsequent release and the overturning of his conviction, the very fact of being linked with crime and violence, especially when compounded with the media's preoccupation with circulating the circumstances of his poverty-stricken single-parent upbringing, resulted in him becoming a metonymic personification of the street (Maharaj 1999). At the hands of a reactionary popular media, ever looking to corroborate pathologizing causal explanations for urban African America deviance (Reeves and Campbell 1994), Iverson was rendered a racially essentialized representative subject, on and through whose imaged identity were channeled the racially grounded fears and fascinations of the broader American populace. He was, at one and the same time, a touchstone for America's antithetical blackophilic and blackophobic discernments (Yousman 2003).

Iverson's challenging personal history, coupled with his distinctive playing style and aesthetic presentation, marked him as the contemporaneous embodiment of black urban authenticity. This patent differentiation from the Jordan-dominated NBA mainstream was clearly foremost among Reebok's motivations for signing him to a \$40 million contract in 1996 and for dubbing him, and his signature shoe, "The Answer," even before he had played an NBA game. As David Falk, his then agent (and indeed still Jordan's), effused at an early marketing management meeting:

With him (Iverson), I have a penchant to do it differently. It doesn't work to do the same stuff that Jordan did in 1984. It would be as if Allen Iverson wore Michael Jordan's custom-made clothes from 1984. They wouldn't fit and they'd be out of style (Hirschberg 1996).

Through the accumulative influence of the annual advertising campaigns for "The Answer" Reebok shoes, Iverson projected an imaged identity grounded in the commonly perceived practices and metaphors of contemporary urban African American culture: expressive and defiant individual-

ism; hip-hop; poverty and hardship; tattoos; crime and punishment; and conspicuous material consumption. Iverson thus became an exemplar of the commodification of a strident expression of black masculinity (Boyd 1997b), whose carefully managed and promoted signification of urban authenticity was designed to communicate to both black and white audiences alike a seductive image of ghettocentric affirmation and/or fascination. He was the "king of hip hop ball" whose "style, attitude and overall disposition endeared him to many people weaned on the influence of hip hop itself" (Boyd 2003, p. 157).

To bring the discussion more up-to-date, to varying degrees and in varying ways the imaged identities of current NBA notables such as LeBron James, Dwyane Wade, and Carmelo Anthony have come to occupy a third-space prefigured on a financially inspired and commercially engineered engagement with the discourses of urban blackness. This amounts to a commercially expedient basketball ghettocentrism, realized through the strategic promotional mobilization stereotypical of signifiers of the urban African American experience and associated aesthetics, including sociospatial location; family history and constitution; and preferences for particular cultural practices, forms of attire, music, hair style, and modes of verbal and nonverbal communication. Despite not being the most successful or popular of the current crop of "next next big things" (Ballard 2006), Carmelo Anthony is a figure most illustrative of the aesthetic ghettocentrism underpinning the cultural economy of the contemporary NBA. Anthony is an individual who, like Iverson before him, has been paraded across the sport media for a series of minor indiscretions following his entry into the NBA. These included various traffic violations, marijuana possession charges, and seemingly unwitting involvement in the notorious "Stop Snitchin'" video (Woestendiek 2005). He is also a figure who is closely associated with a specific urban space: that of the poverty-, drug-, and crime-ridden streets of West Baltimore. Indeed, he has even been used as an arbiter of authenticity regarding fictional depictions of his hometown for NBA.com readers:

While most who watch *The Wire* enjoy the comforts of leather couches and surround sound, Carmelo Anthony watches with an insightful eye. He grew up on the same streets that the show depicts. Carmelo knows the plight of the young black men who survive on the cold corners of West Baltimore . . . Carmelo Anthony says, "It's real. Everything is real about it." Carmelo's confirmation about the show's authenticity is frightening. *The Wire's* fourth season focused on middle school children who are sharp and intelligent, but are unable to overcome shattered families: absent fathers, addicted mothers, and grinding poverty. (Ruderman 2008).

Furthermore, Anthony's fluid yet dynamic playing style fits easily with common assumptions related to the expressive individualism of inner-city

basketball, as does his choice of corporeal attire and adornment. Such a comprehensive and compelling urban provenance has provided Anthony with a seductive aura of *ghetto* authenticity, which has proved to be a lucrative form of cultural capital within the commercial marketplace. For instance, in 2003 Nike's Jordan Brand division chose Anthony as one of its core endorsers and charged him to uphold the cultural prominence, and commercial value, of the Michael Jordan phenomenon. Within a series of commercials, Anthony's position as one of the key inheritors of the Jordan legacy was subsequently explicated.

In his first major commercial for Nike in 2003, Anthony's identity was confirmed to the American public by way of an embodied transformation from Michael Jordan to "Carmelo Anthony, his student." As well as positing his due deference to basketball's living deity, this clever metamorphosis highlights the similarity and differences between Jordan and Anthony. The former in terms of playing style, the latter in terms of personal aesthetics; Anthony's braided hair, head band, and tattoo marking a distinct contrast with Jordan's understated style. In this, and numerous other commercials for the Jordan Brand, Anthony was involved in a two-way symbolic exchange between himself and his basketball/brand mentor. Jordan's cultural presence and import—even in absentia when being referred to by name, as is the case in a series of Nike commercials featuring Anthony and the comedian Tommy Davidson—provided Anthony with a valuable basketball lineage. His unassailable "street" credentials simultaneously acted to, at least partially, urbanize Jordan's image, thus providing the Jordan Brand with a more contemporary ethos and appeal.

The process of urbanizing Jordan's imaged identity is arguably a response to the ghettocentrist hegemony operating within the promotional circuitry of the NBA; a prevailing sensibility to which even icons such as Jordan must attend if they are to maintain their cultural relevance. To this end, an infectious 2005 Jordan Brand commercial featuring Anthony, fellow NBA player Quentin Richardson, the NFL's Terrell Owens, and the music of rapper Common returned to the mid-1970s Brooklyn of Jordan's youth (prior to his family moving to North Carolina). Within a highly stylized visual and musical narrative, the "Be" commercial located Jordan as the product of a clearly cohesive and self-confident black community. In doing so, it advanced Jordan's urban provenance and relevance: something circumvented within earlier iterations of his commercial identity but clearly deemed a requirement of the contemporary moment.

Anthony was also the sole focus of a major Nike campaign in 2005, titled "B More," which centered on a sixty-second commercial. Filmed on location on Myrtle Avenue, the Baltimore street where he grew up, this sweeping narrative visualized Anthony's journey from streets with boarded-up

houses, incessant police sirens, and intrusive helicopter floodlights to the spectacular world of the NBA. It also acknowledged some of those who assisted Anthony on his epic American odyssey, such as neighborhood friends, a role model from the NBA (Bernard King), and college coach (Jim Boeheim). However, the viewer is left in no doubt that Anthony was the primary agent responsible for his successful advancement. This trope of determined individualism was underscored in the extensive website that augmented this campaign. In the opening section of the "B More" website, an anonymous voice announced:

Turning obstacles into opportunities, Carmelo Anthony shows it's not where you're from but where you're determined to go. From learning to shoot on a milk crate on Baltimore's tough Myrtle Avenue to becoming one of the most exciting players in the game. Melo hasn't forgotten his roots; he's embraced them. So come behind the scenes of his latest commercial to find out what really drives Melo.

Herein, contemporaneous ghettocentric logic revealed its neo-liberal underbelly, and thereby its debt to the abstracted individualism previously championed and advanced by figures such as Michael Jordan. Moreover, basketball, and specifically the NBA, is positioned as a benevolent institution responsible for enabling potential "social parasites" to transform themselves lionized sporting celebrities (Maharaj 1999, p. 237).

While the NBA has profited from the promotion of its teams, and specifically its constitutive celebrity brands (players) as embodiments of "the street cool that moves the merchandise" (Starr and Samuels 1997, p. 28), the league simultaneously continues to actively police what it clearly perceives to be the problems accompanying its incontrovertible blackness. Seemingly prompted by the perceived need to manage the league's racial countenance, the NBA has introduced an onslaught of high-profile regulations aimed at policing player behavior on and off the court. Through media spectacularization of player indiscretions, these moral panic-inducing disciplinary edicts—such as those concerned with the size of headbands and wristbands and where they can be worn, length of shorts, clothing worn underneath uniforms, compression socks, ripping off of warm-ups, leaving the bench under any circumstances, disagreeing with referees, and players' possession of firearms—become responsible for stigmatizing and criminalizing the entire NBA player personnel, with the bodies of the leagues young black males coming under particularly intense surveillance (Leonard 2010; Leonard 2006b). Such policies have been aimed at addressing the perceived instability of the league created by media discourses "intimating a link between the influx of younger players, hip-hop, and the lack of discipline" (Leonard 2006b, p. 159). As

such, they once again illustrate the paradoxical relationship between the NBA and its ghetto-centric subjects who continue to act both as a highly profitable source of cultural difference and authenticity and a catalyst for racial anxiety and concern.

### THE GHETTOCENTRIC NFL

While the NBA has made extensive and conspicuous efforts to vigilantly navigate the line between managing its racial order and employing a ghetto-centric promotional logic, the NFL has focused more intently on the former. The sociocultural traditions and institutional structures of the game have acted as an impediment to what is an externally propelled post-Fordist ghetto-centrism acting upon the NFL (largely generated through the encroaching influence of increasingly intertextual, to the degree of becoming parasitic, cultural industries). Boyd described basketball as “resolutely Black . . . The Blackness that defines basketball now is as American as apple pie” (2003, p. 175). Conversely, football, despite the abundance of bodies signifying a homologous identity, occupies a quite dissimilar “raced” space in terms of its residual blue-collar, industrial working-class whiteness. While basketball may be rooted in the material realities and symbolic expressions of a postindustrial urban blackness, football has perhaps maintained an attachment to the meanings of a blue-collar industrial whiteness through recourse to its now mythologized white working-class past. Football’s distinctly white social imaginary is routinely reproduced through the popular discourses, specifically when invoking particular spaces (Canton, Ohio; Pittsburgh steel mills; Midwest industrial towns); historic figures (Walter Camp; Knute Rockne; Red Grange); and evocative sensibilities (rugged individualism; European American heteronormative masculinity).

At the turn of the twentieth century, football was a sport reserved for the white collegiate male elite, and it was an important proving ground for masculine traits of leadership, resilience, and toughness (Oriard 1993). Since that time, and as the game became democratized through its appropriation by the predominantly white industrial working class, football continued to convey particular meanings rooted in the Protestant ethics of discipline, sacrifice, and hard “work,” through which it became sutured to what Althusser and Balibar (1970) would refer to as the ideological structure in dominance of the white-controlled industrial capitalist project. As such, football has emerged as the rational industrial antithesis to the basketball “played” on the “postindustrial playground” (Kelley 1998). While Kelley noted the default promotional image of “street ball” as being “a world where young black males do nothing but play” (Kelley 1998, p. 196), football’s hierarchical structure, collective coordination, and rationalized

division of labor suggestively articulated the game to the productivist ethos of blue-collar, white, industrial-era “work.” Thus, football came to represent an important conflation, or rather an erosion, of the liminal spaces between work and play: Within and through football practice, young men learn to sacrifice their bodies for the benefit of the collective, suppress their creative individualism through routinized labor, and submit to the will of authority.

Further explicating the historical link between football’s inherent American values and its overdetermined industrial whiteness, Oriard notes coach Cameron Forbes’s early twentieth-century logic that “Football is the expression of the Anglo-Saxon. It is the dominant spirit of a dominant race, and to this it owes its popularity and its hopes of permanence” (qtd. in Oates 2009, p. 34). Furthermore, given its enduring white provenance, “Football has always been more resistant than basketball to black style” (Oriard 2007, p. 236). Thus, through its various institutional and discursive formations, and through formal and informal directives, football has aggressively policed its self-apparent racial paradox through the imposition of regulatory measures designed to repress the perceived encroachment of black bodies and culture into this traditionally white cultural space. As Oates suggests, black football players:

routinely find themselves denigrated as unworthy successors to a previous age when the game was “pure,” [read White], while on the field, new penalties have been instituted in an attempt to police behavior and expression on the field. And while it is rarely noted in popular commentary, the unworthy, unruly athletes in question are usually Black. (2009, p. 44)

As with the basketball scenario, the actual sociospatial and cultural derivation of African American football players is largely inconsequential, as the complex diversity of raced subjectivity is routinely overlooked. To paraphrase Yousman (2003), the mere image of the black male body is simultaneously sociospatially essentialized and demonized as being authentic representatives of a narrow range of identities and practices associated with the postindustrial urban dystopia. Since the popular representations of blackness have been compellingly articulated to regressive racial stereotypes, the on- and off-field performances of black players are always already mediated through the lens of broader racial discourses. Hence, football’s black counternarratives both embody and legitimate the “White normative vision and privilege” (Hartmann 2007, p. 53) through which the game is governed and understood.

Within the racially coded world of the NFL, black athletes have been simultaneously exploited for financial gain and sanctioned—not for fear of actual disruption or violence—for the historically entrenched fear of “Blacks breaking White-imposed law” (Cunningham 2009, p. 50). The

sanctions and penalties for such transgressions provides a public exhibition of white control, which reassures the American mainstream that its position of authority is not under threat (see Cunningham 2009; Thomas 1996; Wonsek 1992). The NFL is particularly intent on penalizing athletes who make any attempt to stand out and assert some sense of individual style, creativity, or self-expression; the celebratory act (after scoring a touchdown or getting a sack, for example) itself being a distinct threat against the perceived sanctity of the sport's once dominant white, working-class, industrial values. Subtly enforcing its racially motivated repressions, the NFL has "attempted to control and, indeed, erase such colorful expressions of triumph by asserting that they were unsportsmanlike displays. The league amended its rules in 1984 and 1991 to temper 'any prolonged, excessive, or premeditated celebration by individual players or groups of players'" (Springwood and King 2000, p. 171). Or, as Cunningham more directly asserts, "because the NFL adopted stiffer rules on uniforms, touchdown celebrations, and taunting, Black athletes have borne the brunt and with little surprise: After all, these rules were specifically intended for Black athletes" (2009, p. 45). While attempting to control the perceptions of black lawlessness and avoid what was commonly seen as the NBA's "image crisis" of the late 1970s and early 1980s (Cady 1979, p. 15), the NFL nonetheless incentivizes individual performance and markets particular players for their ability to enhance media exposure, popular appeal, and ultimately, revenue (Cunningham 2009). Again, reflecting the post-Fordist predilection to profit from consumer demand for productions of otherness, the NFL has been no stranger to such pursuits, although it has been more calculated and conservative in balancing its profit-driven veneer of multiculturalism against its underlying desires for white normativity (Goldberg 1994). As Fiske suggests:

The argument is not what constitutes sportsmanlike conduct, but over who controls its constitution . . . Because the issue is not of behavior but one of control, in different social conditions, the same expressive behavior can be viewed by the power-bloc quite differently. In its TV commercials for the World Football League (which is the NFL's attempt to spread US football to Europe), the NFL relies largely on images of black expressiveness that it attempts to repress back home. [For European audiences, presumably] the expressive black body signals not a challenge to white control but an American exuberance, vitality, and stylishness which European sport lacks. (Fiske 1993, p. 62)

While this early promotion of black expressiveness reflected a willingness to market the imagery of otherness abroad, the NFL has only more recently, and still reservedly, inculcated such strategies domestically. Within the contemporary American context, the discursive conflation of black athletes with criminals, rappers, and drug dealers (Lane 2007) has helped produce the ghettocentric promotional context through which acts of defiance have

come to signify seemingly authentic notions of “difference and a site of desire” (Maharaj 1999, p. 235). Stemming from the uneasy relationship of the NBA and NFL with hip-hop culture and popular, albeit essentialized, representations of black men, urban space, and street culture, the promotion of such images further reinforces problematic racial articulations. For example, within the NFL, black players who have committed acts of defiance against league rules or are implicated in incidents involving drugs, guns, or violence are too often, uncritically and dismissively, framed within tropes of hip-hop hedonism. As conservative sport columnist Jason Whitlock alleges:

African-American football players caught up in the rebellion and buffoonery of hip hop culture have given NFL owners and coaches a justifiable reason to whiten their rosters. That will be the legacy left by Chad, Larry and Tank Johnson, Pacman Jones, Terrell Owens, Michael Vick and all the other football bojanagers. (qtd. in Cunningham 2009, p. 43)

Within such reactionary diatribes, “hip-hop” has become another raced euphemism for black criminality and deviance, the meanings of which also signify a commercially viable image of a putatively authentic otherness. In this sense, and despite the embedded traditions that construct football as occupying a very different ontological space than basketball, the desire to market black athletic bodies in a post-Fordist consumer culture has resulted in the advent of an essentializing and demonizing ghettocentrism infiltrating the NFL’s complex, and indeed intertextual, commercial circuitry.

As an example of the aforementioned creeping ghettocentrism, a recent football segment on Nike’s website called “Countdown to Combat” (assumably aimed at high-school-aged football players and/or young consumers) depicts a monthly calendar within which each day features an NFL star, Nike product, or remixed hip-hop track intended to “hype you up” for “game day.” In actuality, the site is reflective of what Oates (2009; 2007) would describe as the exhibition of the black body as an object of desire; commodified, fetishized, and able to be consumed through multiple platforms of cultural production. Almost exclusively featuring black football stars and hip-hop artists, the site offers a compendium of black bodies on display: in motion; half dressed; or, featured in audio track remixes with prominent hip-hop artists. Visitors to the site can download wallpapers featuring the half-naked (albeit displaying an armored skin) and provocatively posed bodies of Adrian Peterson, Steven Jackson, or Justin Tuck, dressed in no more than tight spandex shorts which accentuate more than they conceal. Given the fact that they are depicted in a static position, muscles bulging as they stare back at the viewer—as to more fully enable the viewers’ ocular inspection and imagination—the slogan appearing next to the bodies (“Prepare for Combat”) is also quite

suggestive in terms of sexually objectifying the black male body as “a form of symbolic castration that denies both his masculinity and agency, in an attempt to render the Black male body, once again, controllable by white supremacist patriarchy” (Carrington 2000, p. 142). More specifically with regard to the NFL spectacle, Oates (2007) suggests that the invasiveness and homoerotic subtexts of events like the NFL draft and combine, wherein players are asked to “strip to their shorts and line up” (p. 77), functions both to “dehumanize and to sexualize the Black male body, in effect denying him his humanity” (Carrington 2000, p. 136). As an extension of the NFL’s corporeal obsessions, the inherent eroticism of evaluating the black male body “under the auspices of inspecting goods, as any good consumer might do” (Oates 2007, p. 84), is thereby mobilized through the corporally ghetto-centric fetishization reflected in the hypermediated productions of institutions like Nike, the NFL, ESPN, and EA Sports (Oates 2009).

Visitors to Nike’s website can also access a predetermined number of free audio downloads that appear for each week’s “game day remix.” The most popular track determined by its number of downloads is performed by Birdman and Lil Wayne, entitled “Always Strapped,” a reference to carrying a firearm at all times. Nike’s version features Adrian Peterson talking over the track:

Let’s go. Aint’ no room for hesitation up in here . . . Cause its game time . . .  
 Make your opponent pay the price. It’s time to step up and get it done, son.  
 You go hard or you go home . . . you know your boys gonna put it on the line  
 for you, they got your back, so you better have theirs . . . So what’s it gonna  
 be, man?

Although obviously in reference to handling one’s business on the football field, it is interesting to consider the juxtaposition of Peterson within the song’s context of gun possession, drug references, and flashy materialism. Despite the powerful articulations of black men and gun violence in popular culture, Leonard suggests that “guns merely become a signifier of the danger, the lack of discipline, and purported pathology of black athletes. The problem isn’t guns, but ‘negroes with guns’” (Leonard 2010, p. 257).

Stemming from the blackophilic and blackophobic (Yousman 2003) discernments of post-Fordist consumer culture, the self-same fear of black men owning, carrying, or referencing guns is also partly what drives the promotional ghetto-centrism of companies like Nike. Thus, the very articulation of NFL athletes with hip-hop artists suggests a desire to mobilize the aesthetics of hip-hop, particularly those that reinforce stereotypical assumptions concerning the black urban experience (Kelley 1997), within the cultural economy of the NFL. In addition to Nike, recent Under Armour commer-

cially appropriate the iconography of postindustrial decay as anonymous athletic figures train their sculpted bodies using the raw materials (heavy chains, cinder blocks, etc.) left behind in the dilapidated urban landscape of buildings, warehouses, and factories. While avoiding the explicit focus on celebrity athletes like Nike, Under Armour also attempts to capture an urban aesthetic and perceived authenticity through its associations with postindustrial spaces.

Although the NBA has been quicker to cash in on an exploitative ghetto-centrism, the NFL's promotional ancillaries have begun to demonstrate a more purposeful association with urban themes and cultural products. Given its deeply sutured ethos of working-class whiteness, however, it is questionable whether the new ghetto-centric promotional urbanism will be as pronounced as that of the NBA. In either case, the more intrusive practices of the NFL's body fetishization reveals the preoccupation and capacity to quantify, commodify, and expose black bodies for the consumptive appetites of a white majority (Oates 2009, 2007). In this sense, it is conceivable that the process of inculcating street authentic themes and hip-hop to perhaps reach a younger demographic also carries the somewhat paradoxical subtext of reinscribing the homoeroticism of the "male gaze," which Oates (2007) locates within the existent practices and promotions of the NFL product. It may also be that hip-hop's entrenched sexism and misogyny (Rose 1994; hooks 1992) functions to synergistically reinforce the "panoptic line that must not be crossed if the orthodox masculine—which is to say the patriarchal heterosexual—credentials of competitive sport are to be maintained" (Pronger 1999, p. 374).

While the NBA has thoroughly exploited postmodern consumer society's fascination with the signs and symbols of racial difference (Hall 1992; hooks 1992; Baudrillard 1981) and of ghetto-centric promotion more specifically, the NFL is perhaps moving toward a similar conjunctural space, albeit informed by a quite different institutional history. Within this moment, the corporeal signifiers of blackness—popular myths concerning the form, function, and sociospatial derivation of the virulent black (football) body—become a more central, if regressive, promotional strategy. This being despite the NFL's clinging to the equally regressive vestiges of [industrial working-class] whiteness. In either case, it is difficult to see the NFL spectacle as anything other than a compelling corroborator of an entrenched, and enduringly hierarchical, racial order.

## CONCLUSION

If the NBA is fully immersed in ghetto-centric logics as a primary motor and constituent of its promotional spectacle, then the NFL is clearly following

suit. Furthermore, it would be remiss not to point to the spread of ghetto-centric symbols and sensibilities throughout the broad expanse of the American landscape, and not simply the sporting, music, or entertainment spheres where black bodies most easily reside within popular consciousness (Gray 2005). Indeed, such is the perceived popular resonance and thereby commercial value of aesthetically and spatially essentialized representation of blackness that they can be discerned even in the most incongruous of cultural spaces. It could be argued this post-Fordist engagement with otherness points to the existence of a more diverse and inclusive marketplace, and hence society, the commercially inspired fetishistic appropriation of the black ghetto subjectivity is rooted in, and helps to perpetuate, highly problematic assumptions about race and racial difference. Furthermore, there is an argument to be made that branding strategies utilizing highly stylized representations of urban otherness are post-Fordist appeals to the more diverse markets; the NBA, NFL, Nike et al. seeking to forge better communication with black consumers (Armstrong 2003). However, the overriding impetus behind the ghetto-centric turn would appear to be an essentializing of the embodied practices and experiences of black urban male youth as a means of denoting an “authentic Blackness” designed to appeal primarily to white, middle-class consumers (Cole 1996; Sandell 1995). As Maharaj noted, the “coding here of Blackness as pleasure, play, and authenticity effectively fetishizes Black bodies as commodities to serve capital’s expanding consumer needs” (1999, pp. 236–37).

The forms of commodified blackness—exemplified by the ghetto-centric marketing machinations of the NBA and NFL—are highly problematic since through them, “black bodies function as racialised symbols of cultural difference, without of course challenging the unequal power relationships that structure this consumption” (Carrington 2001, pp. 108–9). In habitually representing NBA and NFL players as the scions of the hyperghetto, they are rendered metonymic personifications of the wild and unruly streets (Maharaj 1999; Clarke 1991), pornographically presented to the American viewing public through the populist medium of local television news (Reeves and Campbell 1994). Through this increasingly pervasive ghetto-centrism, the historically grounded racial fears and fascinations of the majority white population become managed and manipulated as much as the specter of blackness within these sport leagues. As McLaughlin noted, “As a source of popular cultural icons, basketball provides some of the key images for blackness in our society. But the images of this black sport are then consumed in this country by a white-majority audience, through media that consciously shape the images for white needs” (McLaughlin 2008, p. 137). The media’s perception of “white needs” with regard to the consumption of images of black bodies plays on—in a manner that effortlessly conflates—

both the blackophilia (a seductive fascination with racial otherness) and blackophobia (fear and dread of racial otherness) that has always framed the structure and experience of the American racial formation (Yousman 2003; Mercer 1994; Clarke 1991; Rose 1991). Although speaking to the white appropriation of hip-hop, Kelley's (1997, p. 39) insights can also be related to the consumption of black athletes, specifically when stating that the mainstream incorporation of the conspicuously black, urban form of musical expression that is "gangsta rap . . . attracts listeners for who the 'ghetto' is a place of adventure, unbridled violence, erotic fantasy, and/or an imaginary alternative to suburban boredom." Yousman further politicizes the blackophilia/blackophobia couplet:

I argue that White youth adoption of Black cultural forms in the 21st century is also a performance, one that allows Whites to contain their fears and animosities towards Blacks through rituals not of ridicules, as in previous eras, but of adoration. Thus, although the motives behind the performance may initially appear to be different, the act is still a manifestation of White supremacy that is in crisis and disarray, rife with confusion and contradiction. (Yousman 2003, p. 369)

Through the complex media spectacle of the NBA, and increasingly the NFL, black athletic bodies are thus presented, either explicitly or implicitly, as being the necessary progeny of what Macek referred to as the urban "zone of crime and pathology and out-of-control urban populations" (2006, p. 2) simultaneously romanticizing and demonizing the evermore conjoined epithets of black and urban. It is in this sense that ghettocentric logics have rendered both the NBA and NFL, and more importantly, the black bodies who populate them, "simply another resource appropriated by the [corporate capitalist] colonizer" (hooks 1994, p. 150, brackets added) ever willing to accentuate, and thereby perpetuate, racial stigmas in the name of capital accumulation.

## NOTE

1. This chapter develops upon themes and issues discussed in Andrews, D. L., and Silk, M. L. (2010). Basketball's ghettocentric logic. *American Behavioral Scientist*, 53 (11).

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